RECLAIMING YOGA AS A PRACTICE OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

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Womb yoga is a women's yoga practice developed in the UK from the observation that male bodies and experiences are privileged in mainstream yoga. Based on modern postural yoga, womb yoga integrates the philosophy and mythology of *śakta tantra* in reference to scholarly texts and by reinterpreting tantric traditions in line with Anglo-American Goddess spirituality. Through body practice, chanting, visualization and ritual, female cyclic experiences and the different stages of women's lives are approached as gateways to the divine and as opportunities for spiritual empowerment. In addition, in offering a seasonal understanding of the menstrual cycle and establishing energetic resonances between natural elements and the body, experiences of cosmic connection and communion are fostered. The study is based on ethnographic research, combining participant observation and in-depth interviews. It details the practice of womb yoga and the experiences it engenders among participants, and discusses its feminist potential.

Keywords: feminine divine, menstrual cycle, tantra, women's spirituality, yoga

Introduction[1]

Yoga, as practiced in the contemporary Western world, is a predominantly women's practice, which raises questions about its potential to enhance female empowerment. Two main arguments have been advanced against the empowering effects of yoga for women. First, as a consumer practice, yoga espouses ideals of neoliberal feminism, where the focus is shifted from a critique of social or economic structures toward self-governance and self-monitoring, hence reducing gender inequality to an individual problem.[2] Secondly, recent accusations in the wake of #MeToo have revealed that yoga is also a site of sexual violence and abuse of women, in particular within hierarchical lineage-based schools emphasizing the

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[2] Ariane Balizet and Withey Myers, "Yoga, Postfeminism and the Future," in *Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis*, ed. Beth Berila, Melanie Klein, and Chelsea Roberts (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 277–92; Farah Godrej, "The Neoliberal Yogi and the Politics of Yoga," *Political Theory* 45, no. 6 (2017): 772–800; Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), and Andrea Jain, *Peace, Love, Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

authority of the (mostly male) guru.[3] Yet, with regard to the UK context, Theodora Wildcroft has recently studied a subculture of countercultural yoga coined "post-lineage yoga," which has evolved in reaction to both neoliberal yoga brands and guru-transmitted yoga lineages and is characterized by a search for social justice and a critical stance toward accepted authority.[4] This article deals with a yoga practice known as womb yoga, which is part of this countercultural form of yoga in the UK.[5] Womb yoga explicitly aims at women's empowerment not in the neoliberal feminist sense of self-monitoring but, in line with radical cultural feminist thought, through unraveling societal structures of male supremacy that silence women's voices and perspectives, and through collectively cultivating awareness of female bodily processes and experiences as a source of strength.

Since the 1970s, with the rise of second-wave feminism, Eastern, chiefly Hindu, religious traditions have been a source of inspiration for Western feminists seeking to develop a spirituality that serves their project of liberation and empowerment.[6] Female divinities have been used in this context with the purpose of legitimizing female independent power and reclaiming the female body and its cycles.[7] Kali, in particular, has become a feminist icon for recovering the potent sexual dark side of the feminine that is repressed and demonized in Western patriarchal societies. Through her fierceness, she is called upon as a preeminent manifestation of *śakti*, the feminine principle, conceived as an active force or

[3] Jain, *Peace, Love, Yoga*; Karen-Anne Wong, "Inclusive identities: The Lens of Critical Theory," in *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*, ed. Karen O'Brien Kop and Suzanne Newcombe (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 473–89.

[4] Theodora Wildcroft. *Post-Lineage Yoga: From Guru to #MeToo* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2020).

[5] While having followers in other European countries and in other continents, the practice is mostly established in the UK. On the website listing teachers and practitioners who have taken the womb yoga training, currently 65 percent are UK-based.

[6] Rita Gross, "Hindu Female Deities as a Resource for the Contemporary Rediscovery of the Goddess," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46, no. 3 (1978): 269–91.

[7] Carol Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections," in *The Politics of Women's Spirituality. Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (New York: Anchor Books. 1982), 71–86.

energy.[8] Womb yoga follows this orientation by foregrounding the *Mahāvidyā*s, a group of ten fierce Hindu goddesses with Kali as first goddess, as key symbols for reimagining women's life phases and by conceiving women's cycles of life as opportunities for spiritual awareness and growth. It also reorients the term *yoginī* away from its usual meaning in the West of female yoga practitioner, turning instead toward its feminist use as "a model for the independent and spiritually advanced woman,"[9] thus reintegrating its connotation of fierceness and female power that is present in historical sources of South Asian tantric yoga.[10]

The aim of this study is to develop how the practice of yoga within womb yoga is reconfigured with the aim of female empowerment. It also explores what this empowerment means and how it is experienced by womb yoga practitioners. The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork that entailed participant observation in eleven womb yoga workshops, lasting on average three days, and thirty-seven[11] in-depth interviews with womb yoga practitioners, conducted through Skype.[12] Since the book *Yoni Shakti: A Woman's Guide to Power and Freedom through Yoga and Tantra* by Uma Dinsmore-Tuli is the main

[8] Gross, *Hindu Female Deities*, 284–85; Rachel F. McDermott, "The Western Kali," in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 281–313; Rachel F. McDermott, "Kali's New Frontiers. A Hindu Goddess on the Internet," in *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, At the Center, In the West*, ed. Rachel F. McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2005), 273–95.

[9] Loriliai Biernacki, "The Yoginī and the Tantric Sex Rite, or How to Keep a Secret," in '*Yoginī' in South Asia: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. István Keul (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 217.

[10] Sondra L. Hausner, "The Category of the Yoginī as a Gendered Practitioner," in '*Yoginī' in South Asia*, 32–43; Laura M. Dunn, "Yoginīs in the Flesh: Power, Praxis, and the Embodied Feminine Divine," *Journal of Dharma Studies* 1, no. 2 (2019): 287–302.

[11] I further participated in five retreats that mainly relied on Tantric Tao but also integrated elements of womb yoga. I conducted twelve interviews with participants in these retreats. These are not drawn upon for this article.

[12] All names used are pseudonyms. The research proposal received approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy at Ghent University. Informed consent was obtained from each interviewee.

reference with regard to womb yoga, it is drawn upon throughout the article to assess what inspired the development of the practice and what it is about.[13]

Womb yoga reveals many similarities with other forms of feminist spirituality in the contemporary West, such as neopagan Goddess spirituality,[14] spiritual menstrual activism,[15] and women's circles.[16] Empowerment is not conceptualized in reference to the acquisition of socioeconomic position, political impact, or jural rights but, primarily, in psycho-spiritual terms. It rests on finding worthiness and strength in being a woman based on the conceptualization and experience of the female body, in particular the womb and vulva, as "a locus and medium of the sacred," a view denied in masculine monotheist religion.[17] Important means to induce this experience of empowerment through experiencing the divine are: developing languages, symbolisms, and cosmologies, including Goddess imagery, that evoke female sacredness; reversing the devaluation of the female body and its bodily processes and substances such as menstrual blood; reimagining the history around the idea of a primary matriarchy or original female power; reclaiming derogatory terms for female beings or body parts; and cultivating sisterhood, female sharing, and connection including mother-daughter genealogies.

Feminist spirituality has been the object of several critical reflections. Cynthia Eller has challengedthe reimagining of history from the postulate of an original matriarchal epoch for being historically inaccurate or at least speculative and, importantly, because it

[13] Uma Dinsmore-Tuli, *Yoni Shakti. A Woman's Guide to Power and Freedom through Yoga and Tantra* (London: YogaWords, 2014).

[14] Melissa Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1996); Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: The Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco* (London: Routledge, 2002); Kathryn Rountree, *Embracing the Witch and the Goddess: Feminist Ritual Makers in New Zealand* (London: Routledge, 2004); Kristy Coleman, *Re-Riting Woman: Dianic Wicca and the Feminine Divine* (London: AltaMira Press, 2009).

[15] Chris Bobel, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

[16] Chia Longman, "Women's Circles and the Rise of the New Feminine: Reclaiming Sisterhood, Spirituality, and Wellbeing," *Religions* 9, no. 1 (2018): 9, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9010009.

[17] Raphaël, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, 25.

disempowers women by encouraging them into escapist utopian fantasies.[18]As to Rita Gross, she has emphasized that in living Goddess traditions that spiritual feminists draw on, such as Hindu traditions, existence of goddesses does not entail gender equality or socioeconomic status for women and hence is not empowering.[19] Furthermore, the celebration of female body parts and of qualities perceived as feminine, such as nurturance and care, has been targeted for contributing to gender essentialism, ultimately perpetuating gender stereotyping.[20] All these critiques could be applied to womb yoga. However, in my analysis, following Melissa Raphael and more recent feminist work, I highlight the imaginative and experiential dimensions of accounts of female-centered history and of ritualized practices of female sacrality and argue that these are aimed at generating transformation and motivating embodied becoming as an evolving, open-ended process.[21]

Blending Yoga, Tantra, and Feminism

Womb yoga is firstly based on modern postural yoga, in particular Iyengar yoga and Satyananda yoga, which gained ground in the UK in the 1960s and 70s and in which Dinsmore-Tuli has received extended formal training.[22] As a women's yoga practice, womb yoga also continues efforts by female teachers to adapt yoga to the needs of the female body, a move which developed in the UK from the 1980s onward, one major domain being the use

[18] Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

[19] Rita M. Gross, "Is the Goddess a Feminist?" in *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, ed. Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 104–12.

[20] Karlyn Crowley, *Feminism's New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011).

[21] Raphaël, *Thealogy and Embodiment*; Longman, *Women's Circles*, 10.

[22] "Modern postural yoga" developed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries from grafting elements of modern physical culture onto *haṭha yoga* orthopraxy. See Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (London: Continuum, 2004); and Mark Singleton *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). On yoga in Britain, see Susan Newcombe, *Yoga in Britain: Stretching Spirituality and Educating Yogis* (London: Equinox, 2019).

of yoga for pregnancy and childbirth with the development of the natural birth movement.[23] Dinsmore-Tuli[24] herself states that the main motivation to develop womb yoga was related to her experience that the standard Satyananda yoga she practiced was not suited to her during her pregnancies and postnatal recovery and that there was a lack of willingness to answer her questions on these subjects. This made her turn to the yoga practice for mothers pioneered by Françoise Freedman, founder of Birthlight. From then on, she developed her own method of yoga suitable for pregnancy, birth, and postnatal recovery and published two books on the subject. With regard to the development of womb yoga, Dinsmore-Tuli also acknowledges being continuously inspired by Angela Farmer, who moved away from Iyengar yoga to develop a women's yoga style—inspired by Vanda Scaravelli's intuitive approach—with the body moving in arcs and spirals and focused on grounding, fluid movement and organic imagery.[25] Dinsmore-Tuli's training as a yoga therapist at the Yoga Biomedical Trust and with Mukunda Stiles was also influential.

The most original aspect of womb yoga is the way this blend of contemporary practices is merged with tantric views and mythology, read through a feminist lens. Dinsmore-Tuli equipped herself for this via her thorough, well-referenced study of both popular and scholarly work on yoga and tantra and of source texts in English translation using the academic skills she developed by completing a PhD in communication studies. She gives particular attention to the tradition of *śakta tantra*, because of the primacy accorded to *śakti* as active female principle, and to fierce female goddesses, notably the *Mahāvidyā*s.[26] Rituals in *śakta tantra* also involve veneration for the vulva and use of vaginal fluids and

[23] Newcombe, *Yoga in Britain*, 126ff.
[24] Dinsmore-Tuli, *Yoni Shakti*, 59.
[25] Janice Gates, *Yoginī. The Power of Women in Yoga* (San Rafael, CA: Mandala Publishing, 2006), 52ff.
[26] David Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahāvidyās* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishing, 1998), 37.

menstrual blood.[27] Scholarship has questioned whether these rituals and the veneration of the feminine actually empowered female participants or merely reduced them to instruments for male spiritual liberation.[28] Dinsmore-Tuli acknowledges this scholarship and the male bias of tantric texts that speak from the perspective of male practitioners.[29] Yet in her view, they do not prevent this tradition from being used and reimagined by contemporary *yoginī*s to develop their spiritual awareness.[30] To remedy the lack of female voices in tantric scriptures and to disclose a female heritage alongside the canonical male heritage, Dinsmore-Tuli also takes inspiration from *bhakti yoginī*s, women who engage in devotional singing. In this same spirit, Sivani Mata Francis, who is a UK *bhakti* singer and a womb yoga teacher alongside Dinsmore-Tuli, has integrated in some of her *kīrtan*s (devotional chants) poems by the medieval mystic poets Akka Mahadevi and Lalleshwari.[31]

In order to realize the potential for empowerment that Dinsmore-Tuli considers present in tantric traditions, she highlights throughout her book and in her teachings certain Sanskrit terms used in *śakta tantra* rituals that entail a reverential honoring of the female body. The most important terms in this regard are *yoni* (womb, vulva), *yonisthāna* (the place of the yoni), *yoni puspam* (the flowers of the *yoni*, referring to menstrual blood[32]), and *yoni nāḍī* (secretions of the *yoni*, with *nāḍī* coming from the verb "to flow"). Womb yoga also makes extensive use of the *yoni mudrā*, a symbolic hand gesture that, in its simplest form, consists of bringing the tips of the thumbs and index fingers together and pointing them downwards, creating a triangle-like shape. *Yoni-namaskāram*, a term coined by Dinsmore-

[27] David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yoginī* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 67ff.
[28] White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 160.
[29] Dinsmore-Tuli, *Yoni Shakti*, 99–100.
[30] Dinsmore-Tuli, *Yoni Shakti*, 101.
[31] See the album *Jasmine Garden*: http://www.naturalmysticbhajans.co.uk/listen/.
[32] "Eastern texts recognize at least sixteen varieties [of menstrual fluid] and all of these terms end with *puspa* (Sanskrit, 'flower'), a common designation for the red menstrual flux and flow. The Sanskrit *yonipushpa* meaning "vulva flower," also describes a woman's menstrual flowing, as well as a black flower that symbolizes sexual intercourse." Andrea Frownfelter, *Flower Symbolism as Female Sexual Metaphor* (Senior honors thesis, Eastern Michigan University, 2010), 23. See also White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 115ff.

Tuli and translated as "womb-greeting," refers to a series of practices that involve this gesture. In one practice, known as the *śakti* greeting, every woman in the circle is greeted by the others: while joining their hands in the *namaste* position on the heart, the women first say "welcome" followed by the name of the woman: then they point the fingertips downward, and slide the *yoni mudrā* they obtain in this way over their bodies until it rests on their womb. At that point they say welcome to the *śakti* (female power) of the woman, move their hands back to the *namaste* position, and finally greet the woman as *yoginī.* Another term coined by Dinsmore-Tuli, *hṛdaya-yoni nadī*, translated as "heart-womb river," entails practices that activate the river of energy that flows between the heart and the womb, creating a communion between both. The creativity of the womb is brought up to the heart and the love and compassion of the heart down to the womb. By circling the movement from the womb to the ground and up over the head, a further connection is made with the earth and the sky. Through the spread of these practices, the terms and the gestures and movements they refer to have become part of a shared vocabulary among the women who practice womb yoga.

Several of my interlocutors explicitly underscored the importance of finding a new, shared verbal and gestural language that is reverential toward the female body. Alexandra voiced the importance of the womb yoga practices for her as "giving us a shared language for experiences that are so much part of living as a woman but that we don't have, or we only have or own little idiosyncratic language in our own being." Marian contributed to the invention of a new language in order to render the feminine quality of her experience of the heart-womb meditation: "Now when I meditate, I consciously breathe up from the earth upwards through my *yoni*; it is about the earth, *yoni* and heart. They call it 'mindfulness,' it should be 'heartfullness' and 'wombfullness.' It is a different quality. I love it." Jesse highlighted how encountering a bodily practice can open a new kind of communication and

give an unknown and unimagined sense of existence to the body parts involved, impacting on her bodily presence throughout her day:

> I have never established a heart-womb connection before, I didn't think it was a thing. When I do it, it is like a communication with that part of my body, like a "she" I can talk to internally. Then, when I am centring my heart, I am like saying: I want my heart to lead to my womb, establish a connection. I want my energy to be led by my heart and womb connection, not by anything else. The day seems to flow more. I am more connected to myself, more nurtured.

Besides the nurturing quality of these exercises, the reverence they bring was also stressed by several women.[33] Grace, in recalling the *śakti* greeting, highlighted the rareness of finding such an honoring attention: "That gorgeous practice we did with the greeting and the name. Where else do you experience that? You don't. That is such an honouring. I felt really seen, honoured, heard, you know in a safe, comfortable space with no judgments. That is precious."

Women's Life Cycles as a Gateway to the Divine

In womb yoga, as is characteristic of feminist spirituality, the divine is envisaged as immanent in the world, present in nature and in human embodied being. It is connected to rhythms of growing and waning, opening and closing, birth and death and is sensed in the cyclical temporality of nature whether concerning the moon, the seasons, or organic and human life. For women this entails that cultivating awareness of their menstrual cycle and of the different stages of their life are considered to be gateways to experiencing the divine. Dinsmore-Tuli even suggests that this might be the core and very aim of the practice of yoga,

[33] See Carine Plancke, "Nurturing the Female Body: Notions of Wellbeing in Womb Yoga," *Medical Anthropology* 40, no. 8 (2021): 732–44.

allying this view, based on her own and other women's experience, with the observation of women's dominance in modern transnational yoga and with a visionary rereading of yoga's origins.

> Consider the possibility that yoga is a naturally arising way of being in connection with elemental rhythms, and that it was perhaps, once upon a time, first inspired by reverence for the intense emotional, psychic and physical experiences of women's life cycles. . . . And recognize now with certainty that it is largely through women that the practices and benefits of yoga are caressing the globe, spreading a healing wave of positive energy. Allow your awareness to be open to the experience of yogic wisdom inspired by the natural rhythms of your physicality as a woman.[34]

She corroborates this hypothetical view on the original aim of yoga through a discussion of the term *siddhi*. In the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali as well as in later *haṭha yoga* texts, *siddhi*s refer to the magical powers that *yogī*s acquire as a result of yogic practice. In the context of tantric rituals, these magical powers were foremost attributed to the *yoginī*s, meaning both the female practitioners and the ferocious goddesses that acted as tutelary deities and which were represented through sculpture in *yoginī* temples.[35] Important aspects of these rituals included the veneration of the vulva and her fluids, especially menstrual blood.[36] This is what induced Dinsmore-Tuli to suggest reimagining the *siddhi*s as being rooted in the natural rhythms of women's physicality. This reimagination also draws on "her-stories," such as those developed by feminist spiritual teachers Janice Gates and Vicky Noble,[37] that envision yoga

[34] Dinsmore-Tuli, *Yoni Shakti*, 21.

[35] Vidya Dehejia, *Yoginī Cult and Temples: A Tantric Tradition* (New Delhi: National Museum, New Delhi, 1986).

[36] White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 67ff.

[37] Janice Gates, *Yoginī*,12; Vicki Noble, "Women and Yoga: Did Women Invent the Ancient Art of Yoga?" March 8, 2007, https://www.yogahub.com/blog/women-and-yoga-by-vicki-noble/.

as an originally female practice developed at the time of the presumed matriarchal Indus Valley Civilization.[38]

Dinsmore-Tuli elaborates this view of women's cyclic experiences as gateways to the divine in a visual and embodied way by giving an unorthodox reading of the ten wisdom goddesses, the *Mahāvidyā*s, who are known for granting *siddhi*s, i.e. magical powers.[39] In line with her revisioning of these *siddhi*s as connected to the rhythms of women's life cycles, she interprets these goddesses as representations of the different stages of women's lives. The ten goddesses represent 1) change and cyclical shifts; 2) menarche; 3) menstruation; 4) feminine sexuality; 5) creativity; 6) pregnancy, birth, and pregnancy loss; 7) postnatal recovery and lactation; 8) perimenopause; 9) menopause; and 10) postmenopause. David Kinsley, a major scholar of the *Mahāvidyā*s, considers these goddesses who are particularly fierce and often destructive as "embodiments of female fury precipitated by male neglect and abuse."[40] Dinsmore-Tuli draws upon this view to underscore the relevance of these goddesses since, in her view, they offer direct parallels to the current state of neglect and abuse of female bodies and experiences as well as to the strength needed for reclaiming the feminine spiritual authority vested in women's stages of life, when experienced with awareness.[41]

During the womb yoga workshops I attended, the *Mahāvidyā*s were worked with in different ways. First of all, they were integrated in the practice of *yoga nidrā*, literally "yogic sleep."[42] In most yoga classes this technique is used for relaxation: it involves lying down and bringing awareness to different body parts mentioned in sequence by the teacher. As part of womb yoga, it was further elaborated and enhanced through the use of sound, poetry, and

[38] Dinsmore-Tuli, *Yoni Shakti*, 86.
[39] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions*, 37.
[40] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions*, 26.
[41] Dinsmore-Tuli, *Yoni Shakti*, 232.
[42] According to Mark Singleton, this technique was developed by Swami Satyananda and owes many of its elements and the ethos underlying them to Western relaxation therapy; see Singleton, "Salvation through Relaxation: Proprioceptive Therapy and its Relationship to Yoga," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20, no. 3 (2005): 289–304; quotation on 291.

visualizations in order to stimulate the imagination and awaken intuition. For each of the *Mahāvidyā*s, Dinsmore-Tuli has developed a specific *yoga nidrā* with images corresponding to the phase and experience being celebrated. For example, for menarche and new beginnings we imagined holding a red rosebud in and watching it begin to flower. For the experiences of sexuality and creativity, we visualized being in a luscious and abundant garden. During workshops, Sivani Mata Francis also presented *kīrtan*, or devotional chanting, that celebrates the wisdom goddesses. Workshops also featured drawings of the *Mahāvidyā*s, often displayed in conjunction with other goddess cards. These cards were positioned around a cloth that was placed in the middle of the circle of women, with four goddesses representing the different stages of the menstrual cycle and of women's lives. A recurring practice in the womb yoga workshops I attended entailed taking up a position in the circle according to the menstrual phase we were in.

Some women I interviewed highlighted the unusual experience of standing around the circle in this way and openly showing the phase they were in. Alexandra recalled this moment as particularly powerful because it gave her a feeling that all women were connected and because it afforded an acknowledgement of the experience of menstruation, which is usually hidden:

> In the last workshop, they had made a circle of the goddesses. We all were invited to stand in terms of where we were in our menstrual cycle and/or in terms of where we felt we were in our phase of womanhood in life. There is something extremely powerful about that for me. It is a very symbolic thing. It showed us all in this circle, connected through the fact that we continuously orbit this circle, all of us. It really made a visual of this idea of women being linked together with each other. And then there were a lot of us in the premenstrual part. So that also was very powerful for me at the time, that is where I happened to be. The next day I started to have my period.

> There was something so freeing about being able to stand next to all these other women knowing that we were all about to menstruate, and for that to be visible, for that to be spoken, to be acknowledged. There was something very freeing and safe and loving and comforting about that simple saying. Usually we go about our day. You don't know who is menstruating or not, it is not something we talk about, it was sort of like, all these women together, some of the tension that can come during the premenstrual time, again without too many words or analysis, it was very healing to see literally and physically all these women standing here with me at the same point. And then having it linked to goddess figures, to that spiritual element.

Being of Greek nationality, Alexandra was inspired by this use of the *Mahāvidyā*s and decided to integrate in her own yoga classes the ancient Greek goddesses who were familiar to her from childhood.

In a womb yoga teacher training I attended, the ritual circles held for celebrating women's life stages became a tool for making connections over the generations. We formed one big circle aligned according to the age of our menarche and each said our name and age of menarche. A similar menopause circle was held with each of us saying the name of our mother and her age of menopause. Some women also mentioned their maternal grandmothers.[43] During interviews several women recalled these circles as emotionally powerful moments. Elizabeth explained, while being deeply moved, how she felt that "all the different women were like versions of [her] throughout time, past, present, future." Zoe highlighted the ancestral link and how it helped her to relate to her mother with more forgiveness:

[43] This practice of naming the maternal line is commonly found in women's circles and is often highly moving. See Carol Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 141.

> When we were talking about the mothers, I thought this was so powerful, almost like seeing each of these women. If you really believe in this ancestral bringing, carrying grief and pain from ancestors. It really put me in touch with such a wider picture. We were all of these women before us. I felt very emotional, I cried for many of the women in the room and myself. . . . I felt a real tenderness towards my mother. I also felt her different stages in life. It was good to come to a much less selfish point of view, to come into her experience and to put it into context.

Cosmic Connections and Communions

In *śakta tantra* philosophy, the human body and its energies are seen as a living blueprint of the structure and energies of the cosmos.[44] In womb yoga, this view of micro-macrocosmic resonance is elaborated through a feminist appropriation of themes and notions from vedic and tantric texts. A relevant example is the concept of *hiraṇyagarbha*, which literally translates as "golden womb" or "golden egg." While in vedic texts such as the *Hiraṇyagarbha-Sūkta* this notion is used in hymns that highlight the male creator god Prajāpati, Dinsmore-Tuli emphasizes how this Golden Womb that contains the whole universe is a manifestation of *śakti*, the feminine energy of creation.[45] One of the postures of womb yoga, called "In the cosmic womb" (*Hiraṇyagarbha*), invokes the support of the universal Mother: the woman lies reclined on her back with the hands in *yoni mudrā* over the womb and the feet joined with open knees, being supported by bolsters under knees, head, and upper body. A resonance is thus celebrated between the womb of the woman as the seat of creative energy and the cosmic womb she is resting in.

This resonance is further elaborated by linking the cycles of the female womb to the tides caused by the moon and to the different seasons. In the *Mahābhārata*, a major Sanskrit

[44] Douglas Renfrew Brooks, *The Secret of the Three Cities. An Introduction to Hindu Śakta Tantrism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 122.
[45] Dinsmore-Tuli, *Yoni Shakti*, 24.

epic, as well as in Puranic literature, the earth's seasonal changes figure as evidence of her menstrual cycles. Although in these tales all such cycles, in women and nature, are seen as punishment, in womb yoga the seasonal understanding of menstruation becomes a tool for women's empowerment. In this view, which relies on the work of Alexandra Pope, who runs workshops on menstrual health and with whom Dinsmore-Tuli has collaborated, menstruation corresponds to winter; the phase between menstruation and ovulation, to spring; ovulation, to summer; and the premenstrual period, to autumn.[46] The empowering aspect of this seasonal understanding lies in its ability to increase awareness of the energetic fluctuations of the cycle, to tune in with these fluctuations, and, hence, to respect one's bodily needs. The workshops I attended systematically adapted exercises according to the phase of one's cycle. Women who were menstruating were invited to make their movements smaller while remaining seated or lying down. Complete rest was also allowed and even encouraged because it favored an increased awareness of the menstrual phase, seen as an auspicious time for spiritual deepening and new insights. The idea of cycles, in its resonance with flows and circles, was enacted in a more general way by rhythmically moving in and out of the posture in time with the breathing rather than holding a posture for a long time. Undulating and circling movements were continuously integrated. During the cat pose, for instance, consisting of contracting and decontracting the spine on all fours, we were invited, after some coordinated movement, to let our energy (*śakti*) move freely in self-chosen undulating movements. My interlocutors repeatedly described womb yoga as "gentle, flowing, circulating and spiraling."

Womb yoga also fostered cosmic communion through working with the natural elements. Correspondences were made between the five elements—earth, water, fire, air and

[46] Alexandra Pope, *The Wild Génie: The Healing Power of Menstruation*, 2nd ed. (Bedfordshire, UK: Authors Online, 2014).

space—on the one hand, and the *cakra*s (energy centers in the body), *mudrā*s (hand gestures), and *bīja mantra*s (seed sounds, i.e., one-syllable sound repetitions), on the other hand, as outlined in Satyananda yoga. In one practice, designed by Dinsmore-Tuli, these correspondences were enacted through touching in sequence the places of the body where the five *cakra*s are located with the *mudrā* that invokes the element linked to each *cakra*. This was done while being seated in a different posture and while sounding the *bīja mantra* correlated to each *cakra*. This sequence of touching the body with sound and gesture not only induced a multisensory encounter with the elements but had also been designed in resonance with the tantric practice of *nyāsa*, where the divinity itself is located in one's body through the ritual placement of the fingertips. Dinsmore-Tuli also invoked the tantric poem *Saundarya-Lahari*, a key treatise of *śakta tantra* that praises each part of Goddess's body, turning this moving meditation into a reverential honoring of the natural world as both the creation and the form of Goddess.[47]

Another recurring practice in the workshops that was aimed at embodying the elements was *śakti* dance, derived from *kuṇḍalinī yoga*. The first part of this dance involved moving in sequence different body parts, each correlated to one of the elements. The goal was to provide a lived sense of our bodily connection to the universe. Maria, who told me that she tends to be cerebral and hence often feels disembodied, remembered how the retreat, for the first time, made her "physically feel a sense of connection." This mainly happened in the *śakti* dance, which filled her with "really nice visual images and impressions." She could vividly feel the elements while remaining fully embodied:

> For some reason, with the earth one, it was just the sense of roots and ground. With the water, I saw myself on sea, there was water everywhere around me, I was floating and I was very free in my pelvis. I was very fluid. And it was really nice, it felt very

[47] Dinsmore-Tuli, *Yoni Shakti*, 188.

> live and very flexible. Then, with the solar plexus, which was fire, I felt like I was, I kind of first had an image of fire, but it was not comfortable for some reason and then I settled with an image of a huge sun and I felt that sun behind me and everywhere there was gold and an enormous heat, strength. With the air, I was like a bird flying through some beautiful nature. But the interesting thing was, that although I was flying I still had a very clear sense of being grounded. It was like as if the bird was attached to the ground. It couldn't just fly away into the universe and get lost.

The arising of a deeply felt union with nature was further forcefully triggered through individual and collective rituals. One of them was the tree *pūjā*, as practiced in Satyananda yoga. It consisted of a daily individual ritual of meeting a self-selected tree and performing a small ceremony: lighting a candle, burning incense, giving a cup of water, and thanking the tree. For Jane the ritual initiated an unprecedented communication with nature and forged a sense of mutual belonging between herself and the tree, which she could maintain after the retreat:

> I loved the tree *pūjā* every day . . . I just felt the presence, the energy, the spirit and yeah just the realization "we are inside such an incredible, this physical reality is just mindblowing in its kind of complexity." It was even little details of the specific tree that I had picked. It was a perfect match for my personality and for what I needed at the time. Like even the physical attributes, its location: it was a little bit hidden away but also emerging, coming out of the front. I loved seeing the other women and the different tree that they picked. Every tree was a complete match to our personalities. You could see exactly why a certain lady had picked a certain tree. It was just really beautiful. I never communicated with nature in that way. . . . I am back in London now, there are not too many trees around. It is funny, if I am doing a meditation at home, or on the yoga mat when I go to class, I can still link in to my tree because I

know he is still down there at the lodge. It is really uncanny. The moment I psychically link in to the tree, it is like picking up the phone line. I feel like I am back there. I am sitting on the grass, I feel like I am straight back.

Collective rituals included the *ārati*, a Hindu ritual that involves an evocation of the elements by burning incense, circulating a lighted candle, sprinkling water, and waving a cloth in front of an altar and toward the participants, all the while singing mantras. Seasonal rituals were also created in accordance with the Celtic calendar. During one retreat in late October on the theme of letting go, Samhain was celebrated in a self-designed ritual: We first made a spiral with autumn leaves. Then, while collectively chanting mantras, each woman, after setting an intention and carrying a small lighted candle in her hand, wound her way into the spiral, left the candle, and came back to face the new. For Deborah, who had lost her son as a baby, this ritual allowed her to connect with her child's presence, something which was rare in her busy everyday life. The *ārati* had a similar effect for Ann, who had lost her daughter as a small child in a tragic fire, the anniversary of which happened on the second day of the retreat. The ritual, through its repetitiveness and length, guided her to a deep bodily dimension where she could actually feel the physical loss of her daughter:

> It was almost sort of primal, really in the body, not in the head, not in the mind and a sense of connection to that relationship as a mother, possibly. It is a weird feeling, must have been my stomach, I can feel it now. Just the loss really, being able to connect with the physical loss of her, it is so basic, primal, it is not very complicated, but a very powerful feeling. I think just the nature of the whole weekend, the *ārati* certainly on the second day, I felt like my body really likes this place, wanted to go into it, accept the repetition, the pace of it, the length of it, the sound of it. My body just sort of wanted it.

Ann particularly reflected on the importance of accepting death as part of life. She described how the relief of letting herself just feel the loss of her daughter allowed her to also feel the love again. After the retreat, she went to visit her mother and upon seeing her youngest brother, who was sectioned in a psychiatric unit, she gave him a big hug. What surprised her was that he stayed there with her for several minutes, mesmerized, without moving, like a small child. She assumed he must have felt intuitively how the retreat had awakened her maternal love. Hence, she summarized the effect of the retreat as an opening up of space for the core human experience of death and loss, which, in her view, is repressed in Western society. This strongly echoes the acknowledgement given in womb yoga to menstruation, which also usually remains hidden. It highlights the key endeavor that characterizes this form of women's yoga, namely to consider the full spectrum of female bodily experiences, including the ones presumed to be negative, such as birth loss, postnatal recovery, and menopause. The underlying cyclic view, so well expressed by Ann, is that the acceptance of loss opens the potential for something new to come.

The Rhythm of Female Becoming

In my view, the practice of womb yoga can be understood as one of attending to the rhythm of female becoming. It is all about following flows of movement and energy as they fluctuate in cyclical patterns that are the very rhythms of growth and decay, of opening and closure, of letting life be reborn through the acceptance of loss and death. This entails the idea that attending to what is enables an openness to what is yet to emerge from what once was. The image of a spiral is instructive in this regard: a movement that follows a known, circular pattern but, through repetition, goes toward something new. Female-centric stories of the origin of yoga should be understood from this focus on becoming, where the past, even a hypothetical one, gives a basis for imagining a way to move beyond patriarchal social

structures and views and envision new possibilities. Scholarly evidence of female sacrality within *śakta tantra* is used in womb yoga with the same aim of "fictioning female becoming."[48] This relies on an understanding, as developed by Luce Irigaray, of the divine as a horizon of potentiality that is needed for women to develop their subjectivity.[49] It can also be related to Rosi Braidotti's view that for women to "speak the feminine" and to represent it in their own terms is "an active process of becoming."[50] The womb yoga workshops seek to achieve this through visually and ritually honoring female divinities, female body processes, and mother-daughter genealogies. Such shared ceremonial activity aims to spark for each woman the process of developing their subjectivity by bringing awareness to the rhythmic processes that ground female becoming.

Braidotti names this feminine that still needs to be reconfigured a "virtual feminine," in opposition to an essentialized one.[51] A key aspect of this virtual feminine is its imaginary dimension: cumulated images and culturally codified concepts of femininity are recovered but in shifting, open-ended ways that integrate novel aspects. The ubiquitous reference to fierce female deities in womb yoga, alongside deities with more conventional feminine qualities, unlocks this possibility to envisage femininity in a diversity of aspects that can be allied with an idea of spiritual power. The virtual nature of the feminine in womb yoga is also apparent in the conceptualization of the womb, not only as an organ but, in line with yogic philosophy, as an energy center. *Yonisthāna*, a term frequently used and which literally means "the place of the yoni," refers to the *cakra* situated between the *mūlādhāra* (earth *cakra*) and *svādhiṣṭhāna* (water *cakra*). In the workshops, this center of womb energy was

[48] Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, 25–26. Raphael uses the similar image of a "spiralling" of "recycled knowledges" with regard to spiritual feminists' reinterpretations of the past.

[49] Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," in *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 55–72.

[50] Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 26.

[51] Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 7, 22.

considered to be accessible to all, irrespective of the possession of a physical womb.[52] It was also called "source energy" and was seen as the microcosmic expression of the creative cosmic energy that manifests in the comingling of water and earth. It is relevant to note here that scholarship on the "subtle body" language, which is highly developed in tantra through its system of *nadī*s and *cakra*s, argues that energetic concepts create a realm in between the dualist oppositions of mind/matter, I/divine, self/other and allow for thinking beyond the essentialist/constructivist dichotomy.[53] Visualization and using the imaginative faculties are key in accessing this intermediary realm.[54] This is precisely what was encouraged in the womb yoga workshops through practices such as the "heart-womb river," positioning oneself in the menstrual seasonal circle, or dancing the five elements.

Conclusion

Feminists who seek to combat gender inequality and further female empowerment in religion have been divided into four groups: religious reformists, religious revisionists, spiritual revolutionaries, and secular feminists.[55] The womb yoga practitioners presented in this article most closely approximate the spiritual revolutionaries. Women-only groups are favored, the female body and its life cycles are sacralized, and goddesses are used as models for female empowerment. A view of the sacred, understood as immanent in nature and the female body, is paramount. However, yogic traditions are not rejected. On the contrary,

[52] In the second edition of her book, Dinsmore-Tuli has added "a note to male readers, to female readers who do not identify as women and to transgender and non-binary readers," welcoming them to experiment with the practices described in *Yoni Shakti* and to seek "to foster the evolution of [their] own feminine aspects." Uma Dinsmore-Tuli, *Yoni Shakti. A Woman's Guide to Power and Freedom through Yoga and Tantra*, 2nd ed. (London: YogaWords, 2020), 608. I personally heard of a teacher training that included—after prior consultation with the other participants— gay man who already taught pregnancy yoga and was fond of Dinsmore-Tuli's book.

[53] Jay Johnston, "Subtle Subjects and Ethics: The Subtle Bodies of Post-Structuralist and Feminist Philosophy," in *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West*, ed. Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2013), 8–239, here 239, 245.

[54] Geoffrey Samuel, "The Subtle Body in India and Beyond," in *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West*, ed. Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2013). 33–47, here 38.

[55] Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune, *Reclaiming the F Word: The New Feminist Movement* (London: Zed, 2010), 156–57.

teachers of womb yoga have been trained in traditional yogic lineages and recognize their debt to this heritage. They consider themselves part of the yoga scene, albeit in an entirely new guise. They want to see a profound structural change in the yoga world in order to address gender imbalances and abuses. As with religious revisionists, women's experiences are used as a lens to reexamine and reappropriate yogic and tantric traditions. In this article, I have sought to describe in detail this original re-creation of yoga and the effect it has on the practitioners who engage with it.

One important issue that has not been dealt with in this article is how the reinvention of practices rooted in non-Western cultures can act as a form of cultural appropriation resting on religious exoticism and reinforcing white possessivism.[56] Womb yoga is a predominantly white practice wherein Indian religious sources are appropriated to cater to the mostly white women's needs to reclaim and celebrate their femininity as ancient spiritual power. In this sense, womb yoga contributes to the proliferation of new yoga forms by white people that shifts the authority, ownership, and profitability of the practice to the West. Indeed, because of her long-standing yogic training, her academic research expertise, her feminist articulacy, and her charismatic personality, Dinsmore-Tuli, the founder of womb yoga, holds a strong position in the field, which grants her authority and commercial success and reinforces the obviousness of the white ownership of yoga. Yet Dinsmore-Tuli is acutely aware of issues of white cultural and economic privilege and acknowledges them in her courses. She also systematically enters into dialogue and collaborates with people of color.[57] For instance, in a teacher training I attended she integrated a workshop given by a teacher of color to raise

[56] Véronique Altglas, *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Amanda Lucia, *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020); Anya Foxen, *Inhaling Spirit: Harmonialism, Orientalism, and the Western Roots of Modern Yoga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[57] In a recently created online womb yoga training, Dinsmore-Tuli co-teaches with two women of color, respectively with African and Native American roots. For *yoga nidrā* trainings, she teaches jointly with her Indian husband, Nirlipta Tuli, whose mother was a resident swami at a Satyananda ashram.

awareness about the need to decolonize yoga. The revised edition of her book also includes a new section on "decolonising the yoga industrial complex." Moreover, womb yoga is presented as an evolving practice that can be freely appropriated by any woman. This, of course, does not alter her own positionality as a white Western woman whose approach to yoga and tantra relies on a UK tradition of female reinterpretations of yoga and on the larger Western field of Goddess spirituality. Yet it does open it up for developments by women with a different positionality.

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