

SEARCHING FOR SIRSHASANA :

REFLECTIONS ON YOGA, WRITING, RESISTANCE AND THE MUSE

With gratitude to Steven Pressfield's *The War Of Art*, Haruki Murakami's *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, Vikram Chandra's *Grantha series* lecture *A Thriving Writing Life*, *The Yoga Institute, Santa Cruz, Mumbai*.

Gustave Flaubert famously said : “Be regular and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work.”

True words these. Words that I wish I had taken to heart much earlier in my own life and work. Still, one thing I learn every day, to paraphrase Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's philosophical German poem *Hat Alles Seine Zeit*, is that everything has its time, and nothing can happen before the time it is meant to.

Today, I'm looking back. This past decade has brought me, over and over again, to myriad crossroads and complicated intersections. The first, in 2012 comes in the form of a dramatic – and given that I turn 40 that year, a rather clichéd – midlife crisis. I am burnt out after almost two decades of nonstop work as a screenwriter and creative producer in a brutally chaotic television and film industry. I am tired of endlessly dodging tidal waves of audience-pleasing gimmickry and material dishonesty. I am bored of navigating a hard-nosed community that seems to value the art of hustling and one-up(wo)manship over nurturing originality, talent and collaboration in writing. I have very low self esteem, stratospheric levels of emotional stress, and a range of addictions that include attracting toxic, exploitative people into my life, over and over again.

My filmmaker partner pushes me to take a sabbatical, to reboot and change the course of my writing career, to heal from what has been a long phase of fragile physical and mental health. His advice helps. At first, I find new energy from travelling, from switching off my bruised Blackberry, from reading voraciously, as if making up for lost time, those eclectic titles that sit on my old bookshelves in my parents' home. Erica Jong's *Fear of*

Flying, Jacqueline Susann's Valley of the Dolls, Mohsin Hamid's Moth Smoke, Vikram Seth's The Golden Gate, Gita Mehta's Karma Cola, Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha, the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri and Jennifer Egan, everything by Marquez and Manto, parts of the saga that is Ulysses, chapters of the epic tale that is The Mahabharata.

With social media, I discover the art of posting and blogging, and from it grows a column for Arre, essays for Scroll and Live Wire, stories for Juggernaut and Roli Books. One of my fiction pieces, written after a close friend's mother lost her battle with cancer, is shortlisted for an anthology by the Commonwealth Writers Association. To my surprise, now that I am expressing myself in a way that comes naturally to me, I find strangers everywhere who connect to my writing.

I feel liberated after years of slow suffocation, or maybe that's because I'm also learning to breathe another way, through the power of hatha yoga and a daily ninety minute sweat of asana and pranayama.

And so, as the decade wears on, I gravitate towards my long-cherished dream of writing a novel, the seed of which grows in the form of detailed character notes, subtle plot points and experiments in narrative structure. A once-vague idea starts taking shape (as far as I can tell) as a delicious auto-fictional coming-of-age, starring a version of me as its confused, biracial, multicultural, insider-outsider, tragi-comic, faintly melancholic, middle-aged but not-quite-adult protagonist.

Yet as I stand on the brink of 2020, I face the fact that yet again, I've hit a wall. Or maybe the feeling is more akin to being in a dense fog, one that induces blurred vision and mental paralysis. I have spent months reeling through the sudden loss of my father, through the ensuing disenchantment with indifferent friends and acquaintances, through the exhaustion of moving between cities, apartments, pincodes, through nights of restless insomnia and pre-dawn whirlpools of anxiety.

Yoga isn't helping. After a shoulder injury from years of intense practice in the acrobatic, weirdly competitive ashtanga vinyasa method, yoga now feels draining rather than energizing. I am adrift, disillusioned by what I once loved, but what I now see as a hyper-commercialized exercise culture, one that comes packaged with the offer of

quick-fix pseudo-spirituality, one where an almost-comical narcissism parades itself as 'enlightenment', one that has offered no solace at all to me in my time of instability.

And so 2020 announces itself with two self-determined resolutions. To find that much-needed creative release through finishing my novel and submitting it to my publisher. And to re-learn yoga as a genuine physio-spiritual practice, one that aligns with my goals as a writer and self-explorer, one that enables me to contribute to the outer world instead of merely trying to escape from it.

Ironically, the months of lockdown that have shaped this year have provided me with the tools to act precisely upon this dual agenda. I thank what has influenced me all through this solitary summer, and feel deeply privileged for these gifts. For long walks on my Bandra apartment's terrace. For the freedom (courtesy Zoom) of flowing to simple, rejuvenating surya namaskar via the wonderfully inclusive health studio that is Movement Sanctuary. For the logic in *The War Of Art*, a slim memoir presented to me by Anil Senior. For Haruki Murakami's insights when he talks of the meditative confluence of writing and running. For Vikram Chandra's generous digital lecture on what it means to have *A Thriving Writing Life*. And for the earthy philosophy of Patanjali, offered as a guide to *Better Living*, by The Yoga Institute, Mumbai.

From these influences, emerges a fundamental question.

What do artistic practice and spiritual progress have in common?

Writing calls for a certain egotism in the writer – the lower ego as Steven Pressfield calls it – the need to be read and seen and appreciated and instantly gratified. Yet the higher ego of the writer simply approaches writing as a duty. One writes because one must, even if the rewards do not at first appear. In the same way, the yogi must annihilate the lower, material, vanity-driven ego and focus instead on the higher realms of truth and non-attachment to outcome.

The Bhagavad Gita describes the path of the artist/spiritualist as a trial through fire. For Arjun, a warrior on the battlefield, it is his dharma to face the enemy and fight. For an artist, it is her dharma to use her time wisely and create, to put out that work into the

world, to not be swayed. For a yogi, it is her dharma to live by the tenets of the yamas and niyamas, to cultivate discernment, to accept what cannot be changed, to understand that time is precious and finite.

And then there is the aspect of writing and yoga as Callings. They may or may not be, but they're definitely jobs. Not 9 to 5 jobs, more like 24/7 jobs. The good intentions of satsang and sankalp must lead to action, with the rubber meeting the road, in the everyday practice that is sadhana.

The writing life that is painted as erratic, self-destructive and whimsical, is as much a fallacy as the haloed eccentricity ascribed to a cave-dwelling yogi. Sadhana is down-to-earth, real, practical and disciplined. The four pillars of yoga talk of ahar, vihar, achar and vichar as being key to pragmatic, productive living, and these hold up especially for the marathon task that is writing a novel.

Ahar is what yoga prescribes as a diet of light, sattvik food (or, perhaps, the intake of what is right for your constitution/dosha type), a strong filter for the noise that was once vicious gossip and is now fake news and trolling on social media, and an avoidance of harmful influences, patterns and the sorts of people who bring out the worst in you. The same is prescribed for a writing life.

Vihar is what yoga advises as a system of proper exercise, relaxation and recreation. So does writing thrive on these.

Achar is what yogic living determines as routine and discipline. Whether bored or unmotivated or both or neither, writing has to be done every day to fixed hours, no matter what, whether it throws up a single careless paragraph or 2,000 polished words. It is this drill of showing up at the writing desk that is sacrosanct, as sacrosanct as showing up on a yoga mat, and it is the daily regularity in both practices that paves the way forward.

Vichar, or what yogis call attitude, alludes to positivity and pleasure. Happiness is the aspiration in all artistic and spiritual life. I think of how years of hierarchical models of comparison and outer appraisal, in my writing and in my asana practice, led to acute

insecurity and worry in me. How it is only in territorial spaces, where there is genuine pleasure in the work and a shared system of support amongst peers, where I can bring out my best efforts and shine.

The hijacker of the flight to creative joy and spiritual freedom is their common enemy : Resistance. It comes in many avatars : fear, indiscipline, compromise, procrastination, delusion, denial, false worship of others, arrogance of self, the negative addiction to platforms of comparison, the paranoia that prevents graceful acceptance of critique.

And the common myth? It lies in the magical external Muse of Divine Inspiration aka the charismatic outer Guru promising Instant Solutions.

The Muse and the Guru exist, but innately, intangibly; they are found within and nowhere else. For them to appear as a guiding prana, as Pablo Picasso once quipped, they must find you working. Once you make a start, the flow of creative and spiritual enquiry does not stop, but here's the thing, I now know, one has to *start*.

In their purest forms, artistic expression and the teachings of classical yoga have one goal : to unite the Self with its unique essence, to lead the Self towards open expression, to harmonize the Self with Nature.

My own Self as a writer-yogi-in-progress is its own unique identity. I tend towards outer observation and personal experience in my writing, and I find human contradiction and particularity more attractive than the broad strokes of rigid activism. In yoga studies, and from talking to its many diverse students, I have found an equally wide canvas of human behavior, one where the gray space of emotion and circumstance interests me more than conventional morality. The yamas and niyamas are deeply-rooted in ethics, yet the purpose of the yogi is to understand, not judge; to examine the twinning of good and evil rather than view them as absolute and distinct. Perhaps at the heart of all authentic writing and yoga, lies the Third Eye of empathetic discernment.

On a more practical note, what manifests as quality in art and yogic practice?

When I began work on my novel, in rough passage after passage, I found myself venting a lot. Anger and sorrow and sarcasm are valid emotions but don't necessarily

make for great writing (even though a lot of very rage-fueled, despairing and acerbic writing is damn good). It takes time and distance and several notes and drafts and edits to distil content from its raw, emotionally pained state into a refined, emotionally perceptive one. And so it is written in the traditional Sutras, where taking accountability is key, where self enquiry and self witnessing opens up a space where one is not a passive victim of the world, but an active player on its grand stage.

It's hard and slow work and the processes are never-ending

And so anyway, this year, in this very strange year, I plunge into the final draft of my novel, and take baby steps towards a form of yoga that is much more challenging than standing on my head in sirshasana.

There are fantastic days when it all works to a beautiful synergy.

There are aggravating days when the monkey mind will not stop its chatter.

There are moments of depression when I'm reminded of how crucial emotional health is, when I understand that even though the creative-spiritual life is rewarding and oh-so-privileged in the general scheme of things, it is not enough to cure you if you are sick or very sad.

I am no longer seduced by the glamour of melancholia, as I was back in my 20s and 30s, nor by the mood disorder that often characterizes the working artist and yogi, an alluring trope as old as Aristotle's Poetics. There are specific ailments that no amount of work or yoga can heal or distract from, and agonizing complexities for which a different form of help or therapy or love must be turned to.

Meanwhile, as the scriptures say, scriptures that are the earliest known forms of human writing and spiritual expression : Life goes on, and what goes on, must be lived and experienced to the fullest.

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