

Science Vs Philosophy

The tension between philosophy and science is very present in modern yoga¹. Classical yoga emerged experientially and for generations was passed only by word of mouth. Rather than opening up bodies and looking inside, practitioners observed and named their experiences. Within modern yoga there is a significant movement towards scientific evaluation. This is manifested in the medicalisation of yoga therapy and the increasing number of yoga anatomy publications.

The question of science vs. philosophy first presented itself in my life when I was considering the research methodology for my counselling dissertation. The course I was studying encouraged the use of heuristic research methods². I was absolutely appalled by the idea that the research wouldn't be measured or quantified in some way. It took a whole academic year and a lot of wriggling before I was able to start doing the research.

While doing the research I came to the (obvious) realisation that the divide between science and heuristic research mirrors the divide between symptom-based therapy and holistic therapy. While not wanting to discount the huge benefits of symptom-based therapy, my interest in awareness as therapy places me firmly within the holistic camp. Personally, I just don't believe that symptom relief is good enough. We could say *remove a person's symptom; they feels better today. Teach a person awareness; they will benefit for a lifetime.*

As a result of this enquiry I started to notice how scientism (science as ideology) affects our thinking and speech. It seems that anything that has not been researched according to natural science research methods can be dismissed as non-existing. Experiences can be dismissed because science does not know how to measure them, or, measuring them is not cost-effective and will not lead to profit.

Scientism also seems to lead to a discomfort with symbolism. And this discomfort with symbolism seems to lead to a distortion of yoga as a philosophy. The clearest example of this distortion is the way some people talk about the chakras. At some point people started to talk about chakras as if they exist within the body. As far as I know there is no evidence that the ancient yogis looked inside the body. I expect that if they did they would have left anatomy drawings behind (chakras next to a liver or a heart?). The chakras point to psycho-spiritual patterns³ that affect the bodymind system. They are a symbolic representation of the complexity of being. And yoga is an amazing heuristic enquiry of the experience of being. Personally, I think it would be a shame if the meeting between East and West results in the reduction/reformatting of the yoga tradition according to what can and cannot be measured.

Further Information

There are loads of publications about Scientism and heuristic research. Wikipedia provides a good gateway for both.

Clark Moustakas, one of the pioneers of the humanistic psychology in the US, published many books on heuristic research.

Eastern Bodies Western Minds by Anodea Judith is an excellent book about the chakras.

¹ The term Modern Yoga was coined by Dr. Elizabeth De Michelis in the book *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism*.

² Heuristic research requires personal connection with the topic of enquiry and aims to explore the essence of experience. Research methodology includes documentation of inner awareness, meaning and inspiration.

³ A. Judith (2004) *Eastern Body Western Mind* p.5