

Plato's Forms in Light of *Light on Yoga*

For the yogis and yoginis, some background on Plato's theory of forms. Plato believed in an ideal realm of true being. Sometimes people refer to this domain of thought as the world of forms or the world of ideas. In this realm, there are forms of true beauty, beauty in and of itself, true justice, justice in and of itself, piety, courage, temperance, friendship. All of these individual forms somehow participate in the most important form, the idea of the Good. Many of Plato's dialogues address one of these particular forms. *The Euthyphro* asks what is piety, *The Republic*, explores what Justice is; *The Charmides* examines the nature of temperance. Prior to embodiment, our soul/mind had some association, indeed close communion with the forms. Plato typically uses highly erotic imagery to describe this relationship. The soul has intercourse with the forms, it feeds on the forms, it abides with the forms. As we become embodied, we forget what we knew about the forms. Philosophy is largely a practice of remembering what we previously knew.

Scholars spend a great deal of time pondering exactly what the forms are, but one point I frequently make about them is that they are forms and not contents. There is a form of justice that is universal, but that form doesn't dictate a completely set content of what a just act or just society is. For example, all societies have laws, that place certain parameters around what is considered just and the laws and the view of justice can vary widely. We might look at the form of justice as the law making impulse that we collectively and individually have, but laws about safe driving practices, to use a mundane example vary. Nonetheless, considering examples of X can lead us to reflect on what X is in and of itself. Philosophers also spend a great deal of time discussing exactly what kind of participation the forms have with each other and what sort of relationship we have with the forms. I believe yoga philosophy has something to offer the debate.

This is a vastly oversimplified account, nowhere can you turn to page X of any dialogue and read Plato saying here is my theory of forms for your contemplation and enjoyment, but there are numerous passages in the dialogues where Socrates talks about truth, beauty, goodness, and other aspects of ultimate reality. Over the years, Plato scholars have developed a view of Plato's theory of forms, which essentially posits Plato must have believed something like this for all of those passages to have coherence. Why you may ask, does Plato not simply say what is view is. Perhaps the author of the *Seventh Letter* is correct when he says, "it can't be written about like other studies." Perhaps he didn't have it all worked out, perhaps he thought it better for us to figure these things out, to work with the forms and participate with them. What the exact relationship between form X and instantiations of form X in the material world is a matter (so to speak) of great debate. It is here that an understanding of the dynamic relationship between yoga practitioner and yoga poses offers us some help.

For the philosophers and philosophinis out there, some background on yogasana. The practice of asana, yoga poses is one of the eight limbs of Ashtanga yoga. There are yamas, ethics principles, niyamas various self-regulations, asana (poses), pranayama, breathe control, pratyahara withdrawal of the senses, dharana, concentration, dyhana, meditation and finally samadhi, contentment. This system of yoga has roots in the most ancient texts of the Indian Subcontinent but has one of its clearest formulations in a much later texts, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. The important point to see is that we might think of asana as a physical practice, but from the beginning it was rooted in an ethical and philosophical world view, which has numerous affinities with Plato's ethical, epistemological and metaphysical views.

Anyway, at least some form of asana, even if it was "just" seated poses used in meditation was practiced for a long period of time. In 1966, B.K.S. Iyengar published the book *Light on Yoga*, which has pretty much defined what the "classic form" of asana is for the contemporary yoga student. B.K.S. has continued to practice yoga over the intervening 43 years and there's an important sense in which the classic form is an ongoing work in progress. Add to that, there are many traditions of contemporary yoga practice and some emphasize flow much more than form and some have a different definition/convention of how to do a pose. The Trikonasana of asthanga yoga has a shorter stance than how the current version of Iyengar Trikonasana is taught, but it more closely adheres to the directions given about the distance of the stance in *Light on Yoga*. However, everyone would agree that they are both examples of the form Trikonasana. In Amuser yoga, Trikonasana is often expressed with a deep backward bend in the torso. This expressive form is

clearly a variation on "classic" form, but it still participates in the form Trikonasana. At what point does Trikonasana stop being Trikonasana and become some other pose, is an open question. One has to think about what the essential aspects of Trikonasana are that make it different from Utthita Parsvakonasana, for example.... When does courage stop being courage and become something else... Philosophers ask this question frequently as they discuss the unity of the virtues.

There's also an important sense in which all the poses are really one pose, much like all the Platonic forms are really the good. B.K.S Iyengar is famous for saying "Find Tadasana in every pose." John Friend's articulation of the Universal Principles of Alignment, posit this commonality quite directly. Regardless of the pose, universal principles apply. How much and in what way depends on the pose, the practice, and the person.

Some other interesting things to note. Many poses are named after something more universal, like a geometric shape, Trikonasana, is triangle pose. So when one practices Trikonasana, you as particular person are participating in an understanding of the universal triangle. How I have to shape my body as a short, somewhat fleshy American female is quite different, than a lithe long-limbed Indian man. Poses are often named after something in the natural world, Vrksasana, tree pose, Ardha Chandrasana, half moon pose. So when one assumes that shape one might reflect on what aspect of a half moon we are trying to embody. Plato too thought that reflecting on the things of the natural world was part of the path to enlightenment. He articulates this journey in his description of the prisoner leaving the cave and moving toward the light of true understanding. There are also a number of poses named after animals: pigeon (Kapotasana), lion (Simhasana), peacock (Mayurasana), even the feather of a peacock (Pincha Mayurasana). In assuming these poses, we connect some particular quality like flight, or lightness, or courage. Many of the poses, particularly the twists, are named after sages. Twists challenge us and change our perspective just like the wisdom of the sages does. Twists are very difficult for me. I wish my philosophical practice some how had endowed me with more affinity for the sage poses!!!