

CULTIVATING STILLNESS THROUGH YOGA: *Considerations for a deepening of Presencing Mastery at the Bottom of the U*

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Abstract: Dynamic Presencing offers a significant advancement in the work of presencing. The work as a whole opens up new territory at the bottom of the U that develops existing understandings and applications of presencing in Theory U contexts. Key to the first three journeys is the ability to embody different level-depths of presence and to learn to rest in stillness and discern emergence in a way that generates a subtle but active renewal of our seeing from Source. We suggest the *Yoga Sutras*, as a foundational document of the philosophy and practice of yoga, and as a holistic and systemic approach to stilling the waves of consciousness, offer supportive practices and ways of being that are complimentary to the Dynamic Presencing method of attuning to, being and seeing from Source. In this article, we illustrate how yoga practice not only aligns with but also provides an important and necessary contribution to the Dynamic Presencing mastery ideal of engaging presencing as a generative way of being. To this end, we outline two of the eight limbs or components of classical yoga—*yama-niyama* and *gunas*—as a means of demonstrating these alignments and essential contributions.

Keywords: *Yoga Sutras*; stillness of consciousness; holistic approach to Dynamic Presencing; *yama-niyama*; *gunas*

I. Introduction

Living in a historical moment when change is ever more rapid and uncertain, when the characteristics of a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) world (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Hadar et al., 2020; LeBlanc, 2018) are ever more present, Gunnlaugson and Brendel (2020) note *presencing* increasingly represents “... a viable, comprehensive praxis for stewarding change and global transformation.” Contemplative

practice has been a feature of the presencing work since its inception. In their initial dialogues, Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, and Flowers (2005) referred to contemplation as part of the work of suspending, of “seeing from the whole” (p. 41ff), as part of integrating “inner work.” They saw it as a “capacity to slow down and gradually become aware of our ‘thought stream’” (p. 37), pointing to two aspects of contemplation: concentration, the ability to still and focus the mind, and mindfulness, the ability to attend as fully as possible to the present in a dispassionate fashion (pp. 50–53).

They defined presencing at that time as the work at the bottom of the U, as “seeing from the deepest source and becoming a vehicle for that source” (Senge et al., 2005, p. 89). Contemplative stillness plays a role in connecting us to what is referred to in Daoist philosophy as Source: “It’s what is ‘at the heart of the heart.’ When we’re connected to the source, things become more and more integrated as a path, with attention, body, and mind coming together ...” (p. 99). Jaworski (Senge et al., 2005) described this contemplative process as “[b]ecoming aware of yourself and the world by stopping the flow of thought” (p. 182) that leads to a state of “true stillness, what we’ve called the bottom of the U” (p. 183). Brendel (2020) points to contemplative practices of mindfulness and focusing on the breath as means of deepening our awareness and bringing us into the present moment as needed in presencing.

The focus on inner stillness and the ability of contemplative practices to stabilize it connects to a central part of Theory U work. In recent years, Gunnlaugson (2020) has made the case for “a more in-depth approach to presencing” (p. 4) that takes root foundationally in one’s daily life and experience. He concluded that a pre-condition for this task is to engage with presencing as a way of living and being from “a sufficiently lived into depth of embodiment of presence.” Gunnlaugson focuses on an integrated cultivation of presence, which among other core commitments, includes bringing Source into the self and, more specifically, into our own grounded, lived, phenomenological experience. This deep, focused work at the bottom of the U draws upon a contemplative orientation and set of practices to sustain and deepen our overall presence and presencing awareness as a flowing movement. This work is informed in part by the capacity to *connect to*, *be-with* and *be* Source. The contemplative work offers what Reams, Gunnlaugson, and Reams (2014) refer to as the means of accessing “stillness, discernment, and generative action” (p. 41) by revealing the most fundamental levels of our being and underlying dimensions of presencing. The deeper presencing work of Dynamic Presencing is a kind of emergent contemplative practice, in that it requires working with presencing regularly over a sustained period of time in ways that

connect and deepen our access to presencing as a way of being. Gunnlaugson notes that a pre-condition for this task is to engage with presencing ontologically as a way of living via “a sufficiently lived into depth of embodiment of presence” (pp. 6–7). For this purpose, Gunnlaugson developed Dynamic Presencing, which is a more integrated path of presencing mastery that consists of five immersive, transformative journeys (figure 1.0).

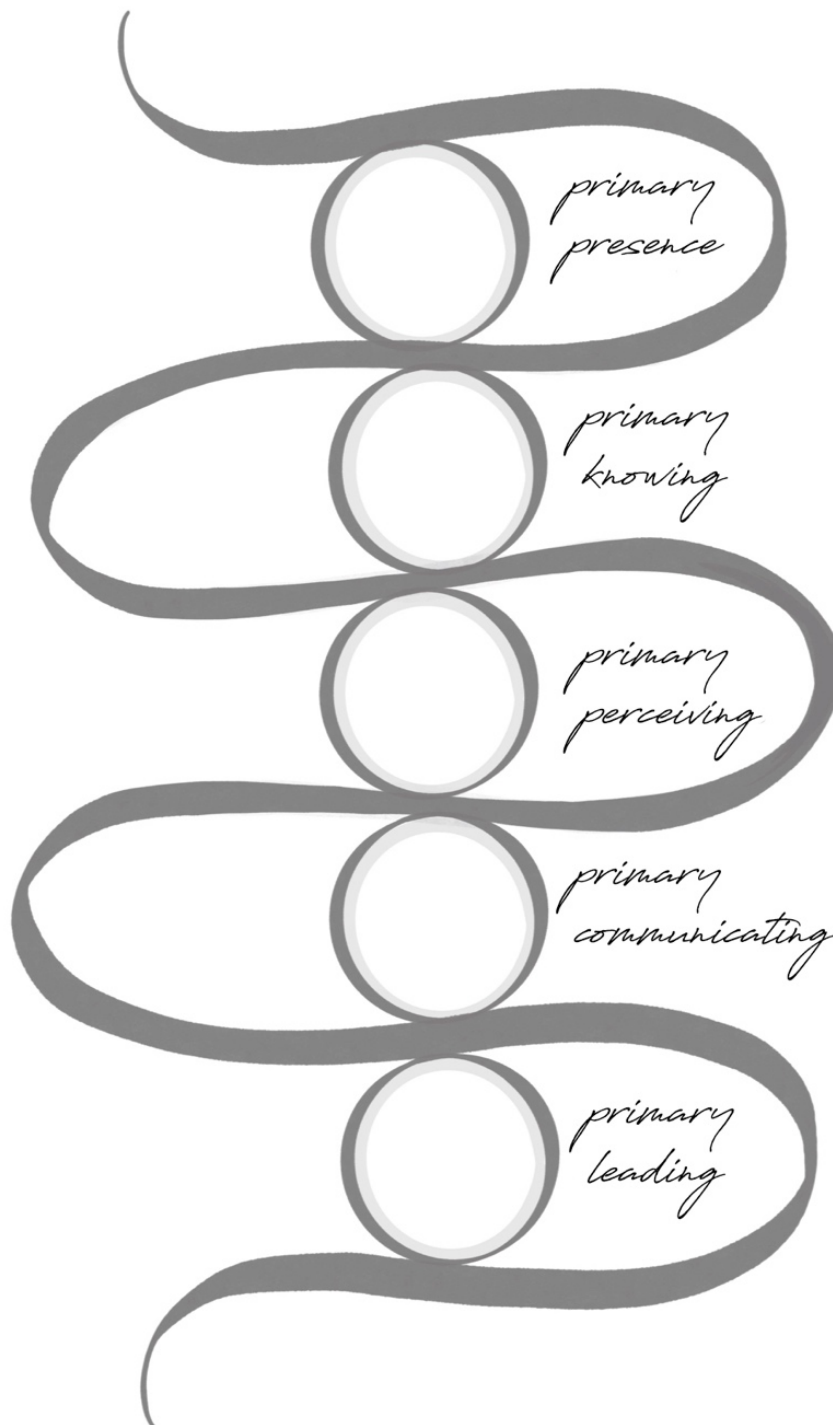


Figure 1.0 The five journeys of Dynamic Presencing

His method focuses on cultivating the ontological dimension of one's immediate experience since this dimension is "precisely where our work begins and continues to live into through each of the five journeys" (p. 67).

For the purposes of this article, we would like to build on the contributions of Dynamic Presencing with its ideal of presencing mastery (i.e., presencing as a way of being) by exploring connections to the ancient path of yoga, as represented in the teachings and practices of the *Yoga Sutras*. As much a way of living as it is a practice (Zimmer, 2009), the *Yoga Sutras* offer a comprehensive, integrated, and effective means of achieving the stillness of mind that is reflected in the first three journeys of *primary presence*, *primary knowing*, and *primary perceiving*.

While incorporating meditative approaches supports the work of Dynamic Presencing, we maintain that these alone will not achieve the desired transformation of consciousness. The *Yoga Sutras* point to a comprehensive and integrated set of practices, regularly working through the body, intellect, emotions, and spirit, that foster the deeper inner work required by Dynamic Presencing. In his commentaries on the *Yoga Sutras*, Chapple (2008) writes of the virtues of an integrated, systemic approach:

Yoga practice takes an individual on an inward journey. It begins with taming one's impulses through the cultivation of ethical precepts and molding a positive outlook through the application of the virtues. It requires the harnessing of the energy generated within one's body and breath. It culminates in a threefold interiority of concentration, meditation, and becomingwhelmed or enraptured. (pp. ix-x)

The essential focus of the *Yoga Sutras* is a systemic, holistic practice embracing every aspect of the individual's being in cultivating stillness. The stillness of consciousness that yoga develops in practitioners helps give an enriched access to the "foundational levels of our humanity" where, Gunnlaugson (2020) asserts, "new inscapes emerge through which presencing can flow through anew, illuminating unfortold insights and revelations" (p. 23). As a systemic approach, yoga practice requires the practitioner to work with all aspects of one's life to still consciousness and is ideally suited to assisting in deepening the practitioner's capacity for the aforementioned Dynamic Presencing journeys. Likewise, yoga encompasses the ontological dimensions of both experience and being. As we outline the relevant teachings and practices of the *Yoga Sutras* in this article, we intend to establish how yoga's aim at comprehensively transforming one's inner being bears similarities to and supports the Dynamic Presencing goal of offering an in-depth journey to transform the capacity, function and purpose of one's existing presencing practice, and in turn realizations and developments along the path of

presencing mastery. Yoga aims at a comprehensive transformation of one's deeper capacities, one's inner being. The stillness of consciousness that yoga develops opens the doors where the ontological, epistemological, and intersubjective transformations can take place.

II. The *Yoga Sutras*

Yoga represents one of the six philosophical schools of Indian philosophy. It is most closely aligned with and literally follows from the teachings of the *Sāṃkhya* school, which provides the metaphysical foundations upon which the yoga teachings rest. *Sāṃkhya* teaches two fundamental principles that comprise reality—*purusa*, the innermost consciousness, the Seer, higher Self, or unitary soul, and *prakṛti*, the material world with all its variability, the Seen. *Sāṃkhya* argues that we normally identify with *prakṛti*—a materialistic self in a changing world—but should aim to re-establish our identity as *purusha*. As Chapple (2008) puts it: “The purpose of Yoga is to reveal reality as it relates to the seer and, through certain practices, break through to the point of consciousness where there is no distinction between seer and seen” (p. 27). This theme of unity is central to the Vedānta school, with which yoga is also closely aligned.

Written by Patañjali, the *Yoga Sutras* present a comprehensive, integrated program for stilling the restless of the mind. The teachings represent what is sometimes referred to as the ‘Eightfold Path of Yoga’ or ‘Eight-limbed Path of Yoga’ or (*ashtanga yoga*):

Yama—the ethical imperatives, restraints, and abstentions, around what *not* to do: nonviolence; not lying; not stealing; sexual restraint; and non-possessiveness.

Niyama—the ethical imperatives around what one *should* do, the observances or virtues: purity of body, speech, and mind; contentment; self-discipline; study of self and spiritual teachings, self-reflection and introspection; and devoted surrender.

Āsana—assuming and maintaining a comfortable posture for meditative practices.

Prāṇāyāma—control of the breath and energy (*prāṇa*) in the body.

Pratyāhāra—interiorization of the consciousness; withdrawing the mind from the sensory world.

Dhāraṇā—concentration; developing one-pointedness of mind.

Dhyāna—meditation; a contemplative awareness of what the mind is now focused on

Samādhi—union; complete immersion in or joining with the object of meditation.

The Eightfold Path is meant to be practiced and developed sequentially; that is, one works on developing *yama* and *niyama* before working on developing stillness in a meditation posture (*āsana*). Once one has developed *āsana*, one can then proceed to practice control of breath and energy (*prāṇāyāma*)—and so on. The practice and

development of one step leads to readiness for the next step. However, in reality one is also working on all the various steps concurrently as part of an integrated practice. As Bryant (2009) points out, the *Yoga Sūtras* is a manual for the yoga practitioner rather than an exposition of a yoga philosophy; the aim is direct experience and ultimately union with *puruṣa*.

What is widely considered the most important *sūtra* (verse) comes at the very beginning: “*yogaś citta vṛitti nirodha*,” which translates as “Yoga is the stilling of the changing states of the mind” (Bryant, 2009, p. 10). The aim of the yoga teachings is to still the restless mind so that it can perceive the true nature of reality—*puruṣa*. The very next *sūtra* asserts: “*tadā drastuḥ svarūpe ’vasthānam*,” which translates as “When that [stilling] has been accomplished, the seer abides in its own true nature” (p. 22). Abiding in that true, still nature provides a greatly deepened insight into the nature of things.

This aim of stillness is similarly reflected in the work of Dynamic Presencing, including what Gunnlaugson, in the last chapter of *Dynamic Presencing*, refers to as the “stillpoint.” Śāṅkara, perhaps the most famous Indian philosopher, in his commentary on the *Yoga Sūtras* (called the *Vīvarana*, circa 700 CE; Leggett, 2016) on this *sūtra*, asserts that knowledge of reality is the aim of yoga; stilling the restless consciousness is the means to this knowledge. Again, we see the connection to Dynamic Presencing and the journeys of *primary knowing* and *primary perceiving*.

It is worth noting that *chitta* (or *citta*) is a comprehensive term, covering the many dimensions and activities of consciousness/mind; as Feuerstein (1989) notes, the term is not easily translatable into English because of its comprehensive nature. It includes the *manas* (the rational mind with its various thoughts and the senses as vehicles of perception; likes and dislikes), *buddhi* (intelligence; judgment, discrimination), and *ahamkāra* (the sense of self or identity, egoity). Feelings/emotions, (likes and dislikes) are also a significant component of *chitta*, and they are often associated with the heart.

The meditative practices outlined in the *Yoga Sūtras* that comprise steps six and seven of the ‘eightfold path’ of yoga—*dhāraṇā* and *dhyāna*—are key to this stilling of the mind. However, the teachings of the *Yoga Sūtras* are meant to be considered as a whole; stripping *dhāraṇā* and *dhyāna* from the text as isolated practices is not as effective in producing that stillness of consciousness. Bryant (2009) writes: The more the eightfold path is practiced, the more these impurities [of the mind, such as aversion, attachment, ego] dwindle, and the more they dwindle, the more this light [of insight, mental illumination, stillness] can correspondingly increase. This increase culminates in the desired discriminative discernment (p. 241)

III. Yoga and Primary Presence

In his discussion of the first journey, *primary presence*, Gunnlaugson states that in learning to “contact and root our awareness from the grounds of presence that support our presencing nature, each lifeworld helps us rediscover what our presencing nature is” (p. 37). The unique contribution of yoga practice lies in offering the practitioner an integrated set of tools that allow one to still consciousness and open awareness in a systematic and holistic fashion.

In fostering this stillness of consciousness, we begin to establish ourselves in our “presencing nature” and in turn to be “in touch with the fullness of reality that is present in each presencing situation” (p. 39). This inner stillness helps create conditions to ground oneself in what Gunnlaugson refers to as the “seat of presence inside each lifeworld” (p. 37). Yoga practices offer, through the integration of stillness and awareness, a sound inner foundation from which one can orient. In this respect, yoga helps navigate and develop the “ontological regions or grounds” that support presencing. Yoga can thus play a uniquely valuable role in navigating each of the four lifeworlds of *primary presence*.

To illustrate how this is possible, the lifeworld of *being real* represents reconnecting to the “immediacy of our existential ground” (p. 39) being “open to ourselves to contacting reality as it is” (p. 40). By returning to stillness, we make this connection to reality, to things as they are. When we contact reality as it is, we can then be more authentic and open to what Gunnlaugson refers to as “an existential form of seeing and relating to reality without the filters and societal lenses” (p. 40). This stillness allows us to disentangle from the intellectual and emotional colourings of our experience in the second lifeworld of *being witness* by accessing a “more transcendent consciousness-based perspective” (p. 45). Similarly, when in the third lifeworld of *being essence*, we contact what Gunnlaugson refers to as “a coherent state of felt contact with our essential nature” (p. 49). From this place of stillness, we begin to gain a deepened insight into the nature of our experience, which leads to re-connecting with the fourth lifeworld, *being Source*. He writes, “in taking our seat in being Source, we contact the very foundation of who we are. From the wisdom traditions, this is regarded as the non-dual immersion into the very heart of reality” (p. 55). Gunnlaugson later states, “through the depths of quiet that rise to meet us, there is an inner cessation and suspension of habitual activity. We come to the fullness of being at rest and in this stopping, therein lies the possibility of communing directly with source to understand, learn from and

apprentice from it directly” (p. 57). We would suggest that yoga, as an integrated practice, can support the journey of primary presence by supporting practitioners in establishing this deeper communion with and *as* Source.

For those practitioners working with Dynamic Presencing, for the remainder of our article, we have chosen to focus on two elements of the *Yoga Sūtras* that we feel can be helpful in both understanding and practice: 1) the *yama-niyama*, and 2) the *gunas* (primordial qualities), which tend to be overlooked in contemporary contemplative/meditative practice.

IV. *Yama–Niyama* and the Three Gunas

The first five limbs of Patañjali’s Yoga—*yama*, *niyama*, *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, and *pratyāhāra*—are known as the ‘outer limbs’ (*bahinranga*), as they “concern a practitioner’s basic orientation to the social world and to the senses” (MacKenzie, 2019, p. 208). Among these five limbs, *yama* and *niyama* constitute the moral foundation upon which the practitioner is to live in a peaceful way in the world, develop and transform character while in engagement with the other limbs. In MacKenzie’s (2019) interpretation, the *yama-niyama* “constitute Yoga’s framework for developing both other-regarding and self-regarding virtues [or modes of being] and virtuous modes of living” (p. 208). The significance of the practices of *yama-niyama* as part of one’s daily life is that they contribute to the development of a foundation of stillness in one’s life.

The *gunas* may be said to represent three fundamental qualities or forces in all nature or the manifest cosmos (*prakṛti*). The significance of these qualities—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*—is that they influence *chitta*, either by contributing to its stillness (*nirodha*) or its restlessness (*vṛitti*). Each of the *gunas* manifests in an individual in varying degrees. The first of these, *sattva*, denotes the qualities of lucidity, tranquility, virtue, wisdom, detachment, unalloyed happiness, purity, and peace; the Sanskrit root of the word *sattva* denotes the fundamental nature of being itself. Attunement with *sattva* stills consciousness and contributes to the Dynamic Presencing journeys by deepening both stillness and insight. *Rajas* signifies activity, creativity, restlessness, attachment, power, passion. While attunement or alignment with *rajas* can evoke creativity and dynamism, it can also contribute to a restless consciousness that can obscure deeper connections to Source. When *tamas* is predominant in the consciousness, ignorance, lethargy, disinterest, delusion, untruth, indolence, and darkness are principally present. These latter forces almost certainly impede the inner processes represented in the Dynamic Presencing journeys. What is significant is that these *gunas* come into force through the

thoughts and actions of individuals, influenced by both internal and external forces. One can increase or decrease the presence and power of any of the *gunas* by conscious and sustained intention, thought, and action. Bryant (2009) points out that one of the goals of yoga is to maximize the presence of *sattva*, since these qualities contribute to a stilled, luminous consciousness, and minimize the presence of *rajas* and *tamas*. It is then that one works towards the stillness of one's consciousness, what Chapple refers to as "the goal of luminosity" (p. 72). The practice of yoga empowers one to "regulate and pacify the drama of the ever-changing *gunas*" (p. 105). Indeed, the last *sutra* of the *Yoga Sutras* (IV.34) references higher awareness or steadfastness of consciousness as a transcendence of the *gunas* and their influence.

V. The Significance of *Yama-Niyama* and the *Gunas* to Yoga Practice and Dynamic Presencing

The significance of both *yama-niyama* and awareness of the *gunas* for the Dynamic Presencing practitioner is, again, that conscious, intentional practice of *yama-niyama* and the development of sattvic qualities leads to the stillness of body, mind, and heart, allowing presencing practitioners to "... delve into uncovering new inscapes and horizons beyond their existing presencing practice" (Gunnlaugson, 2020, p. 7). Other significant considerations are awareness and practice. As mentioned, the *Yoga Sutras* present a comprehensive, integrated/Integral (Wilber, 2006, 2018) approach to the stilling of consciousness and a greater awareness of Source (Gunnlaugson, 2020; Jaworski, 2012), of both what is and what is unfolding, part of the essence of Dynamic Presencing. The application of the teachings of the *Yoga Sutras* allows what Senge et al. (2005) mention: concentration, the ability to still and focus the mind, and mindfulness, the ability to attend as fully as possible to the present in a dispassionate fashion. Central to both yoga and Dynamic Presencing is regular, committed practice. The *Yoga Sutras* presents not only a comprehensive teaching but one that is in its essence a practice. A study of these teachings helps one understand the nature of consciousness and how the restlessness of the mind can be overcome to achieve this state of *nirodha*, which is reflected in the first two Dynamic Presencing journeys of *primary presence* and *primary knowing* (Scott, 2021).

We addressed the ontological dimensions of practice earlier in this essay with our focus on *primary presence*. With respect to the epistemological inquiries, Gunnlaugson writes: "... learning to let go as a surrender relaxes our usual separate self-identity and connects us with our presencing nature. From this perspective, letting go is in essence a

gesture of coming home to a fuller sense of who we are.” The yoga practices are designed, as mentioned early in the essay, to shift the sense of identification from a separate, material sense of self to a complete identification with *purusha*, the Seer. This movement is both ontological and epistemological, as it moves us into that which is unknown to the ordinary, world-centered consciousness. The following passage from *Dynamic Presencing* links the ontological and epistemological and perfectly captures what yoga practice is designed to achieve:

As our ontological capacity for being with what-is develops, so also does our epistemological capacity for discerning new emergence. In other words, our discernment of letting come, when guided by a more developed capacity for letting be, is more centered, coherent, at ease, receptive—again, all subtle qualities of well-being and wholesome, integrated wisdom. (p. 74)

The practice of surrender that is part of *primary knowing* is explored in the fifth *niyama*, devoted surrender (*īśvara-pranidhāna*). This prepares us for the journey of *primary perceiving*. In surrendering, we then can attune ourselves to *what-is*; the non-attachment of both contentment (*santosā*) and devoted surrender (*īśvara-pranidhāna*) deepen our ability to discern what is arising, as we know longer hold on to attachments, desires, assumptions, and knowing. We then can see more clearly *what-is-emerging*. These more foundational ontological and epistemological shifts move us beyond a limited sense of an isolated self. One now identifies and perceives through an interconnected Self, *purusha*, which is “witness, free, indifferent, a spectator, inactive” and all-pervasive (Bryant, 2009, p. xlvi); there is now a “nonseparation of knower, knowing, and known” (Chapple, 2008, p. 27). As *purusha* is the ground of all being, realization of one’s identification with it opens the possibilities for intersubjective connection in the *you-, we- and all-space*. As Lasater (2007) puts it “Patañjali’s Sutra gives us tools for improving our relationships by stripping away the illusions that shield us from connection with our true Self, with others, and with life itself.”

Primary leading, which is made possible by success with the other four journeys of Dynamic Presencing, follows from what Gunnlaugson refers to learning to access one’s stillpoint: “Our stillpoint is the felt inner region of stillness that pervades our inner body and allows for a seamless contact with our ground of presence and the presencing field-space we are in (i.e. *i-space, you-space, we-space or all-space*).” Yoga practice can serve the development and embodiment of this stillpoint, which connects us to source—what we would suggest is the *purusha* of the *Yoga Sutras*.

What distinguishes Dynamic Presencing is its focus on intentional journeys that

cultivate a deepened presencing mastery that builds on the applied, practical focus of Theory U. The active and dynamic elements of these journeys—what Gunnlaugson refers to as an “in-depth apprenticeship”—align well with yoga. A focus on regular, repeated, and sustained practice and on mastery are critically central to the *Yoga Sutras*. *Sutra* I.12 states “[The] *vritti* states of mind are stilled by practice and dispassion” (Bryant, 2009, p. 47); Chapple (2008) translates this as “restraint arises from practice and release from desire” (pp. 116; 146). We earlier compared the restless mind to a stream flowing over rocky terrain; Vyāsa, in his commentary notes that practice (*abhyāsa*) ‘checks’ or tames the flow of water, stilling it (Bryant, 2009; Leggett, 2016). Bryant notes “By flowing along the course of discrimination, the mind leads to upliftment and ultimate liberation by practice of yoga, the flow of mind toward higher knowledge becomes unobstructed, and the mind becomes immersed in discrimination” (p. 48). Minimizing the influence of both *rajas* and *tamas*, as appropriate, is ultimately a disciplinary set of acts and an art of discrimination: in total, a sustained, repeated set of practices. Mastering *yama-niyama*, likewise, is a disciplinary set of acts and an art of discrimination, a sustained, repeated set of practices. These both contribute to yoga and its success. Practice of yoga extends beyond any time set aside for, example, meditative engagement. In a larger, more relevant context, yoga becomes a way of life, a set of conscious intentions and acts designed to be aware of and transform the consciousness that can be carried out throughout one’s life.

VI. Conclusion

Contemplative approaches have become widely advocated in the fields of education, leadership, and health (Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott, & Bai, 2014). One can see that practicing the *Yoga Sutras* is not a short-term project that can be taken on as a practice decontextualized from the aspects of one’s life but rather requires intense, sustained effort in virtually all aspects of life. Similarly, practicing Gunnlaugson’s work on Dynamic Presencing reflects a similar conclusion: sustained effort in practice in one’s life is needed to reach the far shore of presencing as a dynamic way of being. The deeper sustained accolades of presencing mastery cultivated through the five methods of Dynamic Presencing can benefit from comprehensive approaches like the *Yoga Sutras*, which foster stillness through one’s body, mind, heart, and spirit. Meditative efforts on their own, we believe, would not be sufficient for a fully integrated stage of mastery. In this regard, the *Yoga Sutras* offer a comprehensive applied teaching that outlines a set of practices and disciplines that can be carried out anywhere, in every context of one’s life,

with the aim of achieving the quality of stillness and lucidity that are essential to the work of Dynamic Presencing.

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