

The Yogas of Skilful Fabrication and Effortless Naturalness

Tarchin Hearn, 2026

We take refuge in love and clear seeing.

We live courageously in this world of birthing/dying.

Our hearts embrace all companions on this path of lucidity and freedom.

For the sake of all beings,

wisdom, compassion and non-clinging awareness.

This short essay will touch on how I have come to link the very deep and profound arising and perfecting yogas of Tibetan tantric practice with what I now call the yogas of Skilful Fabrication and Effortless Naturalness.

Yoga

Contemplating my life from the vantage point of more than seventy years, I could describe it as a braiding of two great rivers of human endeavour; one being a deep immersion in Buddhist study and practice, and the other, a life long passion for science and scientific enquiry. Over time, these two disciplines have become so interwoven in my ways of experiencing and understanding the world that I forget, that for many people, they seem to be two quite separate worlds. Years ago, if asked what I was in terms of a profession, I tried to address this by describing myself as a yogi of the natural world. The myriad dancings of the natural world – an awesome flowing of multi-dimensional collaboration – is giving rise to me in the act of appreciating and engaging with this dancing of the natural world which, in turn, is giving rise to me. It looks like an endless cycling but actually the entire dynamic is a simultaneous arising. Realising this beginningless/endless union, is yoga.

To to better understand what I mean by the yogas of skilful fabrication and effortless naturalness it might help to look at the Buddhist influences that shaped me. Yoga is a broadly used term that is common throughout India, S.E. Asia and the Himalayan regions. In a general sense, it refers to any practice, discipline or process that encourages a way of living that feels increasingly integrated, whole, complete and unified. In addition to being an active practice or training, 'yoga' can also refer to the result of such training – a realisation of ever-fresh primordial unity. I often use the word 'yoga' to cover both practice and realisation. In Tibetan teachings of tantra, yoga is a term often connected with two profound practice/realisations, one traditionally called 'arising yoga' and the

other called 'perfecting yoga'. Gradually, over time, I found myself referring to them as the yogas of skilful fabrication and effortless naturalness.

Arising Yoga, or The Yoga of Skilful Fabrication

The term arising yoga, also referred to as generation, or development, or creation yoga, derives from [Tib. *bskyed rim*] or [Skt. *utpattikrama*] which in turn comes from *utpatti*, meaning: arising, birth, production, origin; producing as an effect or result, giving rise to, or generating as a consequence. The Sanskrit dictionary goes on to define *utpattikrama* as "the successive stages of creation" – "for example, from Brahman arose ether, from ether wind, from wind fire, from fire water, from water earth, from earth plants, from plants food, from food seed, from seed man."

In Tibetan teachings, the discipline of arising yoga appears in many forms, all of them inviting the practitioner into a deepening contemplation of our seamlessly integrated body/speech/mind or body/brain/mind/community. Namgyal Rinpoché, used to sometimes refer to this form of practice as creative imagination yoga or creativity yoga and for us young students this generally involved visualising a specified radiant Buddha figure and then engaging in some kind of relational activity with it such as making prayerful offerings or receiving blessings. At that time, because the process seemed to involve choosing to bring forth a dynamic sense of the presence of a radiant being, or radiant quality of being, I found it useful to equate this kind of practice with Krishnamurti's term, "choiceful awareness". We would intentionally 'create' it through active efforts in imagination.

Throughout my involvement with Buddhist teaching, I have never been able to unquestioningly accept all the traditional forms of practice. I seemed to be saddled with a deeply ingrained need to make sense of dharma in the context of the full range of interests of my life, which in this case includes science, and particularly evolutionary biology. As I engaged in these traditional forms of meditation practice, questions would arise. How does such a practice or phenomena or experience, and particularly arising yoga as an act of creative imagination, arise in and from the natural functioning of an evolving cosmos and biosphere? What is the purpose of such a practice? What is its relevance to the requirements, needs and problems we face in modern living?

In trying to make sense of arising yoga or creative imagination yoga I found it useful to look at my understanding of the word 'imagination'. For some people, imagination and fantasy are the same thing. To say, "it's just your imagination", is often another way of saying it is not real. Our ancestors, when reflecting on the experience of a vision or daydream, might have explained it as an act of magic. The 'mag' part of *imagination* might have come from 'magus' or 'magician' where thoughts or visions were put into one's mind

by God or some powerful being existing outside oneself. This type of imagination is something that happens in the minds of children, artists, dreamers or the mentally insane. For many people this seems to be utterly different from an act of clear perception which, in contrast, is considered to be real. But is this really the case?

When we see a visual object such as a tree, our eyes don't receive a tree. They receive photons emitted from the sun, bounced off the tree which then activate retinal cells in our eyes. Some people assume that we see the tree in the primary visual cortex located at the back of our brain. Dissection and physiological study however, has been unable to find a tree there. An active visual cortex is accompanied by a cascade of tactile kinaesthetic and chemical responses throughout the body which themselves lead to further cascades – a beginningless endless river of experience. To simplify a very complex and not yet completed story, the image or experience of 'tree' is a construct; a fabrication that involves tree, light, eyes, neurons, prior experience, a languaging community that names this kind of experienced object 'tree', and so forth. The '*gin*' part of imagination can be linked to words such as generate, genetic and genital. With this in mind, an act of imagination could be understood as a process of image-generation – a continuous collaborative generation, fabrication or construction of experience. By image, I'm not restricting it to a visual image. We can imagine music – a matrix of sound, or a particular smell, taste or kinaesthetic sensation. All these experiences arise through the complex process that generates or fabricates them. Our intention is only one small part of the process. In this sense, imagination is a staggeringly rich process that has been evolving for millions of years.

Tibetan practices of arising yoga grew out of an intuitive understanding that our ongoing lived experience is a continuously arising construct. All of us are doing this – it is a non-negotiable facet of being the type of creature we are – but could we do it more skilfully? Our whole life is a dancing of image-generation. Much of this process is governed by unconscious patterns of functioning that were inherited from earlier life. Part of it though, is shaped by our conscious volition and choice which can be skilful or unskilful depending on whether these acts of imagination support the ongoing unfolding of integrated, healthy living or whether they support states of fragmentation, states often accompanied by feelings of conflict and dysfunction. As I came to see arising yoga in this way, I realised that it was not essentially different from the biological process of perception and knowing, a process of definition and discernment that has been evolving and ramifying for billions of years. In trying to explain this yoga to newcomers I found it more helpful to speak in terms of a yoga of skilful fabrication. At the same time, I saw that the contemplative skills such as patience, acceptance, focus and attentiveness needed for these Tibetan yogas could help deepen our scientific explorations, by joining them with ethical considerations of how we might meaningfully live together in a sustainable fashion.

In the yoga of skilful fabrication we are cultivating a suite of life skills that support us in integrating our conscious intentions and aspirations with the vast field of activity that comprises our living physiology responding with and to the rest of the universe. Personal aspiration and communal activity at many levels join together in constructing or fabricating the ongoing lived experience of our lives – both our private personal lives and our communally recognised shared life. The yoga of skilful fabrication is based on the assumption that our understanding of the world is affecting how we perceive it while, at the same time, our perceptions of the world are influencing and shaping our understanding. By enlarging our capacities for perceiving the world, we expand our understanding. By widening our understanding, we extend our capacity to perceive and imagine.

Different cultures make sense of this natural process in terms of their particular tradition of experientially understanding the universe. In ancient Tibet, yogis knew nothing about DNA, cell differentiation, brain structure and evolving ecology yet they could still develop an unshakable confidence in a totally inter-dependent universe described with terms such as bodhisattva, factors of enlightenment, lotus flowers, rainbows, chakras, energy channels and blessings of the lama. In the modern scientific world, we need to include physiology, chemistry, cosmology and so much more.

Living is an endless process of collaborative fabrication. Writing this, I'm not implying that I, an individual am doing the fabricating. No individual can be given credit for this mystery of creation. Rather, a communal collaboration involving myriad dimensions and domains of dynamic experience is giving rise to the experiential sense of me in the act of intentionally participating in this communal collaboration. In this sense the universe is freshly self-assembling, moment by moment. A spontaneous presence of everything that everyone does, is continuously initiating immeasurable cascades of rippling effect throughout the universe. To realise that this is what is happening, is to come into union or 'yoga' with what is happening. The yoga of skilful fabrication could be thought of as a process of knitting together the diversity of life into an integrated whole, based on a profound understanding of how the universe works and how conscious experience emerges. This yoga is a training in skilfully bringing forth such a realisation. It is something we choose to participate in and requires a particular range of talents and disciplined effort. By engaging in the praxis of yoga we come to a realisation of profound union.

Perfecting Yoga, or the Yoga of Effortless Naturalness

In traditional Tibetan practices, perfecting yoga, completion yoga, or as I have come to think of it, the yoga of effortless naturalness, derives from [*Tib. rdogs rim*] or [*Skt.*

sampannakrama] which in turn is associated with *sampanna* meaning: turned out well, accomplished, effected, perfect, excellent. *Sampannakrama* is often equated with a form of *samādhi* – a unified state of absorption.

Because of the linear nature of written language, *sadhana*, or practice texts, can seem to indicate a sequential order of doing things. Practically, one would first cultivate a capacity for generosity, wholesome relating, patience, skilled use of effort, acceptance, focus, attentiveness, and non-clinging presence. As we become more proficient at each of them and with deepening appreciation of how they inter-support each other, we might begin to suspect that they are actually different faces of a seamless whole. The same applies to skilful fabrication and effortless naturalness which are really two facets of a single seamless experience. However, the order of teaching these meditations commonly begins with skilful fabrication in the form of encouraging a particular quality, or way of experiencing the universe, that often often involves visualising a radiant Buddha or *deva*¹.

This ‘fabrication’ or creation can be very simple or staggeringly complex and depending on the particular practice will involve different prayers and practices. Eventually though they all arrive at the stage of perfecting yoga, or the yoga of effortless naturalness. This is initially experienced as a step by step dissolution of the visualised figure. The surrounding world and all the beings within it dissolve or merge into the central radiant Buddha. This figure then begins to dissolve into his or her heart. In the heart/core/centre there is often visualised a mantra particular to that deity which then dissolves a part at a time, until nothing but a dot is left and it too is dissolved into the essential, natural emptiness – the ungraspable spacious openness of inter-being. Texts sometime elaborate on this, saying that, without hoping or fearing, without accepting or rejecting, abide in the realisation of this natural or effortless state of non-clinging awareness for as long as one wishes. In early days of practice, I found myself equating this part of the meditation with Krishnamurti’s “choiceless awareness”.

As our understanding matures we realise that all forms, whether seen in meditation or perceived in the so called outside world, are ultimately ungraspable. There is nothing to dissolve; *sunyata*, emptiness. At this point we develop a deepening confidence that these two yogas are not actually distinct and separate. Skilful fabrication refers to the collaborative, constructive nature of everything, including the sense of ourselves participating in this process of fabrication. With this perspective, no single factor is doing the fabrication. Everything depends on the activity of everything else and so all arisings are mutually shaping. If we were to conceive of a dominant factor and then try to grasp it,

¹ *deva* => radiant being => deity = radiant emptiness In Tantra there are six types of 'deity': emptiness, letter, sound, form, mudra and symbol.

it would slip away like water between our fingers and we are left with a sense of spacious openness, a constantly transforming dancing appearance. Effortless naturalness simply indicates the profound acceptance of the spontaneous ever-fresh nature of this dynamic. The universe exists as a process or creative holo-movement which is radically inclusive and eternally whole. We might have a sense of utter surrender into this and so we taste an expanse of immeasurable love and sublime understanding with no-thing in particular to do.

With choiceful awareness we develop skills in participating in the world according to our aspirations. With choiceless awareness we develop capacities for profound acceptance and appreciation. Learning the arts of refining our experience of these two is yoga as a path of practice. Being the two, perfectly interpenetrated as a unified whole is the yoga of ineffable wholeness.