

# Yoga: A Tool for Intervention and Study of Contemporary Conflicts

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**Abstract**—*The practice of Yoga has gained popularity in modern lifestyle choices, nationally and internationally. This paper argues and presents that Yoga does not however only mean a fitness or lifestyle choice, ie it is not an end. The paper brings to light the many useful aspects of Yoga from the standpoint of using it as a tool to address larger issues facing us today. It argues how Yoga can be, and in many cases, already is a part of understanding and bringing peace to conflict zones, for example, in the Middle East. Thus being an important political, diplomacy, and international development tool. It situates Yoga within the four domains of academic, research, diplomacy, and conflict-peace perspectives to present how it is a means and can be further developed as an essential part of conflict and peace studies around the world and enrich various existing theories like that of Johan Galtung, which is considered to be one of the most credible ones. Being an integral part of the Indian tradition, Yoga also represents the philosophy of holistic and inclusive society that is a part of Indian tradition. The paper makes use of theory, uses case studies from conflict zones like Middle East and India, and makes an analytical understanding of peace and Gandhian traditions in India to weave them together to build up a narrative. The paper shows how Yoga as a science is therefore crucial to the socio-political-cultural developments in the world, is an important means to the advancement of humanity, and crucial to be incorporated into research and academia and is an important need of today's world and a major contribution of India towards world peace.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Samskara saksat karanat purvajati jnanam.*

[Through sustained focus and meditation on our patterns, habits, and conditioning, we gain knowledge and understanding of our past and how we can change the patterns that aren't serving us to live more freely and fully.]

—Yoga Sutra III.18<sup>i</sup>

As for most people growing up in the 90s, Yoga travelled into my house and my life via an elder person in the family who had recently been introduced to Baba Ramdev and his students at a humble ashram. I remember being told to wake up early the next morning as we were about to go and meet some people who teach yoga. It was a word I was still trying to understand while I imagined what it would be like, though an early morning trip was a more fascinating factor for the young kid in me. As a young kid, all I understood out of the surroundings and the dresses of the yoga practitioners at the ashram was that it was something to do with fitness and the asanas, as opposed to running for fitness (which I had been doing until then), and the challenge of achieving a posture rather amused me as a game that I enthusiastically attempted to get better at. Being one of the youngest around, I soon gathered a lot of attention and affection from the practitioners and teachers and much to my fascination, I was able to practice the meditative part of yoga via pranayam as well. Sitting still with a single thought on the mind, was in itself, quite an achievement back then when all one cared about was play.

Today, Yoga is one of the most sought after and practiced lifestyle choices worldwide. Almost every other hobby class, gym, social club, fitness centre, etc. has a Yoga course running. People around the world are increasingly choosing Yoga as a form of lifestyle management and fitness regime as part of alternative therapy. Its benefits to the mind and body, and internal healing benefits for the body as “a system of physical exercises, breath control, and meditation aimed at attaining bodily and mental control and well-being”,<sup>ii</sup> as opposed to a mere physical work-out that most other forms of exercises are; have been recognized over the

decades and are now being officially recognized the world over in the form of initiatives like International Day of Yoga, yoga in schools as part of curriculum, group yoga practice in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the event at the United Nations organized by India's Permanent Mission to the UN that saw participation of thousands and was led by His Holiness Swami Chidanand Saraswati (the President of Parmarth Niketan in Rishikesh and Co-Founder of the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance and Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati (the Director of the International Yoga Festival at Parmarth Niketan and Secretary General of the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance),<sup>iii</sup>etc. It was in 1920 that Paramhansa Yogananda founded the Self Realization Fellowship in United States that became the first organization for practitioners and within 50 years instruction emphasizing the physical and spiritual benefits of yoga techniques was available through a wide variety of sectarian and non sectarian yoga classes, television programs, and others in the United states and Europe.<sup>iv</sup>As Yoga has gained popularity in the western culture, there has been an increasing trend of commercialized and appearance focused exercise culture that it has been equated with. A study that examined one hundred and forty two covers of leading yoga lifestyle magazines found that the models that featured on these covers were mostly thin and had toned bodies and were young in age. It studied 142 female models and media frames of 567 captions featured on the covers of three westernized yoga lifestyle magazines published between 2010–15 and found that models were generally partially clad, posed with high body visibility, the media frames were suggestive of body competence and commercialization.<sup>v</sup>As a result, while many instructors call themselves "yogis", the essence of yogic philosophy as found in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras and elsewhere is hardly present in these modern day practices.<sup>vi</sup>

Yoga As Ancient Indian Philosophy And An Important Component Of Peace.

Yoga is a part of the ancient Indian philosophy and is comprised of the Sanskrit word "Yuj" which means to "unite".<sup>vii</sup> Therefore as the words indicate, the true purpose of this practice is to combine the energies of the mind, body, and the soul and bring them into harmony with each other and the universe. Ancient Indian philosophy believes in the power of the subtle

energies of the body, which are awakened using the spiritual combination of the energy of the mind, body, and soul. Therefore, Yoga is believed to have positive mental and physical benefits in conditions like asthma,<sup>viii</sup> depression,<sup>ix</sup> cardiovascular diseases,<sup>x</sup> muscular strength, and pain management.<sup>xi</sup> Various research studies have proven it from time to time. Yoga has also been proven to have positive effects in controlling fatigue syndrome. A study conducted at the University of Iowa for two years, has shown proven results in benefitting patients with chronic fatigue syndrome and turned out to be the only therapy linked to a statistically significant positive outcome by linear regression analysis.<sup>xii</sup>

Each human being is a different person and has a unique personality, which is made of a set of beliefs, habits, temperaments, perspectives, and response mechanisms to situations that he/she follows. All of these factors combined, make up an individual. Various scholars of peace and conflict studies have agreed that these personalities are an essential component of understanding conflict in a region, among or across communities, and in violence perpetrated by individuals. These perceptions and attitudes that shape up the set of responses, violent or peaceful, to any situation not formed in isolation. They are a result of social, political, cultural, and spiritual exchange of energy between the individual and his/her surroundings. The ancient science of yoga is shaped around understanding these energy exchanges and hence it is one of the most essential components of understanding the conflict and peace situations in the contemporary world. Concepts of conflict, peace, and violence can no longer be understood purely in terms of wars or border conflicts. Conflict in contemporary world entails an entire range of outbreaks of violence ranging from violent teenagers using guns on their fellow students, to instances of communal violence, to psychologically violent responses to family situations, to family disputes leading to alienations and abandonments, to cultural violence against minorities, to decreasing interaction between people on an everyday basis, to social media violence, to apathy to suffering, among others. A conflict resolution or peace approach to the nature of contemporary conflicts therefore requires a holistic approach that yoga offers, as this paper further argues. Traditional peace and conflict theories and practices have mostly focused on forms of violence and the reasons that lead to that overt

or latent expression wherein the focus is mostly on the kinds of responses to violence. Whereas peace today is multidimensional peace,<sup>xiii</sup> which includes “intrapersonal (inner) peace, interpersonal peace, intergroup peace, international peace, as well as ecological peace.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Famous peace theorists like Johan Galtung have talked about peace in an international sense as being *positive* and *negative* in nature.<sup>xv</sup> *Positive peace* as being the presence of fair, equitable, and just social structures that “enhance the human rights of all”<sup>xvi</sup> or the absence of structural violence such as social injustice, oppressions, and discrimination.<sup>xvii</sup> *Negative peace* on the other hand is defined as absence of war, which could be for various reasons like possibility of mutual harm for conflicting parties, or the fear of a larger harm that deters parties from entering a full war.<sup>xviii</sup> Adding to the understanding of peace, Gregor has also presented the idea of a peace typology wherein *sociative* (values, emotions, attitudes that bind people into a relationship based on mutual interests or concerns), *restorative* (reinstating goodwill after an outbreak of violent conflict), and *separative* (that exists because of the fear generated by a coercive deterrence like the existence of Cold War) peace adds to the understanding of creating enabling peace structures.<sup>xix</sup>

Delving deeper, adding value to these concepts and research about peace, is the ancient tradition of yoga because it not only works on the concept of peace and calmness but also addresses the ways in which human beings are shaped up in their approach, habits, thoughts, and attitudes. All of human interaction and response is a result of exchange of energy between the human and his/her surroundings. And the natural response mechanisms or practices can be said to have resulted from habits that we practice on a day to day basis as our response to happenings around us, specially the ones that do not align with our own sense of benefit or self. Everything that a human learns and does is a result of the interaction, and does not stand shaped up in isolation.

In Yoga Sutra III. 18, Patanjali has explained about *samskaras*—the habits, patterns, and conditioning—and how they can be a point of focus to define and redefine the attitudes of the mind and personality that are considered peculiar for every person. Working on these *samskaras* can be instrumental in developing a clearer

perception free of bias or negativity. *Samskaras* however do not always refer to something negative. Even positive responses, habits, and attitudes towards situations, objects, or people is an aspect of *samskaras*. As argued above, these *samskaras* are developed gradually over the years as we interact with our surroundings or due to some specific positive or traumatic event that triggers a specific understanding. For instance, someone who has grown up in a troubled environment or has been subjected to traumatic experiences in a war zone or has been bullied would have a different response mechanism as compared to someone who has had a more enabling exchange with the surroundings. Therefore it is implicit in the *samskaras* that they can have a positive, negative, or neutral effect on one.<sup>xx</sup> As the Upanishads point out, “Peace cannot be created; peace is your natural state. You create agitation and disturb peace. Where is the agitation created? In the mind. You keep giving momentum to thoughts because you do not have mastery over the mind.” The mind is the world, and the world is the mind. All problems, all conflicts arise because of a disturbed mind. The mind is our link to the world outside of our body as well as a link to our own inner peace. When disciplined and regulated a once wandering mind becomes calm, focused and ready to handle the stresses of everyday life.<sup>xxi</sup> These tenets as propounded by the yoga philosophy in ancient times are what a lot of contemporary peace theories also talk about as we saw above. Further, in this direction we find Hall and Hall and the “iceberg of culture” theory. This theory argues that only a small proportion of culture is above the waterline of consciousness i.e. easily visible to us and that we are aware of. The larger part of our consciousness is the massive part of the iceberg that lies hidden from our view such as, unquestioned attitudes, perceptions, motivations, etc. and we are able to realize their role and existence only when we make a conscious and rigorous effort into delving deeper into our consciousness. As a result, while our responses or attitudes towards certain happenings are visible, our deepest attitudes about say, cleanliness, sacredness, idea of another community, or the idea of what is good and bad, etc. lie below this level of visible actions.<sup>xxii</sup> It therefore brings us back to the idea of the energy exchange and *samskaras*, and the taming of the mind that the yoga sutras have propounded, thereby establishing that peace culture and peace theory as we

understand today is an intrinsic part of the ancient Indian tradition of Yoga. In that, yoga is also a science therefore; a science that not only addresses different levels and forms of the violence that exists but also addresses it in a holistic manner along with offering a science/ a way out towards resolution of these conflicts. It addresses conflicts by taking into consideration the root cause of violence—the taming of the mind and invoking the subconscious understanding of self to rectify (or make positive) the energy exchange with the surroundings, i.e. to turn negative *samskaras* into positive *samskaras*. In the present socio-political and cultural context, yoga therefore is one of the most relevant theories of peace that needs to be approached from various fronts in a holistic manner. In that it is a holistic philosophy that does not stop at just a healthy body but goes deeper into a psychological analysis of the human mind so as to make it sync with the larger rhythm of co-existence in a day and age where interpersonal interactions are shrinking and attention spans are shortening and cognitive deficits are on the rise. Given the mental and physical health benefits that yoga brings, it addresses conflict with the 'other' as well as conflict with 'self' which is often manifested in the form of substance abuse or self-harm and depression.

"The true essence of Yoga revolves around elevating the life force or 'Kundalini' at the base of the spine. It aims to achieve this through a series of physical and mental exercises." "The ultimate goal of yoga is, however, to help the individual to transcend the self and attain enlightenment. As the Bhagavad-Gita says, "A person is said to have achieved yoga, the union with the Self, when the perfectly disciplined mind gets freedom from all desires, and becomes absorbed in the Self alone."<sup>xxiii</sup>

Various studies have demonstrated that adolescents mostly believe in the idea of aggression as a response mechanism to situations around them. Childhood aggression also largely translates into different kinds of aggressive responses like juvenile conduct issues, adolescent relational problems, and adulthood antisocial behavior, among others.<sup>xxiv</sup>In a study conducted by Govindaraja Setty, Subramanya, and B. Mahadevan explore the alternatives to physical exercises in order to address the non-clinical adolescents' beliefs about aggression and alternatives in a sample size of 158

normal healthy adolescents using a 'Randomized Control Trial' design study.<sup>xxv</sup>Their study, which lasted for four weeks of yoga practice, showed that Yoga practitioners significantly decreased their overall beliefs supporting aggression and significantly increased their beliefs favouring alternatives to aggression, compared to physical education practitioners. In another study conducted by Kishida and others, questions such as—What are the relational (intra- and interpersonal) influences of yoga practice? And what are the potential pathways in which yoga may enhance relational outcomes?—were explored.<sup>xxvi</sup> The researchers argued that "Four emerging themes were identified such that practitioners talked about the ability of yoga to generate calm states, mindfulness, (self)-compassion, and a sense of connectedness. Throughout the themes, a common pattern emerged such that yoga practice first led to positive intrapersonal changes, which then influenced one's interpersonal relationships. Based on these results, a conceptual model was developed depicting potential pathways of how yoga works to enhance relational outcomes" and concluded that "findings demonstrate the promise yoga holds to improve one's relationship to oneself (intrapersonal) through mindfulness and self-compassion, and to others (interpersonal), through the enhancement of compassion and social connectedness, which may potentially lead to enhanced health and wellbeing outcomes."<sup>xxvii</sup>

Yoga has also been introduced in jails and among people with past criminal records for example at Kenya. At Nairobi's Langata women's prison, yoga sessions are held, twice a week. "According to prison authorities, inmates often face stigma when released and seldom reintegrate into society. "The perception out there is that those who come through our gates will never have anything useful to offer the community," says Susan Marita, who is in charge of the yoga project at the prison. "They are looked at as criminals and individuals of little value. We hope that with the extra skills they learn, they can show people that they can contribute to the greater good. "Yoga will help them deal with the extra pressure they will get from society once they are released. It will help them focus and deal with the negative energy that will come their way. But before that, it also helps them become model inmates."<sup>xxviii</sup>

In another part of the world and in a totally different context, Palestinians are increasingly adopting yoga in their lifestyle, by making it a part of their villages, cities, and refugee camps, so as to cope with mental stress of living under a political stalemate. ““We thought it was a Buddhist practice of just sitting still and saying ‘om’,” said one woman, at the start of the first-ever yoga teacher training in Palestine’s West Bank. A lack of yoga teachers, and a social stigma from the confused belief that the practice had something to do with a foreign religion, meant that until recently not many Palestinians had had exposure to yoga or meditation. But in 2010 Farashe opened, a volunteer-based nonprofit community yoga centre in Ramallah that focuses on outreach. In 2012 and 2013, Farashe was boosted when Washington DC-based non-profit, Anahata International, ran teacher training for Palestinian women to take the self-care techniques into their communities on the West Bank. With training from Farashe and others, over the last three years, about 80 men and women have become yoga teachers. Today, yoga-based practices are integrated into community centres and gyms, not only among the elite of cosmopolitan Ramallah, but also in the small villages. It’s used in health clinics in crowded refugee camps, and in classes at small private studios led by new teachers trained by international volunteers. Palestinians living under the Israeli occupation face stresses that affect their psychological and physical health. The merging of the 4,000-year-old tradition of yoga with the modern science of stress relief is giving West Bank residents the tools to manage their day-to-day wellbeing.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

“The growing popularity of yoga was not without resistance in more conservative areas, with some seeing the practice as being part of Buddhism or Hinduism. But over and over, new teachers who are practicing Muslims came to the conclusion that yoga postures helped them with their own prayers. During training they spoke about the similarity between the bowing and kneeling in both practices and found themselves more supple for the five-times daily prayers. Many said they also benefited from the focus and stillness of the meditative aspect of yoga, connecting more with the intention and sentiment of their prayers. Basma Abu Sway, a board member of Farashe and former general director of the family and children department in the Palestinian ministry of social affairs, started teaching yoga in a village north of

Jerusalem through a UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) programme at the beginning of the year. A report by UNRWA cites chronic lifestyle illnesses among the population as their main health concern, exacerbated by extreme restrictions in movement for Palestinians. “Yoga that can help us with these circumstances,” Abu Sway says. “It helps people reach inner balance. It helps ease these pressures. Even to just have one hour for ourselves to step away from the negativity, listen to our hearts, our minds, and rest, this hour will help so much.”<sup>xxxx</sup> While this is not to say that yoga offers a political solution to their situation, it helps Palestinians cope with stress in a holistic manner that addresses their physical as well as mental stress and fosters an optimistic attitude in the mires of a decade-long political stalemate.

Despite the rising number of examples around the world where yoga has been successfully implemented to usher in a positive approach to building peace, and the volume of research involving yoga, there are a number of problems that various studies suffer from. Lack of randomization, failure to provide equivalent or any comparison populations, small sample sizes, and so on have impeded the pace of research studies on the subject. These also include the lack of specificity regarding the form of yoga that is being practiced and the duration of that. Another major issue is how yoga has come to be defined variously—from simple breathing exercises to posture based movements to meditation to a combination of all of them—thereby leaving an ambiguity about the exact form of practice that is being undertaken in controlled trial study. Further there exist gaps in terms of the uniformity of elements of yoga that are being implemented in order to make an intervention in a conflict situation using yoga as a tool. For instance, comparing various yoga interventions or intervention and no intervention then raises questions about identifying which factors of yoga produced the most number of changes.<sup>xxxi</sup> Therefore it is important that yoga is studied rigorously and researched upon so that we can accurately and successfully draw up empirically validated methods and tools to derive maximum benefit for enhanced outcomes. It is important therefore to develop targeted programs that enable a deeper and dedicated research for the field and act as a bridge between the ancient philosophy, the

contemporary conflicts, and actionable tools to address them.

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