

Yoga and Academia, notes from 2007

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How to integrate yoga as a holistic approach in an academic setting

We have been observing the rise in the popularity of yoga in the United States and in other Western countries, be it in fitness clubs, yoga studios, and, when it comes to academia, mostly in recreation centers on campuses. We have also witnessed numerous debates and dilemmas about the nature of yoga classes, of their content and their scope. What is being offered in a typical yoga class certainly reflects how various schools train their instructors and how they perceive yoga as a discipline. The amounts of philosophy or cultural foundations that are deemed appropriate in various settings where yoga is taught or promoted thus vary from one setting to another. Instructors, practitioners, as well as main yoga publications, together with the International Association of Yoga Therapists and also the Yoga Alliance, have been involved in debates about approaches, their origins, and their possible developments.

Many yoga instructors may come from a highly educated background, yet their initial professional training usually hasn't provided them with an academic degree in yoga as a holistic combination of psychophysical skills, experience, wisdom, compassion, and an integrated, mature understanding of yogic principles and of the yoga tradition. Thus, the split persists in most cases, between courses in yoga philosophy on the one hand and recreational courses, with a variety of approaches and variations, such as fitness yoga. Students may gain academic credit, for example in a department of religious

studies, for courses in Hinduism or Buddhism, with cases where meditation will be included in the curriculum. Those courses in recreation centers, on the other hand, usually don't aim at continuity, awareness building, persistence, self-discipline, and in general don't lead to academic credits, since they are most frequently offered on a drop-in base.

Background and possibilities for a yoga course in academic environment

As one among those humanities professors whose affiliation with yoga goes back to the early seventies, when yoga classes in the West were still hard to find, maybe more so in Europe than in some parts of the United States, it took me many years of regular practice and exposure to various schools of yoga before I felt ready to get certified, first as a Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy practitioner, and subsequently through the Southern Institute of Yoga Instructors in Nashville, TN, after my academic path as a scholar of French, comparative literature and myth studies brought me to Alabama, in 2000. Throughout my career, I have strived to implement some dimensions of contemplative practices in my more intellectually oriented courses. Integration has remained my basic dharma, and it became the key word in my attempt to create a course that would teach *a way of living*, much more than just an experience in intellectual endeavors or an attempt to achieve excellence on the yoga mat. I envisioned something that would not just foster philosophical, or abstract thinking; but rather a credited course that would go beyond the yoga classes I have been teaching at various yoga centers, and also on the University of Alabama campus, focusing mainly on the practice of âsanas. In short, my eager desire was to find a venue, within my academic institution, for a course that would foster the awareness of the body, mind, and spirit conjunction. I was hoping to offer a course where

students would experience yoga postures and understand their origins, their implications on human mind, and the well-being resulting from the practice. While only the tip of the iceberg could be dealt with, in the domain of yoga philosophy, it still appeared crucial to let the students explore new horizons and gain some understanding of different worldviews that would enrich their experience.

I owe deep gratitude to my teachers in the SIYI certification training, Betty Larsen and John Charping, for the model of a balanced exposure to a basic series of āsanās combined with notions of yoga tradition and philosophy. Because of my interest and my previous training in Sanskrit, my term presentation at the SIYI, turned into my final paper, focused on the connection between language and postures. I was privileged to be invited as a guest lecturer in the SIYI trainings following my graduation, which allowed me to see how my teachers continually adapted their curriculum, the modifications usually generated by previous experiences and inspired by their own growth. Their support was certainly most beneficial for my own continuous improvements, in my practice and my more theoretical approach to yoga.

It certainly took a willing ear, for my ideas about a credited yoga course to be heard, together with an appropriate context for the course to be offered in the academic catalog. It is my pleasure to acknowledge colleagues and students in the Blount Undergraduate Initiative, within the University of Alabama, who thought that times were ripe for such an experiment. Blount Undergraduate Initiative is an interdisciplinary program, insisting on “personal and intellectual development,” and “offering the challenging environment of a small, liberal arts college in a heart of a comprehensive research university¹.” In other words, this program is a “college within the college,” the

College of Arts and Science. It is one of the learner-centered venues on campus, admitting about a hundred students every year, who live and study together, feel proud to be “Blount scholars,” and hold high academic standards. They can gain a minor in “BUI,” are often majoring as pre-medical students, and are achieving very good results. It is a real pleasure to work with them. After the initial core-curriculum courses, they can choose from various seminars. Classes are usually small in size, with the cap at sixteen students, which allows for communication and development of ideas. The seminar Yoga: East and West thus fitted the general open atmosphere of this learning environment. Instructors in this program teach their seminars either as an overload, if they are full-time faculty, or on adjunct basis. They are paid a standard overload fee that can be used for scholarly travels or materials, or may be received as a (taxable) check.

I have started to teach this seminar in fall 2002, with the interest so extensive that two groups were created, of fourteen students each. I then taught it in an intense three-week format, during the interim May session in 2003, an experiment in its own right, but too condensed for a deeper integration of the practice and understanding of yoga. We decided to leave the course off the books after the fall 2003, to allow other seminars to attract more students. When we opened it again in fall 2005, the increased interest led to students’ names being drawn out of a hat, and I ended up with twenty-one of them in the class. After my sabbatical leave, the class was again offered in January 2007, with the interest again much larger than what we can accommodate: nineteen students were finally admitted.

Course format and content

The seminar meets once a week, traditionally on Wednesdays, between 3 and 5:30 p.m., in one of the class-rooms in the Blount Living and Learning Center, the BUI residence hall. The room is emptied of desks and chairs. It has an adjacent cabinet where I store yoga mats, blankets, bolsters, straps, and blocks, partly bought through my honorarium for this course and partly covered for through the Blount program. At the core of my connection with yoga, B.K.S Iyengar's influence remains crucial. Having experienced other yoga modalities, I make a point to keep the doors open for other views or experiences, by also suggesting that students seek out teachers from various backgrounds, outside of the class, and report about their experiences in their journals.

As stated among the objectives in the course syllabus, my role is to *help* expand students' awareness; *help* learn new skills which may lead to integration at the body, mind, and spirit level; *help* understand the interconnectedness at the personal and interpersonal level; *help* open new horizons and allow for a better understanding of self, others, and relationships with the world. The word "help" is of the utmost importance to me: I can only serve as a facilitator, a guide, and a friend with more life experience and a larger view of all things yogic. I can only teach the course if I continue to practice regularly and with dedication. When I hear stories of students' challenges and distress, it touches my heart, but it is not mine to serve as a counselor, and even less, to impose my views.

This seminar is thus an incredibly motivating and learning experience for me in the first place, and an opportunity to help create a class atmosphere of safety, peace, non-competitiveness, synergy, mutual support and responsibility. It often leads to the understanding that we are all connected, that we may be enriched by tapping into a

tradition that has been around for millennia, and also profoundly empowered through a heart-centered practice that we share. This in itself is a concept and an experience rather foreign to our students, but the contentment and the joy in class are palpable and highly stimulating. Needless to say, it tends to be my favorite course, where I can be most true to my own passion for yoga and my commitment to spiritual growth. My own practice of yamas and niyamas also makes me recognize potential pitfalls in this process: based on experiences from previous years, I may easily get caught in expectations of how the new situations should work. I can get attached to what one may consider “wonderful results,” and especially a different learning experience from more traditional courses.

In the yoga seminar, I have an opportunity to present myself in a manner that I consider closest to my heart. Speaking from this perspective in a more linguistically oriented course would easily create misunderstandings and make students feel that I promote some values too foreign to their upbringing. This may lead to some form of suffering if I do not practice vairagya, loving detachment, and if I don’t examine my reaction to situations where things don’t work as I would have hoped for. Any “pride” in the success of the yoga seminar may immediately be coupled with anxiety about “what have I done wrong” when a student, for reasons unknown to me, decides to drop the course. Any plans to repeat a previous experience and anticipate the same results are often doomed to “fail,” unless I keep a clear awareness that all things in life are bound to change and that my task is to adapt and accept the transformation.

When I first taught the course, the agreement was that besides the yoga practice, students needed to be involved in some forms of intellectual production. For our core textbook, I could not think of a better pivotal work about yoga than Georg Feuerstein’s

*The Yoga Tradition*². It seemed to fit perfectly my intent as expressed in the initial syllabus, to expose students to a body-mind-spirit practice that can be used to enhance concentration, performance, self-discipline, and personal growth; also, to make a comparative study between Western world views and the traditional yogic philosophy. I divided the class time between “yoga practice” and study of selected chapters from Feuerstein’s book. Students were to choose a topic for their oral presentation, based preferably on the book, and to turn it into a final paper, by putting to use more research in yoga literature. In order to allow for integration of the practice in class, students were to write journal entries that I collected regularly and that served as the basis for the class discussion.

I have used the format two more times, with some modifications, limiting the material that needed to be read, also asking students to individually prepare some of the topics. In this way, I wanted them to facilitate the readings for their peers. My idea was to create a sense of collective responsibility for the acquisition of knowledge. Still, it appeared clearly that Feuerstein’s volume was unfortunately too demanding, too ample, and too complex. It led to an attitude, by the students, that made them more competitive, in terms of “showing off” their “brilliance” in understanding some complex issues. They were also becoming more and more intellectual, almost without having any direct and experiential link with the practice. Regretfully, I don’t think there is a comprehensive manual geared at college students that would address not only yoga postures but more in depth some of the characteristics of the yoga path, although Ravi Dykema’s volume³ can be used in particular situations. I understand he has done extensive work in the field of yoga teaching, through Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, and in his own studio.

Recent changes in the course format

After my own exposure to various teachers in the viniyoga tradition, I opted to replace Feuerstein's book with T.K.V. Desikachar's *The Heart of Yoga*⁴, especially because of its heart-felt approach, the example of a yogic lineage, and its inclusion of Patañjali's *Yoga Sutras*. The book also emphasizes the need to consider individual conditions, in yoga teaching and practice. This allows students to better understand that each and every one is unique, yet connected to the whole. Since B.K.S. Iyengar also came from the Krishnamacharya lineage, I nevertheless do not see any discrepancy in my own teaching style that continues to be inspired by Iyengar's foundational books on yoga. For the class purposes, I mainly insist on two volumes from this path. I recommend that students become familiar with the *Yoga the Iyengar Way*⁵, by Silva, Mira and Shyam Mehta, as well as with B.K.S. Iyengar's *Yoga. The Path to Holistic Health*⁶. I often bring to class other volumes from my personal library, and also briefly present other traditions of body-mind-spirit practices, such as Tibetan yoga, Qigong or Thai massage. The classroom lacks any form of technical support, so I cannot use video or audio material on a regular basis. The class nevertheless managed to see passages from the magnificently crafted DVD, *Yoga Unveiled*⁷. The movie definitely affected students' perception of yoga, its depth, long-standing tradition, and the variety of approaches. It also brought home the difference between the aerobic approaches to yoga (in the West) and the path to unity with the absolute (in traditional yoga).

With the new textbook, I also decided to modify the course format. In general, I keep at least an hour per session for the practice, during which I am the one teaching the

postures and making comments about their variations and possible modifications, as well as their benefits. In order to give the course more unity and structure, and also engage everybody in a more personal investigation into yoga postures, each student prepares two oral presentations, one on a set of yoga postures, and another on issues in yoga philosophy. The order in which postures and notions of philosophy are presented is defined in advance. During the last rendition of the course, students drew their questions from two different envelopes, after a moment of centering, in the hope that everybody be granted the most beneficial topics, and without any scheduling conflicts. The first experience with this approach was rather elating: students started to understand, during the very first class meeting, that they were connected in a subtle way and that they were part of a cohesive group. The repetition of this model was less uplifting, a lesson not to expect identical results from similar situations.

In order to avoid last-minute unwelcome efforts, around papers written toward the end of the semester, and also to keep research momentum, I ask that papers be turned in two weeks after the oral presentations, which sometimes still cannot bypass scheduling conflicts and obligations students encounter in other courses. I remain available for advice and guidance, and am willing to read an initial draft if it is done before the due date. The presentations start after three weeks of work with the group, during which I introduce the series of postures and explain why I encourage them to use Sanskrit terms. My short explanation of some of the basic principles in Sanskrit is also linked to a brief presentation of the *Bhagavadgîtâ*.

Students' background and expectations: the use of outcome assessment

Journals remain the central element of our communication and very valuable information about the class progress and level of ease with the practice. The cumulative grade takes into consideration class participation and assiduity, journals, oral presentations and the two term papers. In order to gather information about students' background, their challenges, their health issues, and with their worldview in the very beginning of the semester, I created an initial questionnaire that goes hand in hand with the learner-centered orientation within my university.

The initial pre-assessment at the onset of the course in spring 2007 was anonymous, although some students decidedly put their names on the questionnaire. The questions were conceived in a way that would allow for a post-questionnaire to assess the rise in students' awareness, their progress, the potential deepening of their experiences, and the expansion of their horizons. I also wanted them to look at their personality traits and progressively observe potential improvements or changes. For the personality input, I used the Ten-Item Personality Inventory, TIPI, such as developed by Sam Gosling from the University of Texas at Austin⁸. The main questions I was interested in, although I understood that they could be risky in this context, dealt with students' worldview, diet, and relationship with religion or spirituality. In a course that is so much focused on a personal experience, initial worldview and conditioning are usually the major causes for potential uneasiness with the course material and the approach that I favor.

Among the nineteen students originally registered for the class, not a single one circled the option "agnostic," "atheist," or "other," when asked about their connection to spirituality or religion. Sixteen of them very decidedly stated that they perceived themselves as Christians, sometimes considering it a "spiritual" and sometimes

“religious” approach, and only two students out of the whole group spoke of themselves as “spiritual,” with no particular affiliation. Most of them valued personal growth and many linked it to religious principles (“biblical principles,” “be like Christ”). To answer the question about their attitude toward other cultures and traditions, some chose more than one option. Fifteen of them circled “wish to learn more,” some of whom added that they were “fascinated by” (Buddhism, Eastern philosophy, Asian culture). Only two mentioned that they were “moderately interested,” although one of them found this seminar to be “a great opportunity to practice yoga and learn about it” and the other one briefly defined her choice of this seminar by stating: “enjoy yoga,” “have practiced it regularly, since about three years ago.” This is actually rare, since the majority of students only experienced random yoga classes.

The ways students defined yoga, in this questionnaire, were most probably linked to their previous experiences: “meditation, relaxation, toning, stress-relieving” (making a person “calm”); “an exercise form” (the same person also described the experience with yoga as “uncomfortable/embarrassed because I didn’t know the motions”). Those who answered that previous experiences were satisfying mostly mentioned that yoga made them feel “calm” or “relaxed.” Lack of satisfaction, in one case, was linked to “pain,” but the majority of experiences seemed to have been positive. A young woman who signed her form stated that “yoga means spirituality, exercise, and meditation”; she hoped that “one day I will do it on a regular basis,” and found that yoga made her feel “healthier and more physically fit.” On the TIPI scale, she defined herself as a strongly outgoing person, “extraverted, enthusiastic” (6/7), “open to new experiences, complex” (7/7), and “sympathetic, warm” (6/7), not crucial or quarrelsome and very little conventional. Since

her personality traits resemble mine, in many ways, I tend to consider such students as “ideal,” while I am perfectly aware that the more introvert, more reserved, less bodily aware and less flexible students actually bring the balance in the classroom situation and make me stay alert, mindful, non-judging, and compassionate.

In the initial questionnaire, a number of students considered yoga as mainly “relaxation,” “exercises tied in with mental relaxation,” as “strength of body and peace of mind,” or even: “I view yoga as the study of certain stretching positions that relax the body and soul.” Those who insisted on yoga as relaxation also mainly expected that this class would help them relax and maybe stretch. If they have taken it in the past, they seem to have mainly explored yoga to work out, stretch, and relax. A male student shared his major challenge, colonectomy (of which he promised to tell me more privately); he considers yoga as “flexibility, oneness” (an interesting combination to start with), although he never took yoga before. He states his choice of this course in three words: “flexibility, healing, spirituality.”

Changes in perspective

The format of the questionnaire at the beginning of the semester may undergo modifications when I will next teach the course, yet it definitely served the purpose of finding out students’ backgrounds and expectations. It was rather amazing how quickly the initial perceptions and the initial definition of yoga changed as students were progressively exposed to more information and to the practice. As I have found it in the past, the best way to monitor students’ progress remains the communication through weekly journals. As they are encouraged to write about their experiences, challenges, and

tribulations, my response to their writing helps to clear the path, support their efforts and also advise them when they need to back up or take a better care of themselves.

The first two presentations in the field of “philosophy” dealt with various definitions of yoga and its branches. Both student presenters watched again portions of *Yoga Unveiled* and were quite shaken to discover how far back in time we can reach to understand the roots of this tradition. Others chimed in similar shifts in their perceptions, nodding to what their colleagues were presenting, and later expressing it in their journals. Moving away from the non-historic general awareness that I regularly encounter in student population, these young women’s horizons were broadened in no time. It may be that students resonated with how the movie approached yoga tradition, or that visual tools helped enhance the experience. The new awareness of the spiritual dimension of yoga seemed almost as a relief to a number of them: if we are forming new generations of yoga “practitioners,” such views may indeed be very promising.

In his journal, a student commented upon his virtual encounter with Georg Feuerstein and the modification it brought about, in terms of how this young man subconsciously perceived Germans. Now, he stated: “I was surprised to see Feuerstein share expertise regarding something as holistic and peaceful as Yoga. After doing research on the internet, I discovered that he not only held expertise, but was at the forefront in the teaching and application of Yoga today.” An interesting shift in itself, yet what I find heartwarming is also his openness and precision in describing his deep experience during the practice: “My body, mind, and entire state of being were elevated to a level of calm and exuberance.”

In this particular group, young women appeared to be quite aware of their bodies and are used to pushing it sometimes beyond their limits. Many of them had an athletic background and could perform postures quite easily, often going for the most demanding variations, in case I mentioned them or a student presenter spoke about them. Of value was their perseverance, while I needed to monitor their desire to do it “right,” explaining that the inner experience is more important than the outer appearance of a pose. Some have very quickly understood how to reach the “energy release,” especially when “relaxing from poses,” an idea they also got from watching *Yoga Unveiled*. I was particularly glad to read that a student understood my insistence on taking a pose with an unattached mind: “I would just let go a little bit and my body would stretch just a little farther, but it didn’t hurt any more.” This is the way I accidentally learn how accustomed these young people are to exert themselves, not really paying attention to the pain, especially if they are involved in competitive sport disciplines and have already shared with me about their injuries. The same student mentioned her understanding of how our minds affect the way we practice yoga: she decided to use it for observation of how her body functions and how different parts interact in a posture. Another student noticed a similar experience: “The connection between mind and body, meaning what my mind thinks I am doing and what my body is actually doing, needs some work.” In this regard, it was becoming quite obvious for a number of them (and I’m only quoting from one journal) that “Yoga is not just a series of poses, it is a lifestyle.” Awareness about the importance of breath is in line with such a statement. A student who has previously experienced yoga wrote a whole journal on her new perception of how focusing on breath

allows her to relax, and how “inhalations and exhalations determine the rate of flow in yoga,” helping to “move further into poses.”

One of the students very maturely discussed the value of a yoga course within the framework of liberal arts, or academia in general. Her arguments appear to echo all our collective efforts to make this society more aware of how a holistic approach to life may be beneficial at the individual and the collective level. This young woman recounted that her peers considered a yoga class as an easy way to gain credits, and that her own father was hardest to convince about its benefits. Her story may be quite typical of general perceptions regarding yoga instruction: “My dad [. . .] could not understand how bending your body into weird positions was helping further my education. I had to help him realize that yoga is not just a bodily experience, as we learned from the movie [*Yoga Unveiled*]. It is a whole mind, spirit, *and* body experience.” This portion of her explanation seems to have been acceptable, but it was harder for her father to understand how this seminar fitted into the Blount Undergraduate Initiative. My student’s words in this regard are again worth quoting: “Blount program is liberal-arts based and encompasses a wide spectrum of arts and science subjects. It encourages students to pursue critical thinking [. . .]. Yoga is perfect for that. It takes an art form; yoga, and causes you to think about your body as a passageway to some higher deity. Instead of using your mind to tell your body what to do, your body tells your mind what to do. It is unique [to enhance] critical thinking.”

Challenges and results

One of the major challenges encountered in the past was the shock students often experienced when they began to understand the body-mind-spirit connection brought about through yoga. It often conflicted, if not clashed, with their religious upbringing and their belief system. My challenge was to keep the horizons open and to allow for a constant dialog, where different opinions were worded, without any of them dominating over others. I also wanted them to understand that regardless of their background, they could embrace yoga to the level of their comfort, and not have it conflict with their initial views.

The other challenge lay in the necessity, for the students, to consider their habits and their way of dealing with stress or (academic) pressure in the new light of their exposure to yoga. Yet, in the most recent group, the reaction after just a number of classes or even the first weeks of practice was: “This feels so good, I want to integrate it more in my regular schedule.” After some weeks, I nevertheless kept witnessing the complaints, in their journals, about how exhausted they were, how they could not find time to practice yoga when other assignments piled up and they had to complete them all in a limited time, staying up late, drinking coffee or even trying out some other modalities. During the spring 2007, the replacement of the old yoga mats with the new hypoallergenic and earth-friendly ones allowed me to lend the old mats to the students, for their home practice, to help alleviate stress and tension around school assignments. It remained unclear, though, how persistent they were in their efforts.

My own challenges, my deep contentment, and my growth

As we mature in our teaching of yoga, it is quite interesting to observe how we are shaped by the experience and how our own views, convictions, and expectations need to be transformed. As I was practicing the selected âsanas, from the sequence the students were to learn and present to the class, I started to question my own choices of particular poses. My own rationale for specific topics was not clear to me any longer, although I have reviewed my outline carefully prior to the beginning of the semester. With a smile, I noticed that “not being perfect” was probably one of the hardest things for me to accept. From the somewhat mental understanding about the impermanence of all things, I seem to have moved to a completely integrated inner conviction: indeed, the inherent logic of my own growth, as well as modified outer circumstances, allow for changes to take place without resistance or attachment. Those “aha” experiences on the mat or in observation of how we act, and what belief systems trigger our behavior, are of course difficult to describe and to define. Yet, they are asking that a “teacher” continuously be a learner, in a much more integrated manner.

We know about the importance of constant contentment in life. Still, there are moments when a teacher-student relationship brings about profound moments of communion, often beyond words, the deepest sense of connectedness, of mutual understanding and support, of synergy and of shared joy. The shyness in asking for help, and then the heartfelt gratitude for a simple gesture, such as covering a student with a blanket after I put her into supine baddhakonâsana, are deeply touching and are validating my efforts. Seeing students’ commitment in preparation for their presentations and subsequently their papers makes me want to take these young people even further in their own exploration of body-mind-spirit connections. Reading about their impressions

related to *Yoga Unveiled*, such as expressed in their journals, confirms the power of yoga and its beauty, as its roots, its history, and its vastness help students gain the awareness that there is much more knowledge and wisdom available than what they initially understood about this tradition, or expected from the course. The remarks in the journals are often a confirmation about the deep impact of example: I do not need to explain it all, since by just being who I am, convinced about what I do, it makes students guess things beyond my words. There is a number of endearing situations worth quoting as an example of the report among us: a student is asking about ways to alleviate nausea; as I move toward her, another student comments: “I thought she’d be able to help.” I make the young woman breathe more deeply and apply pressure on the acupuncture points related to stomach. I can feel her relaxing under my hands, and she states she is doing better, not being sure whether the effect is just psychological, but understanding that “it doesn’t really matter.” At the end of the yoga âsana practice, students are in viparita kârani, and one of them spontaneously moves into karnapidâsana, elated when I answer her question that indeed, it is a yoga posture, a very powerful one, since it relieves mental stress. And the “aha” experience is there, with the trust that the body will know where to take us when needed.

Brief conclusion

As we discuss options for integrating yoga into academia, we may look beyond the school system in the United States or in North America in general, and compare what has been done in this field with experiences in other countries. There have been testimonies in the media, about yoga being included in elementary and middle or high

schools in this country, with excellent results. There are certainly instructors who went beyond yoga as a “simple” tool to alleviate stress and possibly other problems encountered among students in academia. More should be told about their experiences, for us to create stronger foundations for a collective action. Also, we should not forget that yoga may have been part of education many years back, in this country or elsewhere in the world. Learning from those experiences, we may more easily establish a regular and a wider course of study in academic setting, where our expertise could be used to create “yoga minors and majors”—a dream or a possibly reality, in the near future?



Students in shirshâsana



Students in prasarita padottanâsana

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