

REVIEWING YOGA'S ROLE IN RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY COLLECTIVE CONCERNS

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Abstract

The spread of Yoga in various forms beyond the context in which it originated raises questions concerning whether in addition to its adoption and practice by individuals and for individual treatment and support, alone or in combination with complementary contributions, it might also benefit collective responses to shared environmental challenges and existential threats, and key decision makers such as business leaders and directors who have an important role to play in formulating them, and whether its contribution might be enhanced by incorporating other elements of Indian ancient wisdom that relate to respecting and protecting the environment and living in harmony with the natural world. A further question for those concerned with Yoga is whether they should influence aspects of its development purpose and practice, if they are in a position to do so and this would enhance its utility and relevance and increase its contribution, rather than allowing it to evolve in the marketplace.

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INTRODUCTION

The survival of humankind and other forms of life on our planet is not assured as a consequence of our own collective activities and lifestyles (UNEP, 2019; Dasgupta, 2021; IPCC, 2022). When and while confronted with existential threats and other challenges, rather than individually, collectively and systematically address them, many people appear to have other priorities. They lead frenetic, complex, high pressured and sometimes unhealthy lives. They may engage in activities that are not sustainable, while preoccupied with external appearances and the trappings of consumerism, and in many cases continuing to compete rather than collaborate. Their inner selves and negative externalities are often ignored.

As reserves of natural capital vital for future generations are rapidly run down, less wasteful and more responsible and sustainable activities and lifestyles are required. Relentless activity and anxiety has consequences. For example, increasingly, health systems face growing and under-funded demands for mental health support. Slowing down to reduce pressure might now be preferable to speeding up (McAlary, 2018). Many individuals seek relief, whether temporary through trial of a packaged offering, or more lasting as a result of greater and longer commitment, and the deeper understanding that can result from embracing a wider range of elements that could be added to the selection that others for convenience adopt.

It would not be appropriate for an observer without specialist expertise to comment on the science of Yoga, or its evolution, detailed elements and how it is and could be practiced, or its contemporary role in healthcare, welfare and social services, other than very

generally. Instead, this article attempts a brief reflection on its positioning in relation to contemporary challenges that face individuals, organisations and societies. It is initial and speculative, rather than comprehensive, definitive or evidence and/or investigation based. It aims to raise questions that those concerned with Yoga and able to influence its future development and those involved with understanding and disseminating ancient wisdom might wish to consider.



The practice of Yoga has its roots in ancient Indian wisdom and spiritualism



EMBRACING ASPECTS OF ANCIENT WISDOM

The practice of Yoga has its roots in ancient Indian wisdom and spiritualism. More recently it has increasingly been practiced in different contexts as a complementary or alternative therapy for various purposes, including relaxation and the reduction of anxiety and stress. Individual adopters and practitioners vary in the relative stress they place on each possible use. There are parallels or similarities between the elements and impacts of Yoga and other Eastern 'mind-body' practices that have endured for millennia such as Qigong (Boaventura et al, 2022). Yoga can be practiced for personal benefit and/or for the care of others (Kollak, 2009). The first can be an individual activity, while the latter normally requires a relationship.

Yoga interventions may influence both physical and psychological outcomes (Kauric-Klein, 2022). Some groups may benefit more than others and investigations of impacts continue. For example, some research suggests college students may not attain the physical and mental benefits of Yoga practice, while other studies suggest high school students may derive physical, social, academic and mental health benefits (Caldarella and Lulla, 2022; Hayes et al, 2022). Its relevance and impacts may vary across different groups and communities and at different times in their lives. How relevant is it to contemporary collective challenges (Coulson-Thomas, 2017)? For example, Yoga and a holistic lifestyle have been linked with sustainability and environmental wellbeing as well as human health (Leischner, 2015). Might Yoga lead to more focus on essential requirements for life such as breathing and the importance of the purity of air, environmental protection, balance and living in harmony with nature, as encouraged in Hindu Vedas (Renugadevi, 2012; Sharma, 2005 & 2013)?

Selected aspects of certain Eastern practices, including Yoga, have increasingly been adopted by individuals in Western and other contexts. However, existential threats such as global warming or declining biodiversity are shared challenges requiring collective responses at community, societal and international level. As crises such as extreme weather events grow in frequency and severity, the top three severe global risks, identified, assessed and ranked by the World Economic Forum, are environmental, as are a half of those in their 'top ten' (WEF, 2022). Within Indian ancient wisdom, is there further and complementary guidance relating to contemporary challenges that could be adopted alongside Yoga to support collective responses as well

as individual reactions to these risks (Coulson-Thomas, 2017 & 2019)?

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PERCEPTIONS, POSSIBILITIES AND PURPOSES

There are many perceptions and understandings of Yoga according to one's perspective and viewpoint. It can and has been variously portrayed by its individual adopters and practitioners as an interest, hobby or pastime, as a leisure, 'keep fit' or other pursuit, as a physical, mental and/or spiritual activity, as a therapy, or as an arena of practice and a source of income or national pride. What for one person might be a calling, could be an occupation or business for another. Involvement with Yoga can be intermittent and/or limited or regular and/or more extensive. It could be relatively shallow or deep and intensely personal.

Satisfaction with the practice of Yoga and the utility of its outcomes might reflect motivation, commitment and expectations, how and what aspects of it have been used, and by whom and for what purpose, and whether to address symptoms or one or more of their underlying root causes. They may also depend upon situation, circumstances

and context, such as lifestyle, economic, environmental, and cultural and other societal factors and what accompanies it. Most people have a common interest in survival and currently face shared existential threats. Could Yoga and further guidance, lessons and practice from Indian and other ancient wisdom play more of a role in enabling and supporting collective responses to existential threats like declining biodiversity, global warming and climate change (Coulson-Thomas, 2022a)?

There are areas of Indian ancient wisdom and historic practices of particular relevance to current environmental concerns, challenges and threats (Sharma, 2005; Renugadevi, 2012; Sharma, 2013; Baindur, 2015; Lalvani, 2016; Coulson-Thomas, 2017 & 2019). From a purpose and utility perspective, and the viewpoint of an observer rather than practitioner, what role could or should Yoga play in helping individuals, organisations and societies to cope with contemporary challenges and pressures? Could it provide a door or open a window into a wider pool of relevance within Indian and other ancient wisdom? While it may not be a panacea, what contribution could Yoga make in combination or in connection with other and additional elements? What criteria should be employed to assess priorities for the future growth and development of Yoga, and who should be involved in their development, application and monitoring? Are there particular arenas, contexts and circumstances in which its adoption might be especially relevant, appropriate and beneficial?

UNDERSTANDING AND ASSESSING YOGA

The rapid spread of Yoga in its many forms and its suggested packaging and commoditisation during the period since

1975 raises the question of the extent to which it has or may have become detached from its roots and original context, and its initial ethos diluted (Munir et al, 2021). Would its practice and utility benefit from a reconnection with its roots, some form of 'purification', or the adding back of elements that have been downplayed or discarded, perhaps as a result of them complicating its marketization and/or creating perceived barriers to its more widespread adoption? Might it represent a stage on a transition and/or transformation journey away from contemporary activities, preoccupations and lifestyles that are not sustainable to greater awareness of more fundamental and shared requirements such as collective survival in the face of existential threats and more responsible and inclusive lifestyles in harmony with the natural world and respecting the needs of future generations?



While it may not be a panacea, what contribution could Yoga make in combination or in connection with other and additional elements



The challenges for investigators of a phenomenon such as Yoga include the many forms and diverse contexts in which it might be encountered, how to distinguish between cause and effect and an association with outcomes regarded or perceived as beneficial, and in qualitative studies the subjectivity of

the responses of its human adopters and practitioners, who may only use certain aspects and practices. They may also not be fully aware of the whole range of their impacts upon them. In addition, what is being observed may also not be fully understood, even by its experienced practitioners. Yoga appears in many guises. It may be linked with other terms such as meditation and mindfulness in descriptions of its application and other changes of behaviour, interventions or therapies, which can complicate the analysis of relative contributions (Salmon et al, 2009).



Individual motivation for embracing Yoga could range from self-interest to concern for others and the environment. Self-interest could include 'wellness and fitness' (Dykema, 2011)



In relation to other pastimes, routines, activities and/or therapies, Yoga in some form can be relatively accessible and inclusive, in that it usually does not require special equipment, the advanced technologies other therapies may depend upon, or a large investment of financial and other resources before it can be practiced. In this sense, Yoga can be economical in regard to natural capital. Barriers to its adoption and beneficial practice might be attitudinal rather than

physical or financial. One may 'get out' according to what one 'puts in'. Yoga may reach communities that have hitherto been excluded from deriving many of the benefits of modern medicine. Its practice might however, not always be accompanied by all the conditions, understanding and other factors that could enable more of its potential to be realised. Might reconnection with other aspects of ancient wisdom and a re-purposing of Yoga enhance its contribution to required changes of perspective, priorities and lifestyles?

MOTIVATION FOR ADOPTION AND PRACTICE

Individual motivation for embracing Yoga could range from self-interest to concern for others and the environment. Self-interest could include 'wellness and fitness' (Dykema, 2011). Motivations might be suggested by behaviours. Some adopters and practitioners of Yoga might keep to themselves to avoid being regarded as lost or even disloyal, while others may publicly advertise their commitment to stepping aside from one lifestyle in order to explore another dimension, seek enlightenment or search for a simpler, more sustainable and less stressful way of living, perhaps in harmony with the natural world. If this were encouraged by the practice of Yoga, could this reflect contextual roots shared with ancient Indian wisdom that is especially relevant to contemporary environmental and sustainability concerns (Renugadevi, 2012; Baindur, 2015; Coulson-Thomas, 2017 & 2019)?

Withdrawal into personal space, whether physical or mental, and periods of silence, sometimes combined with certain practices, periodic rituals and associated physical activities that observers may notice has also been associated for many centuries with particular communities

and monastic orders. Aspects of such behaviours have been found in many societies and multiple locations through much of recorded history. Archaeological investigations suggest they may have been practiced much earlier. On occasion they may be permanent, representing a different form of life, while more recently they are often a periodic or occasional interruption of 'normal' life. Explained, suggested or imagined motivation for these behaviours could include preparation for a role, entry into a community or the next stage of a current life or a life to come, commencement or progression along a spiritual journey, relief from or avoidance of contemporary distractions or pressures, coping with the consequences of existence, and, like sleep, recharging batteries. They may be observed in individuals or groups, and with or without family members and the support of others.

Detachment and withdrawal might be seen by some as avoidance of accountability, distress, decisions and responsibilities or escape from them and the expectations and designs of others. They could be a means of securing space for personal reflection, away from distractions and the pressures of groupthink, reviewing experiences and/or changing direction, or reassessing values and priorities, and engaging with another perspective or way of thinking and/or pursuing a different path. What to some might be viewed negatively as self-absorption or a retreat could be regarded by others as a positive development and search for a better alternative or understanding. For some, a degree of detachment might increase their resistance to groupthink (Janis, 1972). It might precede a process of review, reassessment and/or repurposing, an intellectual or spiritual journey, lead to questioning and exploration and be necessary for a transition, transformation

or paradigm shift to occur (Kuhn, 1962).



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DETACHMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

Withdrawal and detachment practices and forms of behaviours and their associated beliefs may reflect the communities and societies in which they emerged at the time of their initial adoption and practice, and how they have been subsequently disseminated and modified. They may have deep cultural roots that also find expression in other conscious and unconscious attitudes, behaviours and responses that might persist today alongside them, for example, a preference for neutrality and non-alignment. For some people, certain practices and behaviours and what could appear as withdrawal and detachment may continue for some time and might even become permanent. In other cases they may be followed by more motivated and frenetic engagement with others, whether to re-enter or return and catch up, or to share what has been learned and advocate or proselytize a different way of thinking, operating or living. It might

also trigger further waves of investigation and exploration.

Taking a break or sabbatical, temporarily stepping aside or simply going on holiday can create an opportunity to recharge batteries and think. Some people develop their own ways of relaxing, reflecting, reviewing and recharging or simply switching off and reconnecting with their own bodies and the natural world. Others seek guidance, a model or a path that has been followed by others. They may join a particular community, embrace a religion or faith, join a gym or health centre, follow a guru or hire an exercise or lifestyle coach. Rationale, motivation and commitment may vary with each individual and might be unconscious, even trivial, or conscious and profound. In some areas, as with other therapies, the benefits of yoga may be subjective and less certain than its enthusiasts and those marketing and selling it might suggest. For example, in relation to relaxation certain indicators may not change for patients with schizophrenia after its use, and repeated adoption may be needed for perception to become a reality (Sugawara and Kobayashi, 2022). As with other therapies and practices, purchase, adoption and practice decisions may be influenced by expectations and perceptions, but subjective feelings of benefit may be valued by users.

Withdrawal and meditation with or without reflection could be an alternative to action or a prelude and preparation for more balanced, considered and responsible activity. Reflection and review accompanied or followed by re-purposing, re-positioning, and/or re-invention and changes of direction and priority are urgently needed. The encouragement, enabling and support of critical thinking are required and this is especially important for key decision makers, such as company directors. Board leadership may be critical in

relation to the environment and climate change if reviews of purpose, priority and direction are to occur before tipping points are reached after which an existential threat such as global warming may become irreversible (Bell, 2021; Coulson-Thomas, 2022b; IPCC, 2022).



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CRITICAL THINKING AND MANAGING STRESS

Critical thinking can be especially important for board members who provide strategic direction, executives responsible for its execution and implementation, and also for people more widely as collective responses to common and shared challenges are required and lifestyle changes, transitions and transformations are needed (Coulson-Thomas, 2022b & c). It can involve pause, reflection and re-visiting assumptions (Chatfield, 2017). The critique, questioning and contextualisation that may be utilised in critical thinking can help the assessment of significance and the value of inputs, awareness of the limits of generalisation and the building of understanding (Fisher, 2001; Moore and Parker, 2008; Deane and Borg, 2011; Tittle, 2011).

Active questioning and critical thinking are inter-related, and stimulating one can support the development of the other (Lorencová et al. 2019). To what extent does and/or could Yoga enable, facilitate or support them?

Balanced and responsible decisions often require cool heads. Objectivity and the independence that can come from a degree of detachment are especially important. How might directors and board decision making benefit from the inner peace and mental clarity that may be associated with the practice of Yoga or Qigong (Boaventura et al, 2022)? On occasion it may be necessary to get certain emotions and emotional baggage out of one's system such as anger or revulsion and biases and dated views, but they may continue to distort perceptions and judgements until their root causes are addressed, and reflection is followed by appropriate action. When this does not happen, meditation and other practices may amount to avoidance behaviour and act as a sedative, rather than as an enabler and the source of relevant and practical solutions. A level of concern and degree of anxiety may be necessary as a prelude to the analysis of a challenge and an active response to address it.

When accompanied by a desire to fit in, not rock the boat, compromise and be seen as a team player, pressures on executive directors whose lives revolve around a single entity can lead to a loss of balance, independence, and objectivity, 'groupthink', narrowing perspectives, shortening time horizons and a lack of critical thinking and challenge (Janis, 1972). Independent non-executive directors with experience elsewhere, and the time to stand back, see a bigger picture and think longer-term, may contribute a broader perspective, greater objectivity, additional viewpoints, and qualities that complement those of executive director colleagues whose lives can be especially

pressured and stressful. Frenetic activity and hectic lives can be a source of stress. Managing it and coping with it are a concern of individuals and healthcare practitioners and systems (Rizzolo and Sedrak, 2010).

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Aspects of the practice of Yoga and attitudes towards it have parallels with those towards other more contemporary phenomena such as mindfulness (Salmon et al, 2009). The breathing techniques and slow movements associated with Yoga and Qigong are consistent with a desire to slow down rather than speed up (McAlary, 2018; Boaventura et al, 2022). In relation to certain existential threats and some matters on board agendas, slowing down is not an option. Severe risks, complex challenges and wicked problems may appear on the agendas of business and other leaders, and the members of boards, because they cannot be delegated. They should be encouraged to address factors that might negatively impact their decision making. As mentioned above, some people are at risk of stress, anxiety, depression and mental health issues at certain points in their lives and may need support. Yoga

might be relevant. For example, it may enable high risk adolescents such as high school students to better cope and prevent withdrawal and substance abuse (Caldarella and Lulla, 2022).



Aspects of the practice of Yoga and attitudes towards it have parallels with those towards other more contemporary phenomena such as mindfulness (Salmon et al, 2009)



THE FUTURE ROLE OF YOGA

As also already alluded to, environmental risks, namely climate action failure, extreme weather and biodiversity loss, have been assessed as the top three severe risks on a global scale over the next ten years, with two further environmental risks, human environmental damage and natural resource crises, ranked seventh and eighth respectively within the 'top ten' (WEF, 2022). A review and rethink of Yoga and its application in modern medicine has been suggested (Chaoul and Cohen, 2010). What about its wider contribution to collective action to confront global environmental challenges? If the practice of Yoga makes individuals aware of vital aspects of their own existence as a living being might it also increase their awareness of other life forms and the natural world and help to foster a common interest in survival in the face of shared existential threats?

Could it better do this if enhanced?

Much may depend upon what aspects of Yoga are practiced by whom in what circumstances and for what purposes, how they are practiced and in combination with what other activities. Its wider adoption, spread and repurposing may reflect awareness, access and understanding. How these might be achieved, whether through physical presence or remotely via some form of packaging and the use of digital technologies? What needs to be done to better understand and articulate the benefits of Yoga and support collective responses to shared existential threats? What other and complementary elements of ancient wisdom could and ought to be embraced? Should these include the respect for the natural world which is expressed in Indian philosophy, culture and related guidance (Baindur, 2015)? How should barriers to the further and wider adoption of Yoga be addressed (Atkinson and Permeth-Levine, 2009)?

Yoga may evolve and combine differently or merge with other approaches. It might further fragment into schools or factions. Some adherents may be restless and might wish to try something new or approach it differently. They may move on and try alternatives or seek guidance and/or support from a different practitioner. Having endured for so long and been adopted in diverse situations, circumstances and contexts through the ages it is likely to continue to be practiced, which raises the question of what other aspects or elements of Indian ancient wisdom might complement it and deserve to be disseminated more widely. The need for both reassessment and accelerated action in respect of an existential threat such as climate change is long overdue. Awareness of the negative consequences of our collective human activities, requirements and priorities is longstanding, continues and

they have extended beyond the surface of our planet into space (Bell, 2021; Early, 2022; IPCC, 2022).

EVOLUTION OR INFLUENCED DEVELOPMENT

The practice of Yoga is currently spreading at home and abroad, as are other practices, complementary therapies, counselling and support services from mindfulness to alternative medicines, whether or not officially approved and recognised and funded by public health, welfare and well-being services. They are spreading as a result of their voluntary adoption by many individuals and their evolution will be shaped by market forces and the wisdom of crowds (Surowiecki, 2004). Should companies and other organisations, public bodies, societies and their health and welfare systems and community services encourage and support the wider adoption of Yoga for particular purposes and/or general benefit?

If yoga were to be more widely officially recognised and approved, what might the implications be for the education, development, approval and licensing of those offering Yoga related services to members of the public. Should standards be set and/or a 'kitemark' be introduced, and should educational providers and levels of qualification require approval? Would more registers of approved practitioners be beneficial? Will new bodies be needed to do this and influence the nature of Yoga and its adoption and practice? With whom should they consult? What might standards and regulation mean for choice, diversity and the future of Yoga and its contribution? While it is perceived as helpful and beneficial it should endure.

Our collective environmental challenge remains to live in harmony with the natural world and utilise the earth's natural

capital responsibly and sustainably so as not to prejudice the prospects of future generations (Brundtland Commission, 1987). For its practitioners and influencers, what should the priority now be for the future development and deployment of Yoga? Should it be to achieve and maintain market leadership in the individual coping, health and well-being arenas of whatever manifestations of the Yoga phenomenon either best achieves this aim, or are considered most beneficial? Alternatively, should it be to review, enhance and re-purpose Yoga to better support collective responses to environmental challenges and existential threats and necessary transition and transformation journeys to more sustainable lifestyles, communities and societies? Our survival may depend on this and other such choices of focus and priority while there is still time to affect global outcomes.

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