

Beyond the East/West Dichotomy— The Course *Yoga: Theory and Practice* Conveys the Benefits of an Ayurvedic Lens for Global Health

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Abstract

The course *Yoga: Theory and Practice* (YTP) evolved from the realization that graduate and undergraduate academic offerings of “yoga courses” were filled beyond capacity, while students were not being exposed to the depth and breadth of what yoga has to offer as a holistic, integrative practice, nor how it grew up alongside Ayurveda. Students experientially understood the contribution that yoga practice made in their lives and sensed the health benefits it afforded. Yet, they were hungry for an understanding of the lens through which yoga emerged. YTP is an elective course within an academic minor of study, “Integrative Approaches to Health and Wellness” that provides nonwestern ways of understanding global medicine and health. The focus of YTP is to offer college students an in-depth, academic study of yoga, incorporating both scientific (reductionist), and an Ayurveda health perspective. This course is an educational innovation, translating the benefits of Ayurvedic and yogic lifestyle to a Western audience.

Keywords

yoga, young adults, global health, Ayurveda

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Human life is embodied, as much as Western philosophy wishes to claim otherwise.¹ Classical education has typically regarded the body as an impediment,² missing a huge opportunity for students to draw upon their whole experience (affirming body and mind) to enhance their personal and educational journey toward becoming functional members of society. The course *Yoga: Theory and Practice* (YTP) was designed for students of higher education to draw upon both their body and mind as valid vehicles of Ayurvedic exploration. In YTP, the contemplative practices, writing experiences, and the course pedagogy reflect the theoretical orientation of yoga as an embodied philosophy. The course is structured around lessons contained within Ayurveda, such as our individualized natural state or dosha, and how this impacts so many aspects of our life. Contemplative body–mind exercises help students process these lessons and applicability to their own lives. YTP advances body/mind pedagogy and core concepts of Ayurveda within

higher education, a first step to ultimately advancing an understanding of Ayurveda in the global health community. The course seeks to combine elements of emerging scientific research with philosophical concepts of Ayurveda and yoga, to foster a yoga practice centered on asana, breath, and meditation, ultimately leading to students’ development of self-awareness (see Figure 1). Students are invited to get beyond the East/West dichotomy and experience an innovative new way to approach health and wellness.

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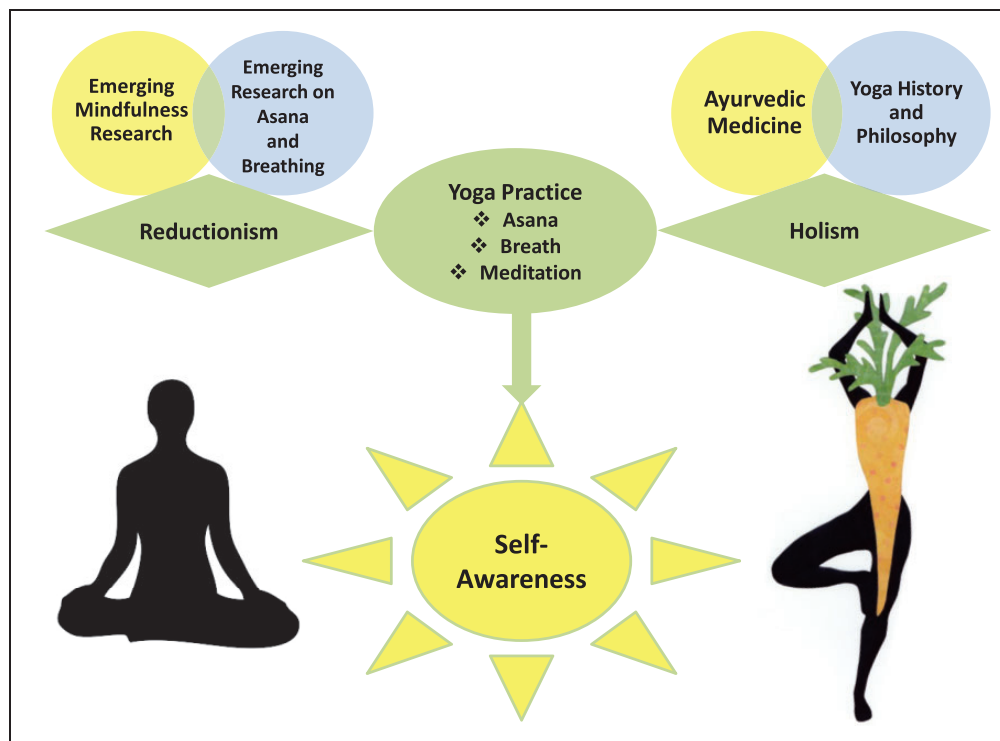


Figure 1. Essential Course Elements.

The semester begins with drawing and writing about one's "Body/Mind Journey" to date. Students immediately learn that YTP will draw upon their whole selves for self-inquiry, by looking at where they have been, and asking how they will utilize those realizations to create their future. By the end of the course, students no longer view the body as an inferior means of mindful self-inquiry and have acquired useful tools to incorporate into future contemplative process. Students complete the course with a deeper clarity of their past, present, and future based upon systematic reflective practice.

The question that forms the foundation of any serious yoga study is, "Who am I?"² which includes both one's body and mind. Yoga practitioners seek answers to this question in a variety of ways, one of the most important being an inquiry into to the body itself as a site of discovery and knowledge.³ Body, mind, and spiritual awareness are viewed as the trinity of life in Ayurvedic thought.⁴ However, while this same question lies at the heart of much of classical Western philosophy, Western thought would claim the mind, which is understood to be articulated through discursive methods of writing, reading, contemplation, and discussion, to be the primary avenue for exploring this question of self-study.⁵ Yoga philosophy does not share the assumption that the mind is primary. In Western thought, there is an assumed divide between the body and mind, but in Ayurveda, they are viewed as connected, and

Ayurveda aims to bring body and consciousness into a harmonious relationship.⁴ YTP provides an introduction to the idea that self-healing is possible by introducing the Ayurvedic concept of an individual constitution, that in understanding one's dosha, students see that they can adjust their nutrition, specific yoga poses, and so on by understanding how to bring their individual constitution into a more balanced state. Ayurvedic concepts engage the students in this course where they are, with individual combinations of energies that make up their body, mind, and spirit. This approach, connecting Ayurvedic concepts to the student him/herself, is taken throughout the course. See Table 1 for a summary of the major concepts covered in the course and for an explanation of the ways in which Ayurvedic concepts are explored pragmatically within the course.

The Body–Mind Relationship

Yoga is presented in this course as a philosophical and practical framework in which theory and practice unite. It is important to note there is not *one* yoga philosophy; yoga is a complex tradition formed from numerous modes of thought, cultural trends, and societal influences in ancient India.⁶ As such, we attempt to present a broad, comprehensive lens of yoga throughout history in YTP, but focus on a few key components of both ancient and contemporary understandings of yoga philosophy.

Table 1. Ayurvedic Concepts Addressed in Yoga Theory and Practice.

Concept	Applied in YTP
Health and the opportunity for self-healing	Addressed through the concept of balance (natural order) and imbalance (disorder) and the role that the individual can play in both prevention and intervention
Three energies that present as one's original constitution or dosha	Discussed regarding dietary choices that can help restore balance, in addition to which yoga poses to aid in balancing one's dosha
Dharma	Explored in reference to the examination of the student's calling or truth, bringing their body/mind/spirit into balance/alignment

Meaning “to yoke, unite, or bring together,” in Sanskrit, “yoga can be defined both as the effort to restore harmony within the body–mind complex and as the effort to reunite the individual human spirit with its essential nature.”⁷ Loaded with complex meaning, this definition positions the body and mind as sites of self-reflection for students to investigate themselves within a greater context of their experience in the world at large. Foundational to yoga theory, *asana* practice, the physical movement component of yoga practice, is thought to extend the core of one's being into the body by cultivating deeper awareness and perception.⁸ This is in line with the notion that Ayurveda helps one understand one's unique body, mind, and the nature of daily operating consciousness.⁹ Consequently, 50% of the total course meeting time of YTP is devoted to yogic movement that complements the material students engage with in their reading and other assignments. This provides students with the introspection and physical exploration necessary for embodying Ayurvedic yoga philosophy. The *asana* practice sessions also serve a functional purpose for students by providing students with opportunities to manage stress and develop physical exercise habits, 2 important issues facing college students in the United States.¹⁰ By equipping students with this knowledge at the undergraduate and graduate levels, we are ensuring their incorporation of Ayurveda into future aspects of their life, namely their health and wellness, as they go on to be professionals in many areas of the country and the world, boosting the presence of Ayurveda in public, global health.

While focused on mindful movement, these yoga practice sessions are also quite unique due to their significant focus on writing. Contemplative writing exercises are consistently interwoven into yoga practice sessions to help students deepen their engagement with the practice themes and integrate material from the lecture/discussion portion of the course. For some students used to straight yoga *asana*, reflective writing interwoven into the physical practice might seem like a form of disruptive introspection. This integration of writing and *asana* practice is a rare occurrence in the typical yoga class; one is unlikely finding the same type of written exploration in a class taken at a yoga studio. Often

done quietly at the beginning of a yoga practice session, these introspective writing sessions might also take place during or at the completion of practice, sometimes followed by voluntary oral sharing of students' written reflections. Contemplative writing exercises, as offered in this course, offer writing as a way of understanding oneself, not merely as a method of articulating the research and thinking of others.¹¹ The writing methodology introduced in YTP invites the students to embody, reflect, write, move, and then write some more. Students write to think, move to embody their thinking, and listen to their own, and others, reflective exploration.

The intent of combining themed reflective writing with specific movement is based on *How the Brain Learns*.¹² Sousa stresses that movement plays a crucial role in the learning process of the brain; thus, the yoga practice sessions of this course echo the class theme of the day in terms of specific postures, variations, cueing, and supportive breath work. The brain's cerebrum, which detects movement impulses sent from the inner ear, also signals the cerebellum, an area of the brain responsible for arousing attention, spatial perception, memory, and the frontal lobe's cognitive function, the very same parts of the brain that are heightened in the learning process.¹² Therefore, even the class meetings dedicated to lecture and discussion begin with gentle movement to warm up the body and focus the mind.

This course does not simply view movement and body awareness as methods of increasing the learning of material typically taught through reading, lecture, and discussion. Foundational to YTP is the idea the body itself is seen as a site of inquiry on par with traditional discursive educational methods. This viewpoint continues the work of researchers such as Richard Shusterman,⁵ whose similar understanding of an epistemology of the body has led to the development of his project, somaesthetics, in which the body is “a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aethesis) and creative self-fashioning.”⁵ From his lens, the cultivation of the somatic experience of the body–mind, which includes its intimate connection with culture, becomes integral to education of the self and society.⁵ This course's yoga practice sessions accomplish such an understanding of the body through class themes that integrate somatic sensation and movement

skills with written reflection on personal experience and yoga philosophy. This type of body–mind integration is exemplified through the course’s first assignment, “Body/Mind Journey,” in which students reflect upon, both visually and in writing, the history of their own bodies, followed by a voluntary storytelling of their journey in class. From the outset, this assignment encourages students to address the body–mind split that has most likely pervaded much of their formal education until this point. Both autobiographical and based on physical sensation, students learn through this assignment to reflect not just on what has happened in their lives, but how their life events have impacted their relationships to their own bodies/selves, and vice versa, giving them understanding of not only their body–mind relations but also their role in the world at large. Often, this assignment reveals several recurring themes among college-age students, namely the significant presence of anxiety and depression in their lives, a noteworthy trend facing the university student population in increasing numbers.¹³

This assignment is one of many methods used in the course that attempts to frame students’ life experiences alongside the academic study of yoga as a philosophical, cultural, scientific, and historical subject. As such, YTP requires that the instructor view students not as empty vessels to which knowledge must be imparted, but as holistic, global citizens, and social beings with lives outside of the classroom that impact who they are as students. Assignments such as the Body/Mind Journey allow these aspects of students’ lives to enter the classroom and become integrated with their study of yoga history, theory, and science, creating an environment of truly student-centered learning. As understood by Collins and O’Brien,¹⁴ student-centered learning places the student at the center of the learning process by inviting students to draw upon their previous experiences, creatively solve problems that cannot be solved by following texts, and involving students in activities such as simulations, role-playing, and team-building. When taught effectively, student-centered classrooms help students gain motivation, increase positive attitudes toward the subject, improve retention, and invite deeper understanding of themselves, their role in global society, and the course material.¹⁴ An example of this is a student who was reluctant to engage in yoga for fear that it interfered with the religious tradition from which she came:

As someone who is, and has grown up, Catholic, it was very interesting to me to see the similarities between Catholicism and some Ayurvedic concepts—they weren’t in conflict with one another as I had feared. It was a relief to come to understand the principles behind yoga and Ayurveda . . . Being able to see that they both aim to connect the mind/body/spirit allows me to

practice yoga as a Catholic young adult without feeling conflicted with a potential religious disconnect that many are concerned with, before they truly understand.

Educators should know that transformative learning *necessitates* that students and teachers be open to discomfort and that teachers’ fears of emotion in the classroom can be one of the most significant barriers to transformative education.¹⁵ In John Eric Baugher’s “Contemplating Uncomfortable Emotions: Creating Transformative Spaces for Learning in Higher Education,”¹⁵ he suggests that “. . . to create spaces for transformative learning teachers must themselves learn to become comfortable with ‘holding’ uncomfortable emotions—our own and those of our students—in an atmosphere of inquiry and loving kindness.”¹⁵ From the lens of transformational learning theory,¹⁶ such opportunities for critical reflection and self-questioning form the backbone of transformative education that helps develop autonomous, socially responsible adults that are globally aware. Likewise, the uncertainty and paradox that often accompany truly constructivist, embodied, and experiential teaching are also exactly what invite students to bring their whole lives (mind, body, and soul) into the learning process.¹⁷ This course helps students become aware of their daily, weekly, monthly, and annual natural cycles, seeing these as part of, rather than separated from, nature and the whole environment in which we live.

When considering the potentially sensitive subject matter that critical self-study through yoga practice might incur, it becomes even more important to offer students mindful physical experiences geared toward improving the body–mind relationship. In essence, the writing assignments within YTP ask students to engage in deep reflective thought about who they are and how they are living their lives, providing them with exciting opportunities for growth. The course designer (first author) envisioned this to be the enactment of preventative Ayurveda. Yet, for students weaned on Western philosophy of the mind/body split, this may also elicit experiences of doubt, fear, or shame. These emotions are also felt, bodily sensations that yoga can teach students how to deal with mindfully and healthily. Because yoga philosophy views the body as “the home as well as the pillar of the soul,”¹⁸ it is essential to teach yoga, even as a philosophical subject, from a position that integrates written discourse with mindful physical awareness. By doing so, educators can help students process and actualize their experiences *through the body* and thus create pedagogy that truly embodies the principles of yogic and Ayurvedic philosophy. Through its mindful yoga practice sessions and creative processes such as the Body/Mind Journey, YTP’s integration of reflective writing, artistic expression, and bodily inquiry create an

environment where philosophy can become actualized. The structure of this course clearly embodies and advances the way in which yogic theory can be effectively taught, thus is a significant contribution within higher education.

A key component of YTP is an exploration of the historical context of the yoga tradition through 2 important texts: the *Yoga Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* is a second century BCE text that unites the essential ideas of YTP through 195 sutras or "threads."⁶ Within the *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali outlines the "8-limbed" path, which offers practitioners a guide through the various stages of yoga practice, beginning with moral guidelines and ethical codes of conduct, moving through postural (*yogasana*) and breath (*pranayama*) practices, and culminating in the deeper levels of concentration that unite the individual self with the Universal Spirit.⁸ Studying the tenants of the "8-limbed" path offers YTP students a foundational base for comprehending that the scope of yoga practice goes beyond physical exercise, which is a common misconception in today's trendy yoga scene. Students in YTP learn that yoga practice is truly a journey of finding oneself within a context of the world at large.

To help students locate themselves within this philosophy, YTP presents the *Bhagavad Gita* through Stephen Cope's *The Great Work of Your Life: A Guide for the Journey to Your True Calling*.¹⁹ Cope's text tells the story of the *Bhagavad Gita*, where warrior Arjuna searches for his *dharma* through conversations with his divine mentor Krishna. *Dharma* can be difficult to define in Western terms, but for this book, and this course, *dharma* can best be defined as "vocation" or "truth." In the book, Cope explores the lives of important figures throughout history, such as Susan B Anthony and Walt Whitman, revealing how those historical figures found, or struggled to find, their own *dharma*.

What students gain from this text is the significant lesson that their *dharma* is already within them; in short, they learn that they cannot be anyone but themselves. To put it in Socratic terms, one of the most important aspects of finding one's *dharma* is to simply "know thyself."⁵ From the perspective of this course, the goal is not to make sure students know what *dharma* is as a conceptual idea; the goal is for each individual student to explore what *their dharma* is (understood from this moment in time). To help students identify their *dharma* and consider possible visual representations of their journey for their final presentation, students answer some questions as a contemplative writing exercise during a yoga practice session. For example, they answer questions like "I was paralyzed at the bottom of my chariot when . . . ," "I feel like myself when . . . ," and "I am paralyzed by"

The questions that Cope's text, and any search for *dharma* bring up might be difficult for some students to answer, possibly causing them to experience anxiety or fear. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna also grapples with paralyzing doubt and fear, unsure how to move forward when faced with a difficult situation. Likewise, many of the students in this course face such doubts as they select majors, pursue career paths, and contemplate life after graduation. The presence of these doubts in a college-age population is normal, if not ubiquitous, which presents a crucial opportunity for student-centered learning to take place in this classroom. This assignment dedicates invaluable time to this decisive point in students' lives as young adults as they start making decisions about how they want to live and the people they want to be. The text offers critical insight into important lessons of healthy adulthood in society, such as the conditions one needs for success, the ability to turn difficulty into an opportunity for growth, and the capacity for letting go of anxiety about the future.

To help students find the confidence to truly embody their *dharma*, the reading of this text and the completion of the writing guide culminate in a Pecha-Kucha-style PowerPoint presentation in which students share their *dharma* story with the class. Meaning "chit-chat" in Japanese, a Pecha-Kucha is 20-slide, storytelling format that automatically advances each slide, consisting largely of images, after 20 seconds.²⁰ While an oral presentation, the specific format and time constraints of a Pecha-Kucha require careful writing and rehearsing of one's presentation ahead of time so that the student is able to deliver their reflections without the use of note cards. As students tell their *dharma* story, the audience experiences a seamless journey of listening to the speaker and watching the images on display.

The use of images in these presentations is not merely for efficiency's sake: images play a unique role in how people form meaning, specifically in that they provide a medium in which intellectual ideas and socioemotional associations meet.¹⁷ Dirkx's formulation of transformational learning theory invites the soul into education, exploring ideas gives voice to the images that shape value and meaning for the participants. Learning through soul actively involves the learner in the process of naming and giving voice to these images.¹⁷ The result of using images in these Pecha-Kucha presentations is not only a unified and smooth presentation but also a format for a reflective, embodied, and practiced sharing of one's life that anyone can do, regardless of major or discipline of expertise.

Conclusion

In a world where colleges and universities often fail to provide students with adequate opportunities to

integrate their study of theory with practical application in their lives and bodies outside the classroom,²¹ YTP invokes education's ancient purpose on the development of self by helping students connect theory and practice through mind, body, and spirit. Through an exploration of the course's structured reflective writing that views the body as a locus for self-understanding, we have shown that students' embodied processing can be integral to students' self-growth and hugely insightful for evaluating student progress through writing. Our discussion of how ancient and contemporary notions of yoga philosophy and practice might be used as a critical educational framework has revealed that written reflection based on embodied experience can help students move toward self-actualization. We have further demonstrated that YTP addresses the pressing need for transformative pedagogy in higher education. This goal is achieved through integration of body–mind approaches to self-inquiry and wellness, interdisciplinary and multi-modal approaches to yoga's philosophical and practical framework, and a focus on student-centered learning geared toward self-growth within the larger situated epistemology. A former student, currently a doctoral student of Occupational Therapy shared that,

The Ayurvedic principle that we learned in this class around what our nutrition should be based upon our dosha made a lot of sense to me. No 2 bodies are the same, so why would their nutritional needs be? As an OT student, we have had multiple lectures on nutrition (including one on Ayurvedic doshas) and I sent my classmates the quiz that I had taken in YTP to take to determine their dosha. My classmates were fascinated to see what their dosha was and how their typical nutrition compared to what they could be eating to stay in better balance.

While this course's content specifically revolves around yoga philosophy and practice, it seems appropriate to close by mentioning that many of this course's contemplative writing and body–mind techniques can be utilized in an array of disciplines. Contemplative pedagogical practices, which garner support from a confluence of research in psychology, yoga, neuroscience, and research on meditation in sports, business, and medicine,²² could not be more relevant or needed than they are today across many college and university programs and fields of study.¹¹ Helping students answer the question, "Who am I?" is not merely domain of philosophy, yogic, or Western but the purpose of education itself. The mindful contemplative practices utilized in this course employs Goldberg's prompt to "write down the bones," physically, mindfully, and actually.²³ Student course evaluations over the last several years average 4.8/5 points regarding course success in delivering the

intended objectives. The course itself brings Ayurveda, yoga, and mindfulness into practice for students in a pragmatic and attainable fashion. Incorporating elements of Ayurveda will bring improved health to the body, mind, and consciousness.⁹ Achieving such a goal is an important accomplishment both within higher education, and ultimately beyond, in the global health community.

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