

# ‘The Light in Me, No Longer Sees and Honors the Light in You’

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION WITHIN WESTERN  
INTERPRETATIONS OF YOGA AND THEORY

TESS STYLER

*“The light in me, sees and honors the light in you.”* Fills the quiet space throughout the studio as the teacher regroups the class for their final pose, with hands at ‘heart-center’ and eyes closed. Ending off strong with a theatrical yet forced, *“Namaste”*, leaves everyone in attendance feeling rejuvenated, proud of themselves and their effort, and enlightened from their participation within a different cultural practice.

Yet individuals are completely ignorant of their contribution to the misinterpretation of yoga and its origins. It doesn’t ask us to join the unconscious masses that seek physical performance in the commercialized and gentrified spaces that dominate the yoga community. Yoga only asks of its participants to do two things: to act and to be attentive in our actions.

Yoga’s origins date back to the Vedic civilization, and is part of the *Four Vedas*, the ancient texts and oldest record of Indian culture, and is far more than just the physical activity millions of Americans partake in (Desikachar). And *Namaste*, “greetings to you”, along with all the other Sanskrit terminology that is butchered and misused, is right up there with it. Yoga’s ideology and practice is rooted in Indian thought, yet its content is universal in that it is open and accessible for anyone who desires to make change in their life.

“Yoga is the journey of the self, through the self, to the self” (Bhagavad Gita).

To Western society, yoga is simply the practice of standing on a thin mat and doing a series of physical poses while breathing, and in Eastern tradition / sacred texts, yoga is the unity of all known and unknown, and your body is just present for that union.

Yoga in Western society and mainstream culture has strayed too far from its traditional roots. Masking cultural appropriation with marketing of the latest fad, creates a false narrative of the practice and the power it has in our lives when done right.

## Freeing the Soul from the Mind- What is Yoga?

“Yoga is the cessation of thought waves in the mind.” (Yoga Sutra 1:2)

Yoga’s direct translation from its Sanskrit origin is defined as “union”, but over the years the term has accumulated several interpretations: “to tie the strands of the mind together” or “to attain what was previously unattainable” (Desikachar 5).

Yoga is when we, as individuals, consciously make ourselves more present, both internally and externally. This conscious decision making is not just of our physical actions but of our thoughts and our presence within. When one chooses to commit to a yoga practice, they are choosing to explore the known and unknown limits of their body and mind. Individuals are investing time, movements, and beliefs towards, “an inwardly generated activity where the onus is on the individual to develop his/her practice, to ‘get in touch’ with the self” (Atencio and Smith 1174). The journey one takes in their self-discovery is to remain judgement free, allowing for complete participation and acceptance of themselves and the world around them.

This exploration of the self is derived from the work of ancient sage Patanjali, creator of the *Yoga Sutras*, one of the firsts texts to conceptualize *Astanga* (“*asta*” = 8, “*anga*” = limb) yoga and offer insight on what it looks like in practice. Patanjali was able to describe this craving of ‘all knowing’ and connection between mind and body as eight distinct parts or “limbs”. These limbs are actively working in accordance with one another and as a result as another because of the goal of attaining peace, physically and mentally. The limbs are as follows: *Yama (restraints)*, *Niyama (observances)*, *Asana (postures)*, *Pranayama (breath control)*, *Pratyahara (withdrawing the mind from sense perception)*, *Dharana (concentration)*, and *Dhyana (meditation)*, and *Samadhi (superconsciousness)* (Dass).

The first three limbs can be understood by their external processes; *yama* is seen as the attitude we have towards people outside ourselves while *niyama* is how we relate to ourselves inwardly. The final external process and most seen in yoga interpretation, *asanas*, is made up of two distinct qualities, *sthira* (steadiness and alertness) and *sukha* (ability to remain comfortable in a posture) (Desikachar 17). Both qualities must be present during a practice, not because of the physical benefits that they provide but rather their contribution to taming the body before the mind (Ross). The fourth limb, *pranayama*, is the life supporting energy that is within us and provides individuals the means to follow one's breath. It is not just noticing and regulating of our breathing, but rather mastering the stillness of it to prepare for meditation. The remaining limbs are internal processes; *pratyahara* means our senses are no longer dependent on things that stimulate us, *dharana* is when "we create the conditions for the mind to focus its attention in one direction...", *dhyana* is the concentration towards that established direction, and *samadhi* is the complete absorption and oneness with an object or thought (Desikachar 109). These limbs are not listed in chronological order; they are to be developed, "concurrently and interrelated". Author T.K.V. Desikachar compares this process of simultaneous growth to that of a fetus, no limb gets left behind as one continues down the path of self-development and realization.

Patanjali outlines what is necessary if one practices yoga with hopes of obtaining a higher consciousness that provides peace and clarity. One is not able to grasp the power that Ashtanga yoga possess if they do not integrate these limbs in their daily practice; it is through the repetition and continuation of exploring one's limits that one will "attain what was previously unattainable" (Desikachar 5).

Regardless of how detailed and expansive the fundamental texts of yoga practices are, it remains challenging due to the internal contemplation and hesitancy one faces. Part of the

attraction of yoga is how it is completely dependent on your own participation, and then commitment by continuously training the mind until “it can no longer distort the true expression of the soul” (Ross). And with that comes the acceptance of humility, or absence of pride that acknowledges that we are always able to learn something new.

### **‘Yoga Bod’ – What is yoga to Western, mainstream culture?**

Yoga, in theory, is inclusive to all walks of life, regardless of prior knowledge or physical capabilities, anyone should be able to practice. And then, in theory, there should be no discrimination or appropriation of its participants because of its inclusivity. Our society is uprooting the life and authenticity that yoga is, for a more marketable, whitewashed, and exclusionary ‘hobby’ that only the privilege can indulge in.

This unfortunate reality is reflected in the findings of Sabrina Smith and Matthew Atencio in their qualitative examination of yoga, and its social dynamics and implications in, “Yoga is Yoga”. While they do touch on the presence of Ashtanga yoga, only *asana* is mentioned, and very little, if not any, information on pranayama. Their findings of an ‘asana’ centered practice is consistent amongst others, including Danielle Thompson-Ochoa, author of “Is Yoga Cultural Appropriation”. Thompson-Ochoa proposes that the West focuses more on asanas than the breath because it is the “combining of physical exercise with a constructed/hallow attempt at spirituality” (Thompson-Ochoa 35). Not only is the combination of physical exercise the root of the problem but it is the shift from a spiritual and unifying practice to a competitive and self-absorption.

“Yoga is Yoga” points out this shift in mindset as what was once an act of self-exploration to a means of self-gratification. And this is reflected in today’s ‘yogic texts’, such as

“Yoga Journal”, that paints the picture of what the “correct interpretation” of a yogi is, “flexible, young, economically stable, and white” (Atencio and Smith). This description of what a yogi today looks like is not a new or offensive claim, it has become the new representative and target audience for the corporate companies that profit off this exclusion.

The manipulation of media and marketing schemes to create the ideal interpretation goes against Ashtanga yoga because it creates a new set of expectations and constructs one singular experience. Yoga being seen as a practice that produces and transmits an “embodied social and cultural capital” reinforces the exclusionary emotional terrain that arises from gentrification (Ross).

Western culture has placed science, image, and numbers as yoga’s reasoning for success while since its inception, was never intended to be seen that way. Formed for individuals to engage and challenge themselves mentally and spiritually, is now seen as trendy skills to “perfect one’s health” (Thompson-Ochoa 36).

The preservation of yoga’s origins within mainstream culture will continue to deviate from its roots...

### **ANALYSIS 3: What does proper integration of ‘traditional principles and practices of yoga’ and ‘modern social mechanisms of influence’ look like?**

With this increased interest, yoga studios and teachers have sought to integrate elements of the yoga tradition into their practices. This integration can take many forms, from incorporating Sanskrit chants to emphasizing the spiritual aspects of yoga.

As we are continuing down the path of technology and most of our spheres of influence revolve around it as well, it comes to no surprise that there have been strides back to digitize yoga. One way to integrate the traditional practices of yoga into modern ones is using

technology. There are now many apps and online resources that offer guided meditations and yoga classes. This can be seen as helpful because some practitioners are unable to attend in person or maybe an individual wants to add to their practice with additional resources.

According to a study published in the Journal of Alternative and Contemporary Medicine, “Mobile applications for yoga can be an effective tool for promoting physical and mental wellbeing, reducing stress, and improving overall quality of life” (Russell et al., 2018).

Another attempt at combining the power of tradition and the power of influence, was done in the 90s by Bikram Chounhury, a yogi guru who came to the states with a 26 posture practice done in a heated room. Known for his charismatic personality and popularity of his ‘brand’, Bikram was able to make a name for himself long before the accusations arose. Over the years, allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse surfaced, leading to a tarnished reputation for Bikram and yoga. He has warped people’s perception of what it means to be a yogi, “The problem is that Bikram Yoga has become so closely identified with its founder that it’s difficult to separate the yoga from the man” (Schuster 2015).

In addition, the heated nature of Bikram yoga has been controversial, with some yogis feeling that the intense heat can be unsafe and lead to health issues rather than mending. It is not just felt by naysayers or those who feel the practice is limiting but even teachers of similar yoga styles such as Matthew Remski, “Bikram yoga was an amalgam of ancient postures, repurposed for a western audience, presented as exercise and therapy, packaged in a near-lethal environment, and sold as a kind of infallible dogma” (Remski 2019).

Overall, leaving individuals to question the legitimacy and purpose of the practice and its association with the larger yoga community. As the yoga community continues to evolve and

grow, it is important to critically examine the practices and beliefs that shape it and ensure that they align with the values of inclusivity, respect, and compassion.

## **SYNTHESIS**

In western society, yoga has become a commercialized and gentrified activity that strays too far from its traditional roots. The Sanskrit terminology is misused, and cultural appropriation is masked by marketing the latest fad. However, yoga's ideology and practice are rooted in Indian thought, and its content is universal, open, and accessible for anyone who desires to make changes in their life. The journey of yoga is about self-discovery, and it requires individuals to consciously make themselves more present, both internally and externally. The eight limbs of yoga, provide insight into what yoga looks like in practice. These limbs work together, concurrently, and interrelatedly, with the goal of attaining peace, physically and mentally. It is through the repetition and continuation of practicing these limbs that one can grasp the power that Ashtanga yoga possess. By integrating traditional and mainstream yoga practices, individuals can honor the roots of the practice while still exploring the limits of their body and mind. As the teacher regroups the class for their final pose, they remind everyone that, "The light in me, sees and honors the light in you" with a final and forced, "Namaste." This phrase, along with all the other Sanskrit terminology, must be respected and used correctly to honor the true power of yoga in our lives.

## CITATIONS

Dass, Hari, and Steven N. Thomas. *Ashtanga Yoga Primer*. Sri Rama Pub., 1981.

Devarajan, Kumari. "How 'Namaste' Flew Away from US." *NPR*, NPR, 17 Jan. 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2020/01/17/406246770/how-namaste-flew-away-from-us>.

Remski, M. (2019). The Post-Lineage Yoga Revolution. The Walrus. <https://thewalrus.ca/the-post-lineage-yoga-revolution/>

Ross, Alyson, et al. "I Am a Nice Person When I Do Yoga!!!: A Qualitative Analysis of How Yoga Affects Relationships." *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2014, pp. 67–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0898010113508466>.

Sargeant, Winthrop. *The Bhagvad Gita*. Aleph, 2016.

Schuster, J. (2015). The Aftermath of Bikram Choudhury. *Yoga Journal*. <https://www.yogajournal.com/.amp/lifestyle/the-aftermath-of-bikram-choudhury>

Smith, Sabrina, and Matthew Atencio. "'Yoga Is Yoga. Yoga Is Everywhere. You Either Practice or You Don't': a Qualitative Examination of Yoga Social Dynamics." *Sport in Society*, vol. 20, no. 9, 2017, pp. 1167–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2016.1269082>.

Thompson-Ochoa, Danielle. "Is Yoga Cultural Appropriation?" *Yoga Mimamsa*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2019, pp. 34–37, [https://doi.org/10.4103/ym.ym\\_5\\_19](https://doi.org/10.4103/ym.ym_5_19).

V., Desikachar T K. *The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice*. Inner Traditions International, 1995.

Webb, Jennifer B., et al. "Is the 'Yoga Bod' the New Skinny?: A Comparative Content Analysis of Mainstream Yoga Lifestyle Magazine Covers." *Body Image*, vol. 20, 2017, pp. 87–98, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.11.005>.