

Chapter 8

Unlocking the Gate to Inner Peace With Yoga

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to show that yoga as a mind-body practice is absolutely relevant for promoting peace worldwide. Yoga proposes to any individual to first cultivate his inner peace and easing his own tensions in order to behave more peacefully with others. Starting from the modern physical practice of yoga in the West, the first part will demonstrate how yoga can first help any practitioner relaxing his own body. As a mind-body practice, yoga has also the ability to help any individual calming down the fluctuations of his mind. Cultivating inner steadiness will help the people reaching a more spiritual state of mind to become open enough to listen more carefully to the universal wisdom taught by yoga. In the second part, an explanation of the philosophical basis and of the roots of yoga will help one to understand how the discipline furthers the art of oneness. The last part will display examples of how yoga is particularly relevant for addressing modern issues that specific population such as refugees, soldiers, and prisoners are facing.

INTRODUCTION

Promoting peace is such an ambitious project that it can be difficult to know where to start but yoga can give some clues to achieve this goal if individuals are ready to listen to its true and universal principles.

Yoga offers indeed an original way of approaching peace-building issues: before trying to reach a ceasefire with others, the discipline contends that the first step is to be at peace with oneself. This is not an egoistic approach but a way of cultivating the right posture of the mind, therefore to be more open towards each other and ready to cope with contradictory feelings within each individual and within the society, which is consistent with the requirements for peacebuilding.

“Inner peace is necessary for political peace and justice because one cannot blindly go into action without understanding the social, cultural and political dimensions in which one experiences the world” (Wiggins, 2011).

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As for building peace, yoga is creating the conditions for unification in a holistic manner. By promoting the unification of the body and the mind, yoga aims to help individuals to connect to their true selves and to find the harmony of the self.

The Interpeace organization (<http://www.interpeace.org>) describes peacebuilding as “a process of strengthening a society’s capacity to manage conflict in non-violent ways”. Peacebuilding is about trust “between individuals and between groups in a society” and requires deep and long term transformations. Starting a yoga practice also means to embark in a long- term inner journey hoping for some transformations towards Samadhi, the highest state of awareness and calmness of the mind; with the hope feelings of gratitude, compassion and connectedness with other beings will finally emerge.

As the time framework for building inner and social peace is very similar, it is consequently accurate to consider yoga has a relevant tool for peacebuilding worldwide.

Considering also the fact this mind-body practice is nowadays largely globalized and that more and more people are taking to the mat, it is worthwhile considering its potential benefits of pacification.

This chapter does not have the ambition of offering a comprehensive list of yoga benefits and of its roots. From a modern perspective, this chapter is an overview with selected references easily understandable to show that yoga in its pure essence is first and foremost a universal science of the mind, a mind-body practice, and a wisdom whose purpose is to make everyone aware of their universal and natural peaceful state of mind and thus their natural connection to other.

In the process of peacebuilding where there is a need to deal and heal injuries of past conflicts; yoga, as a holistic process promoting inner peace through release of physical and mental tensions, offers an original way of approaching peacebuilding issues.

BACKGROUND: YOGA IN THE MODERN WORLD: FROM PHYSICAL PURPOSE TO SPIRITUAL RELIEF

On December 11, 2014, the United Nations (UN) proclaimed June 21 International Yoga Day (UN, 2015, resolution 69/131). The purpose in doing so was to raise awareness worldwide of the many benefits of this ancient Indian discipline for the health of the body and the mind by bringing more physical flexibility and internal steadiness but also to recognize its universal appeal.

The media have broadcasted images of 11,000 people gathering in Times Square in New York to practise yoga together on International Yoga Day.

Yoga has crossed ages and continents to become mainstream also in the West, especially since the end of the 20th century. This is thus a well-deserved public recognition.

Specifying the intention of the world organization, UN General Secretary, Ban Ki-Moon explained that yoga has the capacity of balancing “body and soul, physical health and mental well-being,” and promoting “harmony among people, between ourselves and the natural world” (June 21, 2016).

An answer on how is this possible can be found in Rishikesh, one of the spiritual centres and cradles of yoga, in India. Every year since 1989, the city hosts the International Yoga Festival. The event is famous and well respected not only in India, but also worldwide, as people and scholars from around the world converge there to practice and share their thoughts about yoga in our modern world.

At the beginning of the 2017 festival, the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi (“Yoga shows the way to lasting peace: PM Modi”, 2017), who is also a yoga practitioner, gave a very interesting address: “Today, when the world battles challenges posed by terrorism and climate change, yoga has become

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