



Yoga's Gifts to the Contemporary Western World

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IT IS NO MISTAKE that Swami Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga*, his commentary on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, along with his related raja yoga classes, were presented in London and the US, as they comprise one of the Vedanta movement's greatest gifts to the contemporary Western world.

Yoga psychology, the yoga system's study of the science of the mind, is one of the most popular and practical approaches to wellness and to Eastern spirituality in the West today. Yoga's current inroads into the fabric of the US society through yoga studios, integrative medical wellness centers, and psychologists' therapeutic techniques reveal not only the depth of contemporary American interest in yoga psychology, but also point to the need for even further innovations. As yoga practitioners deepen

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their spiritual lives and understanding of yoga psychology, more sophisticated and previously unimagined clinical experiments will be devised to inform and advance the healthcare industries' integrative wellness treatments.

With a growing hatha yoga industry in the US that reported 20.4 million US practitioners in 2012 alone,¹ a rising number of yoga enthusiasts acknowledge marked physical, mental, emotional, and even spiritual benefits received from their practice. Clinical studies at the Integrative Medicine Center of the top-ranked MD Anderson Cancer Center, in Houston, Texas, show that patients suffering pre- and post-radiotherapy sleep, depression, and cognitive disturbances benefited significantly from yoga techniques.² Furthermore, today a growing number of psychotherapists engage their clients in some kind of mindfulness-based meditation practice as a stress-reduction, centring, or depression relapse

prevention technique.³ Consequently—whether interested in spirituality, yoga, integrative approaches to medicine, health, or mental wellness—many Westerners, find their way to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* to deepen their understanding. Here sincere seekers can find a clear, systematic approach to entering the laboratory of the mind to study, master, and transcend the mind.

In *Raja Yoga* Swamiji teaches an unprecedented, multi-disciplined approach to the *Yoga Sutra* by introducing the yoga philosophy's paradigm of the mind alongside the tantric school's kundalini system of the seven chakras and hatha yoga's science of pranayama, references of which can also be found in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*.⁴ By doing so, the reader receives a holistic view of our psycho-physical being—its mind-body connection—how all the functions and powers of the body, mind, and senses are manifestations of the force of prana. Hence, our one life-force—operating as vital energy, nerve currents, and thought-waves—can through yoga be collectively purified and channelled to operate in synchrony as a gigantic battery of will, capable of unleashing the latent superconscious power within us all. Swamiji explains:

We have to get hold of that which is setting the whole engine in motion. That is the Prana, the most obvious manifestation of which is the breath. Then, along with the breath, we shall slowly enter the body, which will enable us to find out about the subtle forces, the nerve currents that are moving all over the body. As soon as we perceive and learn to feel them, we shall begin to get control over them, and over the body. The mind is also set in motion by these different nerve currents, so at last we shall reach the state of perfect control over the body and the mind, making both our servants. Knowledge is power. We have to get this power.⁵

Swamiji further expands our holistic perspective by presenting yoga's cosmic-centred

vision that the force within our psycho-physical being is connected with the force pervading the entire universe:

In an ocean there are huge waves, like mountains, then smaller waves, and still smaller, down to little bubbles, but back of all these is the infinite ocean. The bubble is connected with the infinite ocean at one end, and the huge wave at the other end. So, one may be a gigantic man, and another a little bubble, but each is connected with that infinite ocean of energy, which is the common birthright of every animal that exists. Wherever there is life, the storehouse of infinite energy is behind it (1.156).

Yoga's system of philosophy that correlates the spiritual heart of each being with the innermost plane of a cosmic ocean of space, vibrating with prana at the highest degree of spiritual vibration, and available to all, resonates with a growing holistic Western worldview of the web of life in a material-cum-spiritual world. This perspective embraces an acknowledgement of the underlying interconnectivity of all life forms,⁶ which ultimately leads many beyond to Vedanta's expansive awareness of the principle of unity in diversity and oneness, one consciousness pervading all.

Furthermore, yoga's path to Self-realisation is experimental and experiential that attracts freedom-loving Americans, many of whom or whose parents had left their dogma-bound, no-questions-asked family religion during the Great Church Exodus of the 1960s and 70s.⁷

Another gift from Swamiji's *Raja Yoga* and related talks and classes are a number of meditations that he shared with his Western students. To this day US audiences appreciate these guided meditations, usually given at Vedanta centres or informal satsangs. However, they are also shared in other public venues: for example, in the last few years at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School's 'Religion and Medicine' course in Dallas, Texas. As an introduction to Hinduism, the

university medical students were presented with an experiential practice to determine 'Who am I?' For the most part, the students accepted the Yoga-Vedanta premise that 'I am not the body' when led down a natural line of inquiry such as:

'Does your I-consciousness remain from childhood to adulthood?'

'Yes.'

'Does it remain if you lose a limb or have an organ transplant?'

'Yes.'

But when the students were presented with the next yoga-Vedanta premise, 'I am not the mind', they balked, that is, until they participated in Swamiji's 'Calming the Lake of the Mind' meditation, based on the ancient Sankhya, yoga, and Vedanta mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness Meditation: Calming the Lake of the Mind

Picture the mind as a calm lake stretched before you ... [See] the thoughts that come and go as bubbles rising and breaking on its surface. Make no effort to control the thoughts, but watch them and follow them in imagination as they float away. ... Hold to the idea, 'I am not the mind, I see that I am thinking, I am watching my mind act.'⁸

Hold fast to the idea, 'I am the witness watching my mind drifting. The mind is not I.' ... see it ... as ... a thing entirely apart from yourself. Identify yourself with God, never with matter or with the mind (8.47).

From this five- or ten-minute exercise, some of the medical students discovered and discerned for themselves several outcomes as follows.

First, **this mindfulness meditation is somehow calming and centring**; the meditator is not whisked away by every thought. Correspondingly, one's breathing becomes slower and steadier, and, in the process, the meditator gains a certain sense of detachment and self-mastery—a feeling of well-being that can be palpably felt.

Second, the meditator cannot help but notice that during the meditation there are **two minds**, as it were, operating: the observer mind and the observed mind.

Third, when the medical students were faced with the axiomatic scientific fact that anything that can be observed is matter and is, therefore, impermanent, they had to agree. When it then followed that for that reason in the Eastern paradigm of the mind, mind is considered subtle matter, the students remained silent and thoughtful.

A fourth outcome of the mindfulness practice is that by perceiving the mind, the meditator can rationally conclude that if I *can* and *do* perceive the mind, it necessarily follows: I *have* a mind, but I *am not* the mind. The medical students could not disagree with this logic. They listened closely when informed that dedicated aspirants can deepen their meditation practice to a point wherein they begin to intuit firsthand that the mind distorts the reflection of the Purusha, as a lake ruffled by the wind distorts the image of the sun.⁹

A fifth outcome occurs over time when this mindfulness practice is performed even briefly before one's regular meditation; then a **practitioner begins to observe the normally hidden, subconscious thoughts** and emotions within the mind that are actually fuelling one's actions.

At that point in spiritual life, we become aware of some of the samskaras or tendencies, that have up until then lurked within and manipulated us beneath the surface of our conscious mind. With the help of yoga disciplines, we are then able to begin applying and re-applying counter thoughts¹⁰ to attenuate these negative forces that block the spiritual current within us and, in that way, begin to make marked progress in our spiritual lives.

Sixth, when the daily habit of calming the lake of the mind becomes second nature, we find that we can tune in to the mind throughout the

day and calm it whenever necessary with the appropriate spiritual antidotes.

Over time we may even ask ourselves *who* is the mind's seer?—and come to the realisation that our mindfulness meditation intuitively but can only *point* to the witness-consciousness itself. Yoga, from the Vedantic standpoint, means complete union; therefore, the subject and the object no longer exist.

Eastern Paradigm of the Mind

Another gift of *Raja Yoga* is the Eastern paradigm of the mind. It is such a sophisticated depiction of the mind that after studying it, an aspirant can begin to label, contextualise, and thereby objectify and understand with detachment her or his mental *kleshas*, afflictions, and then practise yoga remedies to systematically master them.

The *Yoga Sutra* gives us an invaluable map of the mind. The mind is like a lake. The Purusha or Self, is the lake bottom and the lake itself is the *chitta*, mind-stuff, composed of *manas*, recording faculty; *buddhi*, discerning faculty; and *aham-kara*, egoism. Like a cauldron of water, the *chitta* is colourless, odourless, and without shape; but it takes on the form of thoughts and perceptions and other activities that arise within it. Any sense perception, thought, emotion, or memory arises as a *vritti*, thought wave; literally, 'whirlpool', in our *chitta*. And hundreds of such *vrittis*, or movements, occur within our *chitta* during the waking state. They stir its surface waters, muddy it, and send out ripples that are electrically charged, which refract and reflect the non-Self and conceal the lake bottom, which is the Self. And these *vrittis* are stored in a subtle form in the *chitta* as memory.

The yoga science of mind clearly demonstrates how any thought process creates an opportunity or tendency, for us to repeat it. This tendency is called a *samskara*. Samskaras form habits, which create an individual's character. For example, if

someone insults us we naturally become angry. From the yoga perspective, that reaction is like a pebble, as it were, dropped into the lake of our mind, the *chitta*. And each time we remember that insult, its memory reawakens our anger and another pebble is dropped into the lake. If we remember such an incident thirty times a day over twenty-five years' time, imagine the pebble deposit; it becomes a huge pebble embankment!

With this comprehensive paradigm of the mind and its inner workings, we who may harbour such resentments can begin to realise why it takes so little to trigger our anger. From the beginning we had allowed a single incident—one thought—to create the tendency of anger that impelled us to repeat that anger *vritti* until it eventually became a habit; and that habit eventually formed our character: What happened? We then became known as an 'angry person'. In this way, *Raja Yoga* shows us step-by-step how we become a victim of our senses.

When we first understand the mental process, we can then develop the will to attenuate our negative tendencies with yoga techniques—a will that can be strengthened by a further understanding of yoga-Vedanta epistemology.

The Nature of Perception

Yoga's metaphysical understanding of perception is yet another gift to the world. According to yoga-Vedanta when we perceive a sense object, the *chitta* pours out to the object through the two orifices of our eyes and totally encompasses it. That perception responds back to the mind as light and vision. Our sense organ carries this to the optic nerve in the brain centre, and a visual form reposes in the brain. In other words, our mind-stuff, the *chitta*, takes the form of the object of our vision; we *be* and *become* that perception. The *chitta*, like water, encompasses what is perceived and ingested by the five senses.

It follows that what we *think*, we *become*. Our thought holds an object in the *chitta*. And the more we think of that object, the more we saturate our self with the idea of that object. Just as water melts whatever is solvent such as sugar, while retaining the taste of sugar, so also the *chitta* retains the 'aftertaste' or subtle quality of any sense object ingested through the senses and absorbed into the 'waters' of the mind. In this way, the sense object saturates the *chitta*.

Yoga tells us that if that is the source of our bondage, why not take advantage of that methodology? Why not try to find an object that most closely resembles or accurately symbolises our true original nature, concentrate on that object, and slowly *be* and *become* that? Why not make that our habit, by asserting our will and gathering the forces of the mind within?

Why not allow only those *vrittis* to form in the mind that are logical, rational, and spiritually elevating? Then systematically plant those ideas in the mind and become involved with those ideas to such an extent that all other *vrittis* diminish. When only those remain that are connected with our true original nature, we will lose our sense of time and space. Why? Because the concept of time exists with change. Next, we lose our concept of space, because our *vrittis* are limited

and so also change itself is limited. When only one *vritti* remains, 'Thou, O Lord', we lose the sense of 'I' and 'mine'. Only our heart's beloved remains, and we *be* and *become* our chosen ideal.

By entering the laboratory of mind, we watch and understand the nature of the mind. With this practice comes knowledge and power. Then by skilfully gathering the powers of the mind, with the help of the higher mind we use the mind to control, master, and ultimately transcend the mind.

Yoga Practices, Psychotherapy, and Neuroscience

Contemporary psychotherapists have much to gain by informing their psychological counselling with the yoga paradigm of the mind, its mindfulness meditations, and certain yoga practices that help master negative tendencies of the mind. To briefly recap, through mindfulness meditations such as Swamiji's calming the lake of the mind, a meditator uses the higher mind as an instrument to watch the lower mind. In that way, the practitioner stops identifying with the lower mind, knowing 'I am not the mind', and can then gain mastery over the lower mind with certain yoga techniques culled from Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*.

Mindfulness practices have been successively



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used in experiments with patients suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).¹¹ In one experiment Jeffrey Schwartz and his colleagues at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) instructed patients obsessed by compulsive thoughts to think: ‘My brain is generating another obsessive thought. Don’t I know it is just some garbage thrown up by a faulty circuit?’ Furthermore, the array of psychotherapeutic techniques Schwartz’s team used to help detach their patients from their thoughts unmistakably resembles yoga practices, such as: (1) ‘Relabelling’; (2) ‘Reattributing’, whereby the patients tell themselves ‘It’s not me—it’s my OCD’, which from the yoga perspective would be self-talk such as: ‘I *have* a mind, but I am *not* the mind’; (3) ‘Refocusing’, which a yoga practitioner would call mindful counter-thoughts; and (4) ‘Revaluing’, which is also a recognisable internal yoga practice of ‘being the witness’, but termed in psychotherapeutic language as becoming an ‘impartial spectator’.

In Schwartz’s experiment, ‘After 10 weeks of mindfulness-based therapy, 12 out of 18 patients improved significantly. Before-and-after brain scans showed that activity in the orbital frontal cortex, the core of the OCD circuit, had fallen dramatically and in exactly the way that drugs effective against OCD affect the brain. Schwartz called it “self-directed neuroplasticity”.’¹²

We also see how other experimental results with cognitive psychology techniques, consciously or unconsciously aligned with ancient yoga practices and supported by neuroscience, show how the mind can change the brain. Helen Mayberg conducted a University of Toronto experiment on the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) compared with various antidepressant medicines. The research findings were interesting: ‘CBT muted overactivity in the frontal cortex, the seat of reasoning, logic and higher thought as well as of endless rumination about

that disastrous date. Paroxetine, by contrast, raised activity there. On the other hand, CBT raised activity in the hippocampus of the limbic system, the brain’s emotion center. Paroxetine lowered activity there. As Toronto’s Helen Mayberg explains, “Cognitive therapy targets the cortex, the thinking brain, reshaping how you process information and changing your thinking pattern. It decreases rumination, and trains the brain to adopt different thinking circuits” (ibid.). The overall results demonstrated that ‘While the two treatments worked in different ways, they had a similar net effect.’¹³ According to Mayberg: ‘Cognitive therapy targets the cortex, the thinking brain, reshaping how you process information and changing your thinking pattern. It decreases rumination, and trains the brain to adopt different thinking circuits.’¹⁴ As with Schwartz’s OCD patients, thinking had changed a pattern of activity—in this case, a pattern associated with depression in the brain.

When we analyse such data, we cannot help but deduce the psychologically therapeutic effects of raja yoga. Let’s explore more deeply the connection between cognitive behaviour therapy and yoga techniques, and their outcomes. The cognitive behaviour therapy technique of ‘reframing’ is one of the most frequently used methods in modern psychotherapy, as it provides a new, healthier frame of reference through which clients can then view themselves in the context of their world, their family, friends, and co-workers.¹⁵

The psychologist first identifies the client’s frame of reference and world view. For example, the frame of reference for a person with low self-esteem could be a recurring underlying thought, such as ‘I’m worthless’. The psychologist then selects the client’s specific behaviours that support such low self-esteem. For example, the client may have an alcoholic addiction, which can cause a cascading syndrome of lying, stealing, erratic behaviours, and drunken driving.

Third, the psychologist then collects background material that provides new frames to fit the client's problem, such as, in this example, contemporary medical research on alcoholism that identifies alcoholism as a disease, rather than a character defect, along with literature on the Twelve-step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous that provides the path to recovery from this illness. Together, the research and recovery program help to 'reframe' the client's acceptance of her or his alcoholism by constructively 'relabeling' it as a disease—a disease, which thus has a treatment and a cure.

Fourth, the psychologist introduces the 'reframe,' and the client begins to reframe her or his own malady with such self-talk as, 'I am not my disease. I *have* a disease. And there is a cure.' In therapy sessions, the therapist begins to 'reattribute' the client's subsequent negative thoughts and actions that stem from the core problem: the patient's alcoholism.

Yoga scriptures, such as the Bhagavadgita, masterfully reframe human addiction, by systematically identifying how the generic human mind works. In the Gita, Sri Krishna explains to his disciple Arjuna:

Thinking about sense-objects
Will attach you to sense-objects;
Grow attached, and you become addicted;
Thwart your addiction, it turns to anger.
Be angry and you confuse your mind;
Confuse your mind,
you forget the lesson of experience;
Forget experience, you lose discrimination.
Lose discrimination,
and you miss life's only purpose.¹⁶

For example, suppose we are out walking and spot an expensive watch in a shop window. Naturally we admire and appreciate the precision of such a fine piece of jewellery. That appreciation matures into the desire to possess it. Next our mind begins to calculate *how* to possess it,

based on a stockpile of past habits, *samskaras*. One person might think: 'Let me take out my savings to pay for it.' Another might think: 'Let me borrow some money from a friend.' And yet another may try to devise a scam in order to buy it. All the while, we are saturating our self with desire, filling the *chitta* with the craving to call the watch 'my own'. We thus become infatuated and enslaved by the watch.

The first casualty is when rationality is thrown out the window—when my *chitta* belongs to the object of my desire. Then no more am I the master of myself; I have mortgaged myself to the *vritti*: 'I *must* have the watch. No, I'm *entitled* to it!' The object has taken total control of my being. And discrimination has vanished.

What is the solution? Yoga psychology tells us to ignore such thoughts. Don't pay attention; don't show interest. Cognitive behaviour therapy would call this 'refocusing'. For example, suppose we are walking down the street, and out of the corner of our eye we see a stray cat on the sidewalk. If we keep walking, the cat sits still and watches us. But as soon as we turn and look at the cat, the cat begins to follow us. Desires are like that; if we ignore them, they diminish and eventually disappear; but if we pay attention or show interest, they hook themselves to our mind.

Once Matt, a young man in his early thirties who happened to suffer from schizophrenia, confided that he had a problem with self-cutting. I asked him why, and he explained that there was a voice in his head, which he called 'Lucy', who repeatedly advised him to do such self-hurting behaviours. Alarmed, I suggested to his parents that they find a good therapist for Matt—preferably one who was established in one of the dharma traditions, Hinduism or Buddhism—which they thankfully did. After a year, Matt came to visit me, and I asked him about his problem of self-cutting.

'I no longer do that,' he said.
 'That's wonderful!' I replied, 'but how did that change happen?'
 'I don't hear Lucy's voice anymore.'
 'Really? Why not?'
 'My psychiatrist told me to pay no attention to her. So, I stopped listening, and she disappeared.'

I was flabbergasted. When we no longer engage the lower mind by identifying with it, we can stop our compulsive, involuntary thoughts.¹⁷ If a schizophrenic can do this, why can't we? Yoga psychology's methodology is a priceless gift for all.

Deepening Yoga's Inroads into the West

For those practitioners, who understand the benefits of yoga—its sophisticated paradigm of the mind, mindfulness meditation practices, yoga techniques to gain mastery of the mind, and systematic stages of concentration leading to meditation, and ultimately the attainment of Self-realisation—there are many opportunities to develop new or deepen yoga's existing inroads into Western society to improve its physical, emotional, and mental healthcare system and deepen inquiring seekers' spiritual well-being.

For example, more clinical studies using rehabilitative yoga techniques can be performed in the field of medicine. Dr Alejandro Chaoul, at the Department of Palliative, Rehabilitation, and Integrative Medicine at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Centre, recently shared a remarkable discovery that shows profound possibilities in the field of yoga. During a visiting lecture at Texas Christian University, in March 2018, he mentioned that recovering women cancer patients, who had suffered marked cognitive loss from radiation treatment, volunteered for a clinical study wherein they were asked to participate in Tibetan chanting sessions using three

powerful Tibetan seed mantras, two of which were also the familiar Hindu seed words 'Om' and 'Hum'. The results of the research determined a marked increase in the patients' cognitive ability as opposed to those women who did not participate in the study.¹⁸

More clinical studies gauging the therapeutic effects of Sanskrit mantras *could* and *should* take place. However, this would entail the imagination, innovation, and service-mindedness of medical doctors who are yoga-Vedantins and, at the same time, willing to pursue such a worthwhile cause.

The second example has already gained a head start. Because hatha yoga is such a natural introduction to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* and Swamiji's *Raja Yoga*, various Vedanta centres in the West have allocated a room for traditionally trained yoga instructors to present their daily or weekly classes. However, at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Center in Gretz, France, when a number of years ago rotating hatha yoga instructors were first allowed to hold classes at the centre, Swami Veetamohananda stipulated that each instructor must also present a five- or ten-minute talk on one of the *Yoga Sutra's yamas* or *niyamas*, thus injecting the yoga system of philosophy into the Vedanta centre's hatha yoga class initiative.

Then in an all-day program on International Day of Yoga, in June 2016, the Vedanta centre invited about forty yoga instructors from various yoga traditions to guide 1,000 attendees in yogasana sessions at numerous venues on the twenty-acre ashrama property. It was such a success, that the following year, on Yoga International Day, Swami Veetamohananda collaborated with UNESCO to deepen the content of the yoga instructors' asana sessions by incorporating yoga-Vedanta elements into two specific types of sessions which were then exclusively presented: one, Vedic *kriya*-yoga and the other, yoga *nidra*.

For the Vedic *kriya*-yoga sessions,

Veetamohananda gave the hatha yoga instructors specific topic headings, centred around one of the three aspects of *sat-chit-ananda*. For example, some *kriya*-yoga sessions were entitled: 'Sat: the courage to be'; 'Chit: awakening the *buddhi*'; or 'Ananda: love incarnate', and so on. After each yoga instructor chose her or his preferred topic(s) for their session(s), the instructors' tasks were then to choreograph each of their *yogasana* sessions in a way that would help awaken within the practitioners a meditative insight into the meaning of the topic heading itself.

Each of the Vedic *kriya*-yoga sessions were first introduced with a fifteen-minute *nyasa*, purification of the body with Sanskrit mantras; followed by a guided meditation 'on the luminous light, as in radiating coals, within the heart'; and, finally, an overall purification of the body, prana, mind, sense organs, five sheaths, Atman, and so on, with Sanskrit mantras chanted from the *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad*.

The yoga teachers then led their students through their choreographed *asana* sessions of *sat*, *chit*, or *ananda*. At the end of the sessions, a research questionnaire was handed out to all attendees, and the results were tallied at the end of the day's program and presented before Veetamohananda, the Mayor of Gretz, the Ambassador to UNESCO, and the attendees in the all-day program.

The yoga *nidra* sessions, also created by Veetamohananda, were designed to specifically instil within the instructor and practitioner the original meaning of yoga *nidra*—not the misconstrued deep state of relaxation which many Western yoga instructors teach. In the yoga system, yoga *nidra* is a state of *savikalpa samadhi*;¹⁹ whereas in Vedānta, yoga *nidra* is a state of witnessing the three states of consciousness. As Swami Shridharananda, the head of the Vedānta Centre of Sydney, explained: 'Once as a young monk, Swami Hiranmayananda went

to offer pranam to Swami Vijnanananda in his room at Belur Math. He greeted Vijnanananda: "Maharaj, how did you sleep?" Vijnanananda responded: "Do you know how I sleep? I quiet the mind and then withdraw my prana into the heart and then focus on the infinity of the Atman and dissolve into that." "Oh", replied the young monk, "We don't have to go to so much trouble!"²⁰

Swami Turiyananda also practised entering deep sleep knowingly, a state of *samadhi* wherein the dreamless state is experienced as an awareness of primordial ignorance. When one remains conscious between the waking and sleep states, ignorance is destroyed. However, having witnessed the three states of consciousness, Turiyananda lost the capacity to sleep and eventually had to stop his yoga *nidra* practice.²¹

Based on the authentic yoga and Vedānta interpretations of yoga *nidra*, Veetamohananda designed the entire one-hour yoga *nidra* session, given on the International Day of Yoga, to include yoga elements that would help refer the practitioner to yoga *nidra*'s original meaning—an expansive superconscious state. First the meditation began with a chanting of the Gayatri mantra; followed by a meditation on pure consciousness as a vibratory, luminous presence—the background canvas of infinite space; followed by a meditation on prana, as a force of pure energy that is breathed in and expelled as pure love in order for the practitioner to feel an expansive sense of peace and harmony within and without; next was performed a *nyasa* of the hands and body, accompanied by sacred *bijas*, seed mantras; followed by the *bhūta śuddhi*, an impersonal meditation within the yoga tradition, accompanied by the appropriate mantras chanted aloud; and finally, in the *śavasana* posture, the practitioner was then led in a guided meditation on the symbology of the *aśvattha*, fig tree, the inverted tree of life—its divine

symbology poetically expanded to embrace and encompass the yoga practitioner:

Visualise the cosmic tree's leaves,
which vibrate universal life
emanating from its roots above.

The life force is pure love which manifests itself as joy and happiness.

Feel the vibration of joy and happiness everywhere in the universe and within yourself.

Each cell and molecule of your being is the expression of this infinite joy and happiness. ...

Step by step, each meditator was then guided to raise her or his consciousness, using the *ashvattha* tree's symbology:

By elevating your consciousness,
your connection to pure consciousness
is amplified; and light emanates from
the top roots, withdrawing little by little from
the bottom branches.

By the elevation of consciousness comes detachment; consciousness withdraws little by little from the world below to dedicate itself to the contemplation of the infinite Source of life.

By the elevation of consciousness,
the 'desire' branches gradually lose
their intensity and fall away. ...

Through the power of guided meditations and by injecting a yoga-Vedanta narrative into the yoga *nidra* and Vedic *kriya*-yoga asana sessions, the practitioners—many of whom were newcomers to Vedanta—discovered that they received a uniquely elevated experience from their yoga sessions, which they then candidly shared through the UNESCO research questionnaire and which inspired a large number of them to deepen their individual spiritual practices.

Because of its success at the Vedanta centre in Gretz, in June 2018, Veetamohananda

introduced the *theyogasana* program at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas, in Dallas, Texas, USA—but this time as a two-day holistic yoga workshop with two Vedic *kriya*-yoga asana sessions and one yoga *nidra* session, interspersed with nine talks on yoga-Vedanta, followed by question-and-answer sessions, and altogether four nondual guided meditations.

The workshop audience, two-thirds of which were Vedantins and one-third newcomers, responded with dedicated concentration to the workshop talks and asana sessions. Many expressed a desire for another such workshop in the future, a newfound desire to conduct their life more responsibly, and a desire to deepen their own spiritual practice.

In the research questionnaire, a newcomer shared: 'I felt a stronger connection to others [by focusing on] the infinite; [I felt] more love, less feeling towards others as [being] strange or foreign.' Other practitioners shared that they felt a sense of 'centring', 'connectedness', 'expansion', 'purification', 'strength', 'loving kindness', even 'joy'. One felt 'an increased presence of the essence of the universal and universal unity'.

All three of the yoga instructors were classically trained, but only one was a Vedantin; another was a Buddhist, though a student of the *Yoga Sutra*, and the third showed an avid beginner's interest in yoga-Vedanta by studying the *Yoga Sutra* and listening to online yoga-Vedanta lectures before and after the workshop. Undoubtedly, these yoga instructors will use what they gained from the holistic yoga workshop to teach their present and future yoga students in the years to come.

Through such initiatives, experienced teachers or long-time lay Vedantins can use their knowledge and spiritual imaginations to create other successful innovative experiments and effective ways for yoga techniques to enhance our physical,

mental, and spiritual health or our profession, hobby, or talent. When Americans then adopt or begin to engage with such innovations, gifted from another religious tradition such as yoga, which improve their quality of life, they become enriched in ways that can enhance and broaden the way they look at themselves and the world. That is how any of us change our thoughts, our way of thinking, and even our way of life. Barriers are lowered between the West and the East and, in the process, non-Hindus discover for themselves the beauty and depth of an ancient spiritual tradition such as yoga. 

Notes and References

1. See 'New Study Finds More Than 20 Million Yogis in U.S.', *Yoga Journal*, 5 December 2012 <<https://www.yogajournal.com/blog/new-study-finds-20-million-yogis-u-s>> accessed 28 November 2018.
2. See Chelsea G Ratcliff, et al, 'Examining Mediators and Moderators of Yoga for Women with Breast Cancer Undergoing Radiotherapy', *Integrative Cancer Therapies*, 15/3 (September 2016), 250–62 <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1534735415624141>> accessed 28 November 2018.
3. Yoga psychology workshop on 'Tools for Life'. Talk by Yoga Vedantin psychotherapist Brad Brager on 'Mindfulness as a Therapeutic Tool', delivered at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas, 16 November 2013.
4. See Patanjali, *Yoga Sutra*, 2.49–51.
5. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 1.144.
6. See Sandy Olliges, 'Deep Ecology and Evolution of Consciousness: Part 1 of 5—Deep ecology's holistic view promotes healing of the planet', *Psychology Today*, 30 May 2013 <<https://tinyurl.com/y8oswxr4>> accessed 28 November 2018; and 'Indigenous Peoples Worldviews vs Western Worldviews', *Working Effectively with Indigenous Peoples*, 26 January 2016 <<https://tinyurl.com/y7cuzo8k>> accessed 28 November 2018.
7. During the 1960s and 70s, sixty to seventy per cent of Christians and Jews in the US left their churches and synagogues.
8. *Complete Works*, 8.48.
9. From the yoga philosophy perspective, the mind is considered other than the Purusha, therefore, the mind contains and distorts a reflection of the Purusha. Though most Vedantins would agree with yogis that the mind distorts the reflection of the Atman or Purusha, from a higher standpoint, an Advaitin could say that the mind is a distorted reflection of the Atman. As Sri Ramakrishna said: 'The pure mind [Atman] and pure intellect [*buddhi*] are one and the same. God is known by the pure mind.' (M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 726.)
10. See *Yoga Sutra*, 2.33.
11. See Jeffrey M Schwartz and Rebecca Gladding, *You Are Not Your Brain* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011).
12. Sharon Begley, 'The Brain: How the Brain Rewires Itself', *Time*, 19 January 2007 <<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1580438-3,00.html>> accessed 28 November 2018.
13. S Dingfelder, 'CBT may stabilize over-activity in higher-order brain areas', *Monitor on Psychology*, 35/4 (April 2004), 11.
14. 'The Brain: How the Brain Rewires Itself'.
15. See Wayne Perry, *Basic Counseling Techniques: A Beginning Therapist's Toolkit* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2008), 61.
16. *The Song of God: Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (New York: Mentor, 1958), 42.
17. See Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*, (Novato: Namaste, 2004), 16.
18. See 'Examining Mediators and Moderators of Yoga for Women with Breast Cancer Undergoing Radiotherapy'.
19. See *The Life of Swami Adbutananda as We Saw Him*, trans. Swami Satswarupananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2011), 209.
20. Swami Sridharananda's private reminiscences given to Pravrajika Brahmaprana, in Dallas, Texas, USA, October 2009.
21. Reminiscences of Swami Prabhavananda at the Sarada Convent, Santa Barbara, California in the early 1970s.