

Vanderbilt Divinity School

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Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*: A Path to Wholeness

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Introduction

I arrived at Vanderbilt Divinity School (VDS) from Los Angeles in August 2010 a newly minted yoga teacher. I had practiced yoga since 1999 and decided to pursue teaching credentials in tandem with the decision to become a chaplain. I recognized a synthesis between pastoral care and yoga, and sought to forge a career path that would allow me to combine yoga, spirituality and mindfulness.

Doing so was easy to imagine in Los Angeles, with its abundance of yoga studios and openness to and affinity for Eastern religion and spirituality.¹ When I began at VDS in Nashville, America's city of churches, I encountered a different climate. The Divinity School was very welcoming of the opportunity to host a yoga class.² However, as I began teaching, I found that the community was less receptive to experiencing what were perceived as Hindu aspects of yoga in class, such as hearing the Sanskrit names of yoga poses, being greeted with *Namaste*³ and chanting *Om*⁴ – traditional characteristics of any yoga class I had ever attended or taught.

I believe this largely had to do with the fact that for the first time I was teaching a predominantly religious Christian population, most of whom either had no previous exposure to yoga or whose prior encounters were devoid of any true yogic context: aside from the physical postures; their idea of yoga was that it was just another form of exercise or a way to relax. The fundamentals of yoga's spiritual and philosophical roots had not been conveyed to

¹ For the purposes of this paper I will be differentiating "spiritual" from "religious" in the following manner: "spiritual" concerns matters related to the spirit in relationship with divinity from an individualistic and holistic perspective; "religious" concerns the observance of traditions or practices that honor a particular faith or God in an organized fashion.

² The VDS yoga class has been supported since its inception by the Office of Women's Concerns, of which I also was an officer.

³ The Sanskrit word *Namaste* translates to an acknowledgement of the divinity in each of us that literally means, "I bow to you." It is a common greeting in India that has been appropriated to yoga classes.

⁴ *Om*, sometimes spelled *Aum*, is a primordial sound comprised of three Sanskrit letters: aa, au and ma. It is believed to contain every sound within it.

them, and in some cases, had actively been removed from the practice, a situation that increasingly is common in America as yoga's popularity grows and yoga is practiced in a variety of settings outside of traditional yoga studios, including, more commonly, churches.

More, my plans to launch VDS's yoga program coincided with the pronouncement by Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, that a yoga practice was inherently contradictory with faithful Christianity.⁵ Mohler perceived a ripe moment at which to speak, using the opportunity to review one of four books published in 2010 on yoga's cultural impact to decry the practice. His position heightened for many Christians a burgeoning fear about non-Western spiritual practices, reifying what I believe is an incorrect assumption that yoga must equal Hinduism.

To be clear: yoga's roots are located in Hinduism. Yoga is a branch of Hindu philosophy.⁶ But in analyzing the definition of yoga, which means union, and taking a closer look at ancient yogic philosophy, it becomes clear that yoga itself is a syncretic product, thus making the practice of it appropriate for, and compatible with, devotees of other religious traditions. While the modern physical practice of yoga draws upon the philosophical ideas of self-improvement and spirituality found in the classical yogic texts of ancient days, it does not seek to make Hindus out of adherents, in part because yoga itself has been influenced by many religions and interpretations. One does not become a Hindu by contorting oneself on a yoga

⁵ "Yoga is Unchristian, says Baptist Leader," *Christian Century* 127 (2010): 18.

⁶ Yoga is an aspect of *Samkhya*, one of the six Indian orthodox philosophical systems. It is a dualistic philosophy, contending with *prakriti* (nature, or matter) and *purusha* (spirit). Yoga is a practical means for addressing matter and spirit. For purposes of space and scope, I will not discuss classical Indian philosophy in this paper; however, many of the authors listed in my bibliography do address *Samkhya*, most notably Georg Feuerstein, widely considered the foremost modern expert on yoga. Rather, when addressing yoga's philosophy and spirituality, I will be referring to specific texts and ideas that stem from and have been influenced by *Samkhya*, and then make strategic recommendations for how their utilization can help in maintaining yoga's authenticity.

mat and chanting *Om*. Neither would one become a Christian by attending a church service; nor would one become a Muslim by reading from the Qur'an.

Yet yoga is more than a series of physical movements. And as I thought through how to set the tone for the VDS yoga class, I questioned how to successfully incorporate yoga's inherent, authentic spirituality into a yoga class that would be taught outside of a traditional yoga studio environment – a class that was designed to serve a community of diverse, faithful believers in a religious institution of higher learning. This question also has influenced my yoga teaching over the course of my tenure at VDS, which through various associations also has led me to teach yoga in other diverse, faith-based contexts, including the spiritual wellness program of a women's correctional facility and for a faith-based intentional living community.

My experiences as a yoga teacher in these various capacities, and also as a self-identifying Jewish-Buddhist-Humanist, have led me to consider how syncretism can play a role in maintaining the spiritual integrity of yoga while also engendering a classroom environment that is welcoming to students of all faiths.⁷ This led me to re-examine a core text of yoga philosophy, the *Yoga Sūtras*, or aphorisms, of Patañjali, a second century BCE sage. In his ancient words are found prescriptions for living, called the *yamas* and the *niyamas*: moral codes of behavior that foster a life of wholeness that is free of suffering, which are compatible with all major religious beliefs. I believe the *Yoga Sūtras* can provide an ethical framework for behavior and serve as the precepts for the physical practice of yoga. In this project I will argue that use of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* in yoga classes of all kinds can successfully restore an authentic

⁷ For the purposes of this paper I will be defining "syncretic" as the combination of spiritual or religious beliefs, practices or traditions. I will be defining "syncretism" as the relationship that develops in practice through the process of bringing distinct religious traditions, customs and beliefs together.

spirituality to yoga practices in all environments, while allowing practitioners from all backgrounds to draw what they seek from yoga without contradicting the beliefs of their own religious practices and still allowing for an authentic spiritual yogic experience.

In arguing for the inclusion of the *yamas* and *niyamas* in all yoga classes as a response to the way in which yoga has become divorced from its essential, authentic spirituality, I will seek to highlight the ways in which yoga's fuller religious and spiritual meanings have become diluted as its popularity has grown. I will contextualize yoga's development within a discussion of its roots in India among other Dharmic religions and then, more broadly, within the United States.⁸ Then I will take a closer look at Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, the *yamas* and *niyamas*, to demonstrate how yoga is intended to be a holistic practice that facilitates wholeness and integration. I will conclude with strategic recommendations for how to make yoga's philosophy and spirituality more accessible to both teachers and students so that yoga can be taught and experienced as an embodied discipline that enables wellness, presence and awareness which ultimately can alleviate suffering.

I. **Divergent Opinions On Yoga's Religiosity**

When yoga arrived in the United States in the nineteenth century as an esoteric spiritual and physical endeavor that was a pursuit first of the intellectual and then the elite, neither its proponents nor its practitioners could have foreseen that it would become as ubiquitous as it

⁸ Dharmic religions include Hinduism and Buddhism – religions that believe in cycles of rebirth and liberation.

has.⁹ Through two centuries of proliferation and transformation in America, different aspects of yoga alternatively have come to the fore of public consciousness and then receded, leaving us with the fragmented, yet enormous, yoga culture that exists today. Yoga is practiced in gyms and church basements, in public parks and in corporate offices, seemingly making it a universally accessible practice that boasts benefits ranging from weight loss to decreased blood pressure, reduced stress and overall calm. Yet unless yoga is practiced in a yoga studio – and not always even then – very rarely, if at all, is the physical practice of yoga connected to its ancient spiritual and philosophical roots. And when this does happen, an association between Hinduism and yoga often is drawn in such a way as to leave some yoga practitioners worrying that yoga may contradict their religious beliefs, as was seen in the 2010 kerfuffle when Mohler, at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said that yoga was inherently contradictory with faithful Christianity.

The year 2010 was big for yoga. Four books on the origins of modern yoga and its impact on American culture were published and widely reviewed.¹⁰ The Minneapolis-based advocacy group the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) launched its “Take Back Yoga” campaign to combat what it perceived as the cooptation of yoga in the West and to reinforce the link between yoga and Hinduism. And, directly related to the increased media attention on yoga and its cultural impact, Mohler seized an opportunity to make a comment on religious syncretism and his belief in the incompatibility of yoga and Christianity.

⁹ In the interest of space and scope, I will not detail yoga’s journey from East to West in this paper; instead I will focus on themes related to yoga’s assimilation into Western culture that relate to their impact on yoga’s spiritual authenticity.

¹⁰ These books include: Philip Goldberg’s *America Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation How Indian Spirituality Changed the West*; Robert Love’s *The Great Oom: Improbable Birth of Yoga in America*; Mark Singleton’s *Yoga Body: The Origins of the Modern Posture Practice* and Stefanie Syman’s *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America*.

On September 20, 2010, Mohler posted a review of author and editor Stefanie Syman's book *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* on his Web site.¹¹ Syman's account of the history of yoga in the United States traces how yoga has drifted from its essential, spiritual construct to become "a singular thing: a way to stay healthy and relaxed,"¹² that, as she writes in her introduction, reached the apex of assimilation when practiced at the annual White House Easter Egg Roll in 2009.¹³ What greater sign of yoga's integration into mainstream American culture as a benign, universally accessible, healthy phenomenon than to have it given First Lady Michelle Obama's stamp of approval – she who has made the elimination of childhood obesity through exercise and healthy eating the hallmark of her tenure? Yet while this sentiment was overt, the syncretism at play with yoga during the Easter Egg Roll – the ancient Hindu philosophical and physical practice combined with the festivities associated with Christ's resurrection – goes unmentioned by Syman.

However, Mohler notes the syncretism that Syman fails to acknowledge, and balks. He blames America's careless syncretism for what he believes is yoga's dangerous impact:

America has developed its own obsession with syncretism, mixing elements of worldviews with little or no attention to what each mix means. Americans have turned yoga into an exercise ritual, a means of focusing attention, and an avenue to longer life and greater health. Many Americans attempt to deny or minimize the spiritual aspects of yoga...¹⁴

¹¹ Syman's book is one of the four above-mentioned books which came out in 2010 that I used for background research for this project surveying the transmission of yoga from the East to the West. It analyzes yoga's assimilation into popular Western culture.

¹² Stefanie Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴ Albert Mohler, "The Subtle Body –Should Christians Practice Yoga?" *AlbertMohler.com*, accessed September 30, 2012, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/09/20/the-subtle-body-should-christians-practice-yoga/>.

He also accuses the practice of yoga of exposing Christians, who should look only to Christ for spiritual direction, to other means by which they can explore spiritual fulfillment, writing:

When Christians practice yoga, they must either deny the reality of what yoga represents or fail to see the contradictions between their Christian commitments and their embrace of yoga. The contradictions are not few, nor are they peripheral. The bare fact is that yoga is a spiritual discipline by which the adherent is trained to use the body as a vehicle for achieving consciousness of the divine. Christians are called to look to Christ for all that we need and to obey Christ through obeying his Word. We are not called to escape the consciousness of this world by achieving an elevated state of consciousness, but to follow Christ in the way of faithfulness.¹⁵

Syman does concede in her book that yoga's inclusion in the Easter Egg Roll is evidence of yoga having become "one of the first and most successful products of globalization," writing that "it has augured a truly post-Christian, spiritually polyglot country."¹⁶ This is exactly what Mohler takes issue with in his review of Syman's book, using Syman's cultural analysis of yoga's adaptation to argue that in participating in the physical postures of another religion, American Christians are revealing the extent to which their own core spirituality has been eroded. Mohler writes, "To a remarkable degree, the growing acceptance of yoga points to the retreat of biblical Christianity in the culture."¹⁷ With that, he says, Christians are making themselves vulnerable to the "postmodern spiritual confusion" he feels has pervaded churches.¹⁸

Mohler is not wrong when he writes that "yoga is a spiritual discipline by which the adherent is trained to use the body as a vehicle for achieving consciousness of the divine." Yoga's roots are in Hinduism, as well as in the other Dharmic religions of the Indic region; in the ancient texts of Hinduism yoga is indeed described as a path to enlightenment. But practicing

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 9.

¹⁷ Mohler, "The Subtle Body –Should Christians Practice Yoga?"

¹⁸ Ibid.

yoga does not make one a Hindu. Nor are the tenets of yoga, as delineated and codified in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, specifically Hindu. In fact, they are holistic prescriptions for living that integrate well with, are responsibly compatible with, and additive to, all major religions.¹⁹ Thus, in attempting to dissuade Christians from practicing yoga, Mohler reveals his own misunderstanding of what yoga actually is, or can be when practiced in connection with its philosophical roots.

Mohler adds to what I perceive to be the problem with yoga's assimilation by writing: "There is nothing wrong with physical exercise, and yoga positions in themselves are not the main issue."²⁰ If yoga positions in and of themselves are not objectionable, than what is? As Mohler says, "These positions are teaching postures with a spiritual purpose."²¹ I argue in this paper that the issue with the way yoga is taught is that only *sometimes* are yoga positions "teaching postures with a spiritual purpose." This is how we have arrived at a point when yoga has become, as Syman writes, "extracted and distilled... from centuries-old Hindu, Hatha Yoga scriptures," and instead is conveyed as a physical regime devoid of its spiritual roots.²²

The roots of yoga are found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the sacred Hindu text that dates from either the third or fourth century BCE. The *Gita* devotes an entire chapter to yoga, though the yoga described throughout the *Gita* is not a physical practice but a meditative one.²³ The roots

¹⁹ By "responsibly syncretic" I mean in such a manner as to carefully consider whether the theological tenets and practices that are being fused will truly be in concordance with each other, as opposed to what has become known as the "cafeteria style" manner of religion which Syman and others write about by which an adherent selects different aspects of religions that are appealing to the believer without considering how, if at all, they might relate to the core principles of one another.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 4.

²³ Yoga is primarily discussed in the sixth teaching in the *Gita*, which I will further explore in the next section of this paper.

of the physical practice, which are linked to the core of yoga philosophy, come from the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali, a second century BCE sage. The *Yoga Sūtras* focus on spiritual practice for personal betterment and while including discussions of oneness with God and divinity, makes no allegiance to a particular God.

Here in yoga's roots we see a mix of the religious and the secular, and, as I will discuss later in this paper, aspects that are syncretic, but underscoring it all is a philosophy of yoga that is more than just a series of movements that have since been codified by a lineage of teachers, both Indian and Western. In most cases today, that philosophy is ignored, or sacrificed, for an incorrect and explicit assumption that yoga in its pure sense must equal Hinduism, and that it must be all consuming. This confusion has enabled yoga's dilution and cooptation in America today. How else could yoga become an equal pursuit of the spiritualist, the health nut, the churchgoer and the corporate raider?

This distillation of yoga has led to its mass proliferation. Fifteen million Americans are currently practicing yoga, making it a \$6 billion market²⁴ that is growing at a staggering rate: the number of people practicing yoga is increasing by 20 percent annually, and the amount spent on yoga products has risen a staggering 87 percent²⁵ over the past five years to \$27 billion.²⁵ But who comprises this booming culture of yogis, and where are they practicing their yoga? We know that demographically, the majority of people rolling out their yoga mats represent a marketer's dream: they primarily are college-educated women in the prime of their lives (ages 18-54), more than half of whom are earning, on average, a robust salary north of \$87,000 per

²⁴ Suketu Mehta, "Yoga, American Style," *The New York Times*, January 12, 2012, accessed September 15, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/01/12/is-yoga-for-narcissists>.

²⁵ Yoga statistics culled from NAMASTA, YIAS, LiveStrong, and *Yoga Journal*, verified July 2012 and published by Statistic Brain, accessed September 4, 2012, <http://www.statisticbrain.com/yoga-statistics/>.

year.²⁶ And it's known that more than 40 percent of fitness and health clubs offer yoga classes, making gyms as common a place to find people practicing yoga as more traditional yoga studios.²⁷ This is part of the problem: as the variety of venues in which to practice yoga increases, the access to the philosophy and spirituality of yoga decreases.

Much of what drives the attraction to yoga and thus has boosted yoga's appeal is the desire to find some inner peace and quiet in an increasingly noisy, crowded world that arguably disrupts a connection to the divine. This has led to yoga being practiced in non-traditional spaces like churches, giving rise to religiously-inspired styles of yoga that caught the interest of journalists in yoga's homeland. A May 22, 2010 article from the *Hindustan Times* notes that the popularity of yoga has coincided with the de-emphasis of its Hindu roots, leading to the widespread reinterpretation and reappropriation of yoga:

Yoga's association with Hinduism sometimes makes it difficult for people of other religions to accept. Till a few years ago, yoga carried an exotic tag in the US – it was seen as a spiritual activity imported from India. But its growing popularity there these days has ironically led to its decoupling from any hint of Hindu or Indian association.²⁸

The article describes Christian and Jewish yoga practices in the U.S.: The Christian yoga mentioned in the article is depicted as being overly concerned with making yoga compatible with Christianity, while Jewish yoga is shown to be a tool to express Judaism or to bring Jews back to Jewish practices. The tone of the article implies that this is syncretism as sloppy as what Mohler also argues against. The article says:

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Annie Cushman, "The New Yoga," *Yoga Journal*, accessed September 15, 2012, <http://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/281>.

²⁸ Anirudh Bhattacharyya and Dipankar De Sarkar, "The Rise and Rise of Yoga," *Hindustan Times*, May 22, 2010, accessed September 30, 2012, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Entertainment/Wellness/The-rise-and-rise-of-yoga/Article1-546673.aspx>.

But there's more to yoga in the West than its status as an industry. It's become so commonplace in the US and UK, in fact, that new forms are emerging. Forms that transcend the original version that emerged in India, so that for many Indians, they seem as foreign as yoga itself must once have seemed to Westerners.²⁹

The American Hindu community, also mentioned in the *Hindustan Times* article, like Mohler also had been concerned about the increase of yoga practitioners who are not Hindu. In contrast to Mohler, the community sought to heighten awareness around the relationship between yoga and Hinduism in hopes of affirming yoga's Hindu roots rather than to dissuade non-Hindus from practicing yoga. The community similarly seized on what Mohler called a "strange cultural moment," to launch a campaign to "Take Back Yoga," whereby it sought to reinstitute the connection between yoga and Hinduism in the public eye. Under the auspices of the HAF, the "Take Back Yoga" campaign of 2010 brought attention to the fact that as the practice of yoga was becoming more widespread and iterations like Christian yoga were being developed, yoga was being stripped of its authentic Hindu religious and spiritual cultural context. On one end of the spectrum Mohler eschewed yoga for Christians as too Hindu; on the other end, the HAF said yoga was no longer Hindu enough – both sides demonstrating the increased controversy and confusion over yoga in the U.S..

In print and online media campaigns, HAF stressed the relationship between Hinduism and yoga, saying that while one need not be Hindu to practice yoga, to deny the association was to rob yoga of its heritage.³⁰ As HAF board member Sachi Lamb wrote in a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* and to the *Baltimore Sun*:

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Paul Vitello, "Hindu Group Stirs a Debate over Yoga's Soul," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2010, A1, accessed September 15, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/28/nyregion/28yoga.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all.

While yoga practitioners do not need to convert or profess their allegiance to Hinduism, they need to appreciate the fact that yoga is one of Hinduism's greatest contributions to the world, rooted in Hindu philosophy and an essential part of Hindu belief and practice. Yoga is a means of spiritual attainment for any and all seekers, but the Western trend of severing its links to Hindu philosophy is perhaps a signal that it's time for Hindus to take back yoga and insist on credit where credit is due.³¹

In seeking to reconnect yoga to its Hindu roots, both the article in the *Hindustan Times* and content on the HAF Web site mention that the physical practice of yoga – which is what has come to represent the yoga that is being practiced in gyms and in churches – is a mere aspect of the philosophy explicated in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*. Most importantly, the physical practice alone is devoid of the way to wholeness that Patañjali's elucidated and has been taught from yoga teacher to yoga student for millennia. While conservatives of every tradition may argue that it is their path alone that can lead to enlightenment, I believe that Patañjali's prescriptions for living, personal improvement, fulfillment and wholeness are compatible with all major American religions. A return to Patañjali's teachings can imbue yoga practices with an essential spirituality that has in most cases been stripped away, while allowing practitioners of all stripes to remain faithful to their own traditions as they continue their yoga practices, now enjoying the full benefits that yoga has to offer. This is a way to restore yoga's spiritual authenticity and to transcend the dichotomy enacted by Mohler and the HAF about the degree to which yoga is too Hindu, or not Hindu enough, instead returning the focus to yoga's spiritual and philosophical roots.

³¹ Sachi Lamb, "HAF Refutes LA Times' Attempt to Delink Yoga from Hinduism," Hindu America Foundation Web site, April 13, 2010, accessed September 30, 2012, <http://www.hafsite.org/media/pr/ltelatimes>.

II. Modern Yoga's Syncretic Roots

The way in which modern yoga has, in many cases, lost so much of its essential spirituality becomes evident when comparing and contrasting modern yoga with its ancient form, which was explicitly located in a religious textual context. In doing so, what becomes immediately clear is that there is a difference between classical yoga – the yoga of the sacred Hindu texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* and Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* – and the modern posture practice that is purely physical.

In his book, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, yoga scholar Mark Singleton posits that the best way to make sense of this striking departure is to consider the classical yoga of the *Bhagavad Gita* and Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* and the modern yoga that is *āsana*, or posture based, as homonyms that refer to different types of yoga altogether.

Singleton writes:

A more valid and helpful way of thinking ... might be to consider the term *yoga* as it refers to modern postural practice as a *homonym*, and not a synonym, of the 'yoga' associated with the philosophical system of Patañjali, or the 'yoga' that forms an integral component of the Śaiva Tantras, or the 'yoga' of the *Bhagavad Gitā*, and so on. In other words, although the word 'yoga' as it is used popularly today is identical in spelling and pronunciation in each of these instances, it has quite different meanings and origins.³²

This suggestion has merit for categorical and interpretive purposes, and provides a useful framework for determining how modern yoga moved away from its classical, philosophical roots. But Singleton goes on to say that it is not just a historic or cultural *caesura* that resulted in the distinction between classical and modern yoga. Singleton explains how the experience of

³² Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 16-17.

yoga in the West in a way compelled its transformation from a religious and philosophical system to a physical one:

This is not to say that I take popular yoga today to be necessarily divorced and isolated from other, prior traditions of yoga...recent studies have made it amply clear that yoga, in its dissemination in the Western world, has undergone radical transformation in response to differing worldviews, logical predispositions and aspirations of modern audiences.³³

Thus, by virtue of geographic re-location and re-contextualization, yoga became malleable. By taking yoga from the caves of ancient India, or even from the modern *shivir*, or camps, where it is practiced in India today, and bringing it to school gyms, churches, prisons and even more traditional yoga studios, yoga becomes open to, and changed by, the influence of its environment, its teachers and practitioners.

Even though the classical texts are philosophical and spiritual, they barely refer to the physical practice, or *āsana*, which was developed, codified and institutionalized by various teachers who produced their own lineage of different branches of yoga, resulting in modern yoga, as I have discussed in the prior section of this paper, becoming in most cases entirely focused on the physical aspects of the practice, and, often, anti-philosophical and anti-spiritual. Yet it is because yoga is originally named in sacred Hindu texts that Hindus continue to claim ownership over modern yoga today, as discussed in the case of the 2010 “Take Back Yoga” campaign. However, this association has caused many to remove the spiritual and philosophical components of yoga practices for fear that they are too Hindu, or that they will conflict with their religious beliefs. Yet modern yoga is itself a product of syncretism, drawn from Buddhist, Jain and even Islamic influences, combined with Hindu practices. This gives

³³ Ibid, 17.

strength to the case that yoga can be claimed by one religious tradition, yet also be practiced by faithful adherents of others in way that successfully blends all aspects of these ideologies – yoga itself is a product of this process.

The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, which means to yoke.³⁴ As yoga and Sanskrit scholar Georg Feuerstein explains, “Early on [c. Sixth or Seventh Century BCE] it came to also be applied to a ‘spiritual endeavor.’”³⁵ The essence of “to yoke” has been translated into English as union, as the idea of union, or uniting, is at the core of the philosophy of the practice of yoga. Yoga seeks to unite the breath, body and mind to produce actions of intention, which can then be applied to acts of devotion that will enable the pursuit of spiritual liberation. As researcher and theologian Elizabeth De Michelis writes in her essay “Modern Yoga: History and Forms,” the philosophy of classical yoga is undergirded by a philosophical paradigm that seeks to reconcile three components: the impact of the behavior of this life (*karma*) on reincarnation (*samsara*), a cycle that can only be released through liberation (*moksha*).³⁶

Yoga is discussed as a constructed practice of spiritual discipline that leads to union with the divine and, eventually, to spiritual liberation, in the *Bhagavad Gita* (which translates to the Lord’s Song), the sacred Hindu text dating from the third or fourth century BCE. A key component of the way yoga is understood in the *Gita* is through the fulfillment of one’s duty in this life (*dharma*), which contributes to the realization of one’s *karma*. As mentioned above, the *Gita* devotes an entire chapter to yoga – the sixth teaching. In author and commentator

³⁴ Georg Feuerstein, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 412.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Elizabeth De Michelis, “Modern Yoga: History and Forms,” in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 18-19.

These also are exemplary, and common, elements of the Indic region’s Dharmic religions.

Ekknath Easwaran's translation of the *Gita*, he writes that yoga in the *Gita* means "integration of the whole spirit,"³⁷ which is achieved via meditation:

In the *Gita*, the word *yogi* often has a more modest definition: it can mean a person who does his or her job with detachment from rewards (6:1), or it can be rendered as 'one who has attained the goal of meditation.' For *yogi* literally means 'one who is accomplished in yoga,' and *yoga* means 'integration of the spirit.' In this sense, *yoga* means wholeness or the process of becoming whole at the deepest spiritual level.³⁸

Through this lens, the *Gita* goes on to discuss three types of yoga: *karma yoga*, the yoga of action, *jñāna yoga*, the yoga of knowledge, and *bhakti yoga*, the yoga of devotion: all meditative practices.

The core philosophy of yoga that produced the physical practice of today and should, but rarely does, inform it, is found in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*. Patañjali was a second century BCE sage whose 195 *sūtras*, or aphorisms, comprise a four-part text that, like the *Gita*, focuses on spiritual practices for personal improvement, including discussions of liberation, oneness with God and divinity. Also like the *Gita*, the *Yoga Sūtras* contextualize yoga as a philosophical, spiritual and meditative practice, beginning in verse I.II which says, "Yoga is the restraint of fluctuations in the mind."³⁹

However, unlike the *Gita*, the *Yoga Sūtras* do widen the understanding of yoga's meditative qualities to include details of a physical practice, outlined in sections II.28 to III.8, known as *ashtangayoga*, or the eight limbs of yoga.⁴⁰ Patañjali writes in verse II:28 of the *Yoga Sūtras*: "From the following limbs of yoga, on the destruction of impurity there is a light of

³⁷ Ekknath Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1985), 134.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Christopher Chapple and Yogi Anand Viraj, *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* (Dehli: Sri Satguru Publications, 1990), 18.

⁴⁰ Ashtanga yoga also is the name of one of the modern posture practices, popularized by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois. It is an intensely physical practice that believes that the rigorous employment of *āsana* and *prānāyāma* is necessary in order to achieve the other eight limbs in Patañjali's system.

knowledge, leading to discriminative discernment.”⁴¹ Feuerstein interprets this by describing *ashtangayoga* as a path of “yogic maturation.”⁴²

Ashtangayoga consists of eight practices, which are a combination of the physical and the meditative:

1. Restraint (*yama*)
2. Observances (*niyama*)
3. Posture, or the physical practice of yoga (*āsana*)
4. Breath control, also a part of the physical practice of yoga (*prānāyāma*)
5. Sensory withdrawal (*pratyāhāra*)
6. Concentration (*dhāranā*)
7. Meditation (*dhyāna*)
8. Liberation (*samādhi*).⁴³

It is in the *Yoga Sūtras* that the physical practice of yoga is first mentioned, though all that is said about it, in verses II.46:47, is:

*Āsana is steadiness and ease,
From relaxation of effort and endless unity.*⁴⁴

But this mention alone is one of the reasons why the *Yoga Sūtras* have become, as Singleton writes, the “ur-text,”⁴⁵ of modern yoga; while there are many different versions, or denominations, as De Michelis calls them, of the modern yoga practice, they can all be traced back to an incipient mention in Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* as part of this philosophical system of spiritual pursuit.

Patañjali goes into greater detail in his discussion of the codes of restraint and observances, the *yamas* and *niyamas*. The direct translation of the *yamas*, from verse II.30 of

⁴¹ Chapple and Viraj, *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 22.

⁴² Feuerstein, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga*, 337.

⁴³ Taken from Feuerstein’s definition of *ashtangayoga*, and from Chapple and Viraj, *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*.

⁴⁴ Chapple and Viraj, *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 23.

⁴⁵ Mark Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Constructive Orientalism,” in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 77.

the *Yoga Sūtras* is, “The restraints are nonviolence, truthfulness, nonstealing, sexual restraint, and nonpossession.”⁴⁶ The translation of the *niyamas*, from II.32 of the *Yoga Sūtras*, is “purity, contentment, austerity, self-study and dedication to *Īśvara* [Lord] are the observances.”⁴⁷ In the ensuing verses, Patañjali particularizes the manifestations of the restraints and observances, and the conditions that are beneficial to, and result from, their adherence.

On the face of it, there is nothing exclusively Hindu about *ashtangayoga*. Indeed, the *yamas* and *niyamas* sound consistent with the tenets of the Abrahamic religions, among others. That the ethical principles of classical yoga are seemingly so broad is because, as scholars have argued, even in its earliest forms yoga was a fusion of the Indic region’s Dharmic religions, making yoga itself syncretic. As sociologist Kenneth Liberman writes in his essay on the authenticity of the physical practice of yoga:

...the ‘yoga’ that is known and practiced in the modern world is derived from a *tradition that was itself a derivative and syncretic* form of spiritual practice... It was indeed a hotchpotch of Buddhism, Śaivism, Vaisnavism, with even Islamic influence and non-Hindu tribal asceticism.⁴⁸

This interpretation has influenced contemporary discussions – including the argument in this paper for a more nuanced understanding of yoga’s valuable religious dimensions – about the degree to which what has become modern yoga is by necessity an exclusively Hindu practice rather than a philosophical and spiritual one. Rather, because yoga has been so greatly influenced by its surrounding cultures and belief systems, it is naturally a spiritual practice that

⁴⁶ Chapple and Viraj, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 22.

The Sanskrit translations of the *yamas* are: nonviolence (*ahimsa*), truthfulness (*satya*), nonstealing (*asteya*), sexual restraint (*brahmacharya*), and nonpossession (*aparigraha*).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

The Sanskrit translations of the *niyamas* are: purity (*saucha*), contentment (*santosa*), austerity (*tapas*), self-study (*svadhyaya*) and dedication to *Īśvara* [Lord] (*Īśvarapranidhana*).

⁴⁸ Kenneth Liberman, “The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Hatha Yoga,” in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 104.

can be incorporated into, and be adopted by, believers of a variety of religious traditions, which is what has been seen in the most positive cases of the syncretic adaptation of modern yoga.

As author and yoga teacher Mark Stephens writes:

Arising from the diverse and evolving cultures of India, often moored to and conditioned by Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and other religions, the philosophies, teachings, and practices of yoga are as richly varied as the innumerable tributaries of the vastness of yoga in all its manifestations.⁴⁹

What has changed, however, from classical times to the present, is the degree to which yoga's inherent construct as a path to spiritual liberation has been maintained. When yoga arrived in the United States in the late nineteenth century, yoga's history and spiritual and religious content had been revised by a Hindu philosopher named Swami Vivekananda precisely for the purpose of making yoga as palatable and approachable to an American audience as possible – a practice that continues today.

Vivekananda is credited with having introduced Hinduism to the West through his participation at the Chicago Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893. According to Syman, Vivekananda took a deliberately syncretic approach to presenting Hinduism to his audience, “invoking Christianity and science” and “emphasizing the most Christian dimension of [Krishna's] philosophy.”⁵⁰ Vivekananda fell in with a crowd of Transcendentalists to whom he taught a thoroughly reinterpreted version of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, publishing some of them in his teachings on *Rāja Yoga*, excluding some altogether. This was because, as Syman describes, Vivekananda and Patañjali represented divergent approaches to Hindu theology:

⁴⁹ Mark Stephens, *Teaching Yoga: Essential Foundations and Techniques* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 1.

⁵⁰ Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 45.

Though Vivekananda clearly quotes from the *Yoga Sūtras*... he never mentioned them by name. And he would hardly have pointed out this essential fact about the *Yoga Sūtras*: these present a markedly different conception of divinity than Vivekananda's own Vedanta.⁵¹

Vivekananda's cooptation of the *Yoga Sūtras* illustrates what has become the standard practice of selective application, or exclusion, of yoga's classical roots to the modern practice. His actions paved the way for what would ultimately become the modern yoga culture of today: a hybridization of appealing elements of Eastern mysticism and esotericism combined with Western Protestant notions of self-improvement that, in classic American style, allows one to pick and choose how spiritual, or not at all, one wishes to make his or her yoga practice. As De Michelis argues in *A History of Modern Yoga*, Vivekananda is to blame:

Contemporary evidence suggests that, a century down the line from the publication of Vivekananda's *Rāja Yoga*, this erroneous notion has been completely assimilated into Modern Yoga culture, and beyond it into a 'global' community of seekers... The same process has, conversely, greatly contributed to create a widespread *unawareness* of how many links branch out from the highly condensed structure of Patañjali's text (and from the attached commentatorial literature) to radiate and connect at many different chronological, textural and performative levels throughout the Hindu tradition. It is only because of such unawareness that Modern Yoga exponents can claim that, 'Yoga is not a religion, it is a way of life.'⁵²

Thus the question of yoga's religiosity stems from its historic syncretism, its exposure to other cultures, audiences and the participation in it by devotees of other religious traditions. There emerges a potential for yoga's mutability that gives rise to debates about yoga's ownership and authenticity. This creates problems, as with the case of modern yoga, about the degree to which yoga's spiritual integrity can be upheld amidst an environment that by necessity of transmission and proliferation undergoes transformation, even when it is

⁵¹ Ibid, 53.

⁵² Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (London: Continuum: 2004), 179.

disseminated to Americans by a Hindu Swami. Is it reasonable, then, to expect something different from Americans with no ties to India teaching yoga to each other? It is my assertion that using the *Yoga Sūtras* as a guiding philosophy that influences the way yoga teachers teach and that yoga students behave on and off their mats can bridge divides that are both cultural and comprehensive, thus restoring yoga's philosophical connection.

Even Vivekenanda recognized the benefit of using Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* as a way to make yoga accessible to his late nineteenth century audience. While he downplayed and rephrased, if not ignored entirely, key parts of the *Yoga Sūtras* that related to spiritual liberation, he recognized the relevance of the *yamas* and the *niyamas* in particular. One hundred-plus years later, integrating a focus on the *yamas* and the *niyamas* into modern posture-focused yoga practices can reconnect yoga to its classical roots and lay a foundation for wholeness that can be interpreted in more explicitly moral ways by the yoga practitioner within whatever practical, theoretical, philosophical or religious context that is appropriate and syncretic for him or her. Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras* are moral codes, eternally and universally relevant, whether applied to spiritual liberation, liberation from earthly cages, or liberation from the stresses of modern life, which is precisely what has brought so many people from diverse backgrounds and orientations on to yoga mats in the first place, resulting in the need for a way to infuse modern yoga with authentic spiritual integrity.

III. Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras*: A Path to Wholeness

As Easwaran writes in his translation of the *Gita*, yoga is intended to foster integration and wholeness. Yet without connecting the physical practice to its spiritual side, modern yoga

itself becomes fractured, compromising its ability to lead practitioners towards a path to wholeness. A retrieval of yoga's complicated – even syncretic – religious origins as a spiritual and philosophical system designed to enable mastery over self and cultivate union with the divine can enrich the contemporary practice without forcing any religious beliefs, Hindu or otherwise, on its practitioners. As yoga teacher and philosopher T.K.V. Desikachar explains in a series of published lectures:

No matter what name we use – *Īśvara*, God, or Allah – any movement that makes us understand something higher than ourselves is also yoga. Being one with the Lord means we understand and respect something that is higher than what we understood yesterday. When something within us feels in tune with something higher, that too is yoga.⁵³

This is not to say that yoga needs to become a religious practice. Rather, an understanding of yoga as a spiritual practice that engenders individual fulfillment and overall well being can imbue the modern posture practice with the authenticity I believe it often lacks. As Liberman writes:

The system of yoga of Patañjali and of all yogis since have included the *yamas* and *niyamas* or something similar that refers to basic moral practices such as honesty, good will, selflessness, and the like, without which a daily practice cannot be considered to be 'authentic' yoga. Accordingly, these need to be made a part of the regular and daily instruction in yoga classes worldwide. The situation today is that less than a small percentage of yoga students in the world can correctly identify the *yamas* and the *niyamas*, let alone practice them. This is a scandal.⁵⁴

I agree with Liberman and submit that yoga classes of all kinds must include engagement with the *yamas* and *niyamas* outlined in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*. These ethical prescriptions for living are designed to encourage a life of wholeness and integration that

⁵³ T. K. V. Desikachar, Marie Louse Skelton, and John Ross Carter, *Religiousness in Yoga: Lectures on Theory and Practice* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980), 2-3.

⁵⁴ Kenneth Liberman, "The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Hatha Yoga," 112.

conveys to students both their individual and larger purpose in life. As author and yoga teacher Aadil Palkhivala writes: “Teach your students that they are part of a universal force. With this in mind, they don’t have to work only for themselves, because there is a bigger purpose.”⁵⁵

Including the *yamas* and *niyamas* in yoga practices of all kinds is a way to point students towards awareness, both of themselves and of their interconnectivity. This is because the *yamas* and *niyamas* speak to more than just what happens on the yoga mat; these are instructions for how to live a life with purpose that, within the context of the classical Indian philosophical structure of *karma*, *dharma*, *samsara* and *moksha*, help to guide one towards liberation, and outside of it can free practitioners from the trappings of life that may be holding them back from being their best selves. The *yamas* and *niyamas* can be translated to the everyday, secular existences of all yoga practitioners – even faithful yoga practitioners of other religions – in that they encourage a peaceful and harmonious life of intention and purpose. As Desikachar explains:

Yoga tries to create a condition in which we are always present in every action, at every moment... The practice of yoga only requires that we act, and at the same time, pay attention to our actions. We do not have to endorse any particular concept of the Lord, but we must have respect for such concepts. Although yoga has its source in Indian thought, it neither dictates that a Hindu must practice it nor that a non-Hindu is prohibited from such practice. Yoga is universal in that it is the means to attain a desired new condition. If we want to be happier and we find the means to that happiness, that is yoga.⁵⁶

The philosophy behind Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* seeks to create happiness for its followers by alleviating their suffering. As comparative religion scholar Mircea Eliade writes, the contention with suffering is the concern of all the Indic religions:

⁵⁵ Aadil Palkhivala, “Teaching the Niyamas in Asana Class,” *Yoga Journal*, accessed November 25, 2010, http://www.yogajournal.com/for_teachers/976.

⁵⁶ Desikachar, Skelton and Carter, *Religiousness in Yoga: Lectures on Theory and Practice*, 3.

The considerable importance given to 'knowledge' by all Indian metaphysicians, including the technique of asceticism and method of meditation known as yoga, is easily understood if one takes into account the causes of human suffering. The misery of human life is due not to divine punishment or to original sin but to *ignorance*. Not simply ignorance in general, but only ignorance of the true nature of the *spirit*...⁵⁷

The *Yoga Sūtras* suggest that the ease of suffering occurs through the process of transformation from ignorance to wisdom. The *yamas* and the *niyamas*, in making recommendations for self conduct, explicate the steps necessary to eradicate the suffering that is both a naturally occurring and universal part of life. Doing so creates the possibility for one to feel more centered, grounded and focused, and with that mindset, open, if so inclined, to experience a divine connection with whatever version of the divine with which one might wish to commune.

Even without getting into the realm of religious experience or religious beliefs about suffering or other claims, the behavioral directives of the *yamas* and the *niyamas* address a timeless, common desire to find peace, the relevance of which is made all the more compelling by the growth of yoga's popularity. In *A History of Modern Yoga*, De Michelis writes that the modern posture practice of yoga received a great boost in participation once stress and nervousness were discovered to be consequences of modern urban living.⁵⁸ This created a need for people to tune out the distractions of modern life and to turn inward, which a yoga practice can help them do. Adding the *yamas* and the *niyamas* will deepen this connection, and increase the potential for happiness through the relief of suffering.

There is a preliminary step that can be taken to establish a foundation from which teachers can begin to teach their students about this way of living. It is not uncommon for yoga

⁵⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Patañjali and Yoga*, trans. Ian Markmann (New York: Schocken Books: 1975), 24.

⁵⁸ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 249.

studios to issue etiquette briefings to their students about yoga –“yoga 101” fact sheets so to speak – so that newcomers to both the practice and the environment are informed about what to expect on arrival.⁵⁹ Yoga studios, and in turn any place where yoga is taught, could adopt this practice and the text of the *Yoga Sūtras*, or even just provide students with a brief overview of the *yamas* and the *niyamas*, so that students can begin their yoga practices with an understanding of how yoga is not only a physical, but also a holistic, integrated way of being. From there, yoga teachers already will have a platform from which to begin to teach about how the *yamas and niyamas* can be incorporated, both on and off the mat, as well as a sense of commonality and purpose with students. Moreover, in doing so, the various environments where yoga classes are held can become unified as sacred spaces that are conduits for the lineage of teaching yoga.

Bringing spirituality to the physical yoga practice really begins with how the teacher sets the tone for the class. Rather than commencing directly with the physical practice, the teacher should begin with a guided meditation that leads students towards setting an intention. In doing so, the teacher can convey that a yoga practice should be conducted with intention, and that the intentionality that is cultivated in yoga is meant to be carried throughout their day, and into students’ lives. A sample opening that I have used to begin my yoga classes at VDS and elsewhere, and that I have revised for inclusion in this paper, follows:

Sit up nice and tall in *sukhasana* (easy pose), with the crowns of our heads reaching up towards the sky, our necks nice and long, our shoulders rotating back and down. Let’s feel ourselves in our bodies. Let’s close our eyes, taking the gaze inward, as we breathe, breathing in and out through our noses, softly, gently.

⁵⁹ A sample “What is Yoga?” fact sheet that I prepared when I began teaching yoga at VDS in Fall 2010 and then revised for inclusion in this project follows as an appendix to this paper.

As we sit here let's notice the sound of our breath as it fills our lungs, fills our bellies, and then releases back out into the world. As we breathe we remember that our breath is always with us. It is always here for us, to guide us, for us to return to, no matter what is going on around us. There is our breath, and then there is everything else. Let's focus on the sound of our breath – that beautiful, calming sound – as we inhale and exhale.

Now, let's set an intention for our yoga practice today. Maybe it's love. Maybe it's peace. Maybe it's acceptance. Maybe it's surrender. Maybe we wish to dedicate our energy to someone, somewhere in need. We set an intention on the mat to remind us to act with intention in everything we do.

Now let's bring our hands together in *anjali mudra* (prayer position), at our heart centers, gently pressing our thumbs into our breast bones to acknowledge our heart centers and to seal our intentions. We open our eyes and begin.

This creates an opportunity to introduce the *yamas* and *niyamas* by establishing with students that their yoga practice is cohesive through this very notion of intentionality: the *yamas* and *niyamas* are ways to live into the idea of conducting oneself with purpose in so far as to have an orderly, thoughtful life that can be experienced as integrated and free of suffering.

A closer look at the *yamas* and the *niyamas* reveals how their instruction can be interpreted by yoga teachers and students to create an embodied path to wholeness that elevates the physical practice of yoga into a spiritual one. The *yamas* and *niyamas* work together in this way by advocating for a life of self-control, mindfulness and intentionality. "Kindness, truthfulness, abundance, continence and self-reliance – living and teaching these *yamas* puts us on the fulfilling path of an all-encompassing yoga, an approach to the inner quest that makes us whole," writes Palkhivala.⁶⁰

There are many ways to interpret the *yamas* and *niyamas*, and it is incumbent upon the yoga teacher to do so. The yoga teacher is charged with being a guide and in some ways acting as a pastoral minister in directing students on the course to exploring and perhaps ultimately

⁶⁰ Aadil Palkhivala, "Teaching the Yamas in Asana Class," *Yoga Journal*, accessed November 25, 2010, http://www.yogajournal.com/for_teachers/984.

embodying a yogic lifestyle. Yoga classes themselves provide ample fodder from which to draw upon in teaching the *yamas* and *niyamas* as holistic instructions in living. Following are strategic recommendations as to how the *yamas* and *niyamas* can be interpreted to connect the physical yoga practice with its spiritual and philosophical roots so as to create an integrated path to wholeness, on and off the yoga mat, which is syncretic and appropriate for yoga practitioners of all faiths.⁶¹

| Restraint (<i>Yama</i>) | Strategic Recommendations for Teachers | Strategic Recommendations For Students: On the Mat | Strategic Recommendations For Everyone: In the World |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nonviolence (<i>Ahimsa</i>) | Approach students with compassion. | Be kind to your body when engaging in the physical practice so as to avoid injury. | Act with awareness when engaging with all other beings so as not to inflict harm upon them. |
| Truthfulness (<i>Satya</i>) | Be honest when guiding students in their practice. | Be candid with yourself about your body's limits. | Speak with integrity and honest intentions. |
| Nonstealing (<i>Asteya</i>) | Cultivate an awareness of abundance in the universe. | Use only what is yours. | Don't use something for a purpose other than what is intended. |
| Sexual restraint (<i>Brahmacharya</i>) | Maintain appropriate boundaries between yourself and your students so as to demonstrate the integrity of personal relationships. | Be mindful in expending your energy on physical movement and emotional interactions. | Employ continence – sexual energy is a vital but limited life force that often is disbursed without careful consideration. |
| Nonpossession (<i>Aparigraha</i>) | There is a difference between what we need and what we want; the awareness that yoga provides helps us to recognize this. | Focus on your own yoga practice – don't covet the abilities of another in the class. | Give freely without expecting anything in return. Don't take advantage of a situation. |

⁶¹ These strategic recommendations are inspired by: Palkhivala, "Teaching the Yamas in Asana Class," and "Teaching the Niyamas in Asana Class;" Stephens, *Teaching Yoga*, 7-9; and Kelly Wood, *2010 Karuna Yoga Teacher Training Manual* (Los Angeles: 2010) 39-50

| Observance (<i>Niyama</i>) | Strategic Recommendations for Teachers | Strategic Recommendations For Students: On the Mat | Strategic Recommendations For Everyone: In the World |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Purity (<i>Saucha</i>) | Treat your body like a temple – keep yourself clean inside and out, demonstrating to your students the benefits of a yogic lifestyle. | Conduct your yoga practice in an orderly manner: keep your mat neat and clean; put things back where you found them. | Be aware of the cleanliness and orderliness of your surroundings and let this influence your lifestyle choices. |
| Contentment (<i>Santosa</i>) | What we have is enough; our yoga practice helps us to recognize this. | Accept what is, whether it is the limitations of your body, the time restrictions in your day, or the challenges of the mindset that you bring to your practice. | Suffering comes from resisting acceptance of what is. Learn not to argue with reality. |
| Austerity (<i>Tapas</i>) | A regular yoga practice builds commitment and discipline. | Regular, mindful engagement in yoga can move you outside of your comfort zone, cleanse the body and spirit of impurities, and remove impediments to progress. | Anything worth having requires effort. |
| Self-study (<i>Svadyaya</i>) | Encourage awareness of how the yoga practice is experienced physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally. | Yoga is not just a physical endeavor; it creates an opportunity for self-examination and reflection of how one responds to the experiences that yoga provides. This can be a mirror for what is happening in life. | Self-awareness allows us to act more authentically in all that we do. |
| Dedication to <i>Īśvara</i> [Lord] (<i>Īśvarapranidhana</i>) | Yoga is not about the results; it is about the experience, which helps us to understand our purpose in life. | Use the awareness you have developed to ground you in a sense of place in the larger universe and to connect you with a sense of the divine. | Surrender and let go. |

The *yamas* and *niyamas* light the way and the yoga teacher serves as the guide. Yoga students can then draw upon his or her own spiritual resources and religious background to further pursue their own means of spiritual connection. Regardless of one's religious beliefs, an authentic yoga practice that is imbued with spiritual integrity creates a path for all seekers to find the stillness within that can enable divine communion.

Once students have been instructed in the *yamas* and the *niyamas*, they can pursue further study, and explore more deeply how to incorporate this ethical, spiritually-rooted code of yogic behavior into his or her life. It is my hope that through exposure to and an understanding of the *yamas* and the *niyamas*, students will become inclined to study yoga's classical roots further, and to interpret for him or herself yoga's original meaning as a meditative path that can enable relief from suffering. Thus, the inclusion of the *yamas* and the *niyamas* in all yoga classes in all environments will create opportunities for students to ultimately pursue a path to wholeness, peace, integration, and wellness and, possibly, enlightenment, in whatever way is most appropriate for them, restoring yoga's authentic spirituality to the physical practice.

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APPENDIX: An Example of a Fact Sheet Introducing Basic Yoga Etiquette, Philosophy and Intentionality

What is yoga?

Yoga means union – to unify and to make whole. Yoga is the process of bringing the body and the mind together and making one whole in body, mind and spirit.

Yoga teaches us how our body works, how to breathe properly, and how to combine these efforts to our benefit. This enables us to understand how to relate to the mind and body together instead of separately, so that we can act with intention both on and off the mat.

What kind of yoga are we practicing?

We are practicing Hatha yoga. Hatha yoga focusing on uniting opposites: “ha” means sun in Sanskrit and “tha” means moon. Hatha yoga unites opposites through postures (*āsana*) and breath (*prānāyāma*).

Is yoga a religion?

No. Often associated with Hinduism because of its development in India, yoga actually is a spiritual philosophy, of which the physical practice – *āsana* – is only one aspect.

Patañjali, a second century BCE philosopher, compiled the *Yoga Sūtras*, the core philosophies of yoga, in which he outlines the eight limbs of yoga – the philosophies essential to a yogic life. These together lead to a life of intention, wholeness and integration, which is really what our yoga practice is about: it’s more than just a series of physical exercises – it’s a way of being.

The eight limbs of yoga:

1. *yama* = attitudes towards our environment
2. *niyama* = attitudes towards ourselves
3. *āsana* = the practice of body exercises
4. *prānāyāma* = the practice of breathing exercises
5. *pratyāhāra* = the restraint of our senses
6. *dhāranā* = the ability to direct our minds
7. *dhyāna* = the ability to develop interactions with what we seek to understand
8. *samādhi* = complete integration with the object of meditation/what we seek to understand

The *yamas* and *niyamas* in particular can be translated to the everyday, secular existences of all yoga practitioners – even faithful yoga practitioners of other religions – in that they encourage a peaceful and harmonious life of intention and purpose.

What is this Om thing we are chanting at the beginning and end of our practice?

Om is comprised of three Sanskrit letters – *aa*, *au* and *ma* – which, when combined together, make the sound *Aum* or *Om*.

It is believed that Om mystically embodies the essence of the entire universe – it is the basic sound of the world and contains all other sounds within it.

When chanted it's considered to have a divine frequency, to be a positive affirmation and a symbol of peace and perfection that resonates throughout the body, penetrating to the center of one's being, the *ātman* or soul.

What should I know about yoga before I do it?

Yoga should never be painful

At times, especially as we develop our practice, certain *āsanas* may be uncomfortable, but yoga never should hurt. There are ways to modify every position to accommodate every body so if something hurts, let me know. Everyone can find something to do in yoga that can work for them.

Wear something comfortable

We will be moving, standing, sitting, and stretching, so wear something that allows for flexibility and ease of movement. We may also be sweating, so layers are good.

Try to practice on an empty stomach

If possible, try not to eat two hours prior to coming to class. If you do need to eat before your practice, try to eat something light.

Yoga is about you... and you

Don't worry about what's happening on the mat next to you. Yoga is a journey that brings you inward, connecting you with you. It's not a competition. It's not a race. It's not about who is more flexible, who can relax faster or chant louder. Close your eyes. Go inward. We come to yoga to be alone in a crowd – we are sharing our personal practices together. What happens during our yoga practice stays in the room.