

# Yoga for Social Justice: Developing Anti-Oppressive Tools for Change through Yoga

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*This paper presents the practice of yoga as both a method of pedagogy and inquiry to create transformative social justice praxis. The Sanskrit word yoga translates to yoke. The practice of yoga, rather the practice of creating a yoking or connection of body, mind, and spirit, provides an avenue for how transformation begins with the self, and then spreads into our collective engagements and anti-oppressive work. Through self-examination of body, mind, and spirit we are able to unearth the roots of oppression that exist within our being, in other words the embodiment of marginalization, oppression, and silence. I use autobiographical methodology to examine how my practice of yoga has informed not only a critical examination of the self, but a critical examination of how to disrupt the interlocking systems that continue to marginalize, oppress, and silence. I draw from different spiritual philosophies to create a more well-rounded view on how suffering can be used to traverse human connection, recognize the alternatives, and bring about balance within individuals.*

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*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing  
with the glory that will be revealed in us.*

*Romans 8:18 NIV*

I am brought to this very moment with the intention of finding a means for social justice work through the path of yoga. I am brought to this paper by my love of the study of yoga philosophy and my commitment to social justice. I am brought to this work by my quest to disentangle myself from the conditions of my own making and the makings

of others that have been imprinted on my body and spirit. Particularly, when I practice asanas (yoga postures), I often pause to ask myself “why did you show you up on your mat today?” Why did you decide to be here at this moment on your mat as you are? What do you gain from showing up on your mat? What do others gain by you showing up on your mat?

My yoga mat is a mirror for my life, impressed with my glow, my joy, my pain and my sorrow. It is impressed with a personified quality of speaking to the change that can exist without when change begins to find itself within. My yoga mat is held with a sweat of wanting to experience change inside and outside of myself and find a means of doing so collectively with the bodies that surround me.

Thich Nhat Hanh (2007), a Vietnamese Buddhist Zen master and scholar writes, “Please raise your voice so that you can come together with others. When we come together, we can voice our concerns strongly and effectively. Because collective awakening is the only thing that can change our situation” (p. 161). The collective awakening positioned by Thich Nhat Hanh is not different from the urgency of critical consciousness building and liberatory action placed on us by critical theorists and critical feminists (Berila, 2016; hooks, 2015; Freire, 2014). Through critical feminism (hooks, 2015) we are compelled towards self-transformation through “ongoing critical self-examination and reflection” (p. 24) if we are to experience disruption to the interlocking systems that continue to marginalize, oppress, and silence. This is the answer to my question; this is why I come to my mat.

This paper presents yoga as both a method of pedagogy and inquiry to create transformative social justice praxis. The Bhagavad Gita, a sacred Hindu text, positions that yoga is the connection of the individual consciousness to the universal consciousness. Yoga is spiritual oneness with a higher source, experienced through a connection of body, mind, and spirit. This paper makes the argument that connecting the body, mind, and spirit provides an avenue for how transformation begins with the self, and then spreads into our collective engagements and social justice work. Throughout this paper, I do not articulate a particular discipline of yoga, rather I attempt to frame the philosophy of yoga holistically to the self-examination work activists and social justice educators are to

take up. I position yoga as a method of pedagogy and inquiry for change. I include autobiographical narrative woven with critical feminist theory to provide examination of attachment and dualities as creating the suffering we wish to overcome through social justice work. Throughout this paper, I draw from different spiritual philosophies to create a more well-rounded view on how suffering can be used for human connection, recognize the alternatives and bring about balance within individuals. This paper concludes with considerations for how the aforementioned ideas can be engaged in higher education.

### **WHY YOGA?**

Yoga is a Sanskrit term meaning to yoke. A yoke is utilized to maintain evenness amongst animals being herded. A yoke is used to find balance. Yoga, then, is the practice of finding balance of body, mind, and spirit. Yoga is a means of embodied learning. Yoga is a practice of awakening to the dialogue that happens within the self before the dialogue happens beyond the self. Yoga is a practice of coming to unlearn what keeps us stuck in patterns and operations that only serve to benefit a conditioned mind. But before anything can be unlearned it must be unearthed. Yoga is a means of unearthing what sits in the depths of our wells, looking to be spoken and verbalized. Yoga is a means of unearthing what has been kept invisible for the sake of protecting vulnerability. And yoga is a means of exposing fear. And fear, as we all know, is the mind created tool for self-preservation. hooks (2015) writes, “It is necessary to remember that it is first the potential oppressor within that we must resist—the potential victim within that we must rescue—otherwise we cannot hope for an end to domination, for liberation” (p. 21). Fear also operates to preserve things as they are for the sake of being in constant contact with someone else’s fear. Fear is our oppressor.

We are pressed with finding ways to undo oppression that operate silently and violently. Yet, we lack dialogue. We lack the means of creating dialogue—a process that requires gentleness, intimacy, respect, participation, and vulnerability. We lack the means of creating this between two or more, because we are not equipped with creating dialogue within. It is my position that if there is any expectation of change to happen with-

out, the change must first begin within. Moreover, we have constructed liberation to be something that exists when the conditions beyond ourselves change, as if the revolution is to occur beyond the self. We have missed and are missing opportunities to look inwardly. Liberation occurs when we are aware of the conditioned states of our minds that impact our bodies and spirits. Liberation of ourselves as learned through the philosophy of yoga frees us from attachments and conditioning that cause us to be distant from dialogue and distant from ourselves as members of humanity. Liberation begins as a process within us, rather than outside ourselves. Liberation requires vulnerability.

But fear prevents vulnerability. The very thing every human being wishes to be and wishes not to be, is vulnerable. Yoga at its truest definition is about concentrating the mind, controlling internal energy (pranayama), controlling bodily movements (asanas), practicing discernment and rising to our highest state of consciousness (liberation). Through yoga we become aware of how we embody social constructs and socialized norms. Embodiment is “the process by which the body becomes a vehicle for socialization” (Shapiro, 1994, as cited in Berila, 2016). And we understand oppression and marginalization to be embodied—Berila (2016) positions that “unlearning and healing” must happen at an embodied level—at a level that fully attends to the body. This means our gaze must be turned completely inward. And that’s a vulnerable practice. It is our vulnerability that moves us closer to change. Audre Lorde (1984) writes “that visibility that makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength” (p. 42). Only I can speak to where I am most vulnerable. I am subject to my existence. What we gain from critical feminist theory is just that—I am subject, not object. I choose to tell the story. I choose to tell my experience of joy, pain, suffering, marginalization, oppression—I tell that story. And I also make determinations for how my fear limits me, grips me, captivates me, and beholds me to it, making me a victim to myself and myself alone for no other purpose than self-preservation, and in the end my hold to my fear only continues to cripple social change and growth. It only serves to cripple what I claim I want—social justice.

Externally I commit to wanting change. Internally I commit to staying exactly the same. Externally I commit to calling out marginalization and speaking to the suffering of groups—while also naming someone else’s suffering for them. Internally I commit to keeping my suffering private and commit to not naming my own invisibility. It starts to feel contradictory as a social justice educator and researcher, to be so committed to something changing outside of myself with no real commitment to disrupt anything that happens within myself—with no real commitment to peeling back my own layers and unearthing my own shit. I’ve committed to unearthing the shit of the whole. Of the collective. And laughably, aren’t I part of the collective? Aren’t I a piece of what the hell is wrong? Shouldn’t I take a step back and look at how I function in this life? What gives me the right to be in dialogue outside of myself, and I can’t be in dialogue within myself? My dilemma is similar to Arjuna as he meets with Krishna to discern what is right action as he grapples with the internal struggle of whether or not to move forward on the battlefield.

Reflecting on these questions also poses an interesting consideration for my work as a social justice educator in higher education. The change sought on our campus communities requires those who are charged with leading efforts of change to do a lot of internal work in order to effectively support those they serve. Further, the above questions invite me to consider the function of spirituality on campuses.

In many ways, spirituality is ineffectually engaged and skirted around so as not to unintentionally infringe on someone’s position about the world. This work that I position requires individuals who are committed to diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), and social justice education to invite spiritual openness into their own lives and to work from a place of integrity and interconnectedness. Yoga for social justice is about discovering our wholeness as connected to others for the purposes of collective engagement and future change. I’m in full recognition that this work may not be for everyone. But I do position that spirituality versus faith traditions invites folx to do the work of recognizing our humanity and interconnectedness. Western epistemologies regularly take the spirit out of social justice work; demands for humanist, secular, or scientific ways of knowing are problematic when connection to spirit needs to be center.

## REVELATIONS IN YOGA CLASS

Lorde (1984) writes, “for we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness the weight of that silence will choke us” (p. 44). Yoga has taught me how to stop waiting in silence for fearlessness. My journey towards coming out from the weight of silence, fear, and choking begins in the Deep South. The ever contentious yet rurally beautiful Deep South. History has taught me this place is filled with hate and racist White people (in pickup trucks). I was taught to be afraid before I moved to this place, rather, I was socialized to be afraid. The day this all began to unravel, happened in a 97-degree power yoga room. As per usual I walked into the space unaffected and uninvolved with the other bodies in the room, except noticeably to me I was the only body of Color in the room. I was a speck of pepper in a sea of salt. And I cared. *I cared that I wasn't more represented in the space. I cared because these women must be wondering what the hell is she doing here. They must see me, the way their ancestors saw mine. They hate me. They are consumed by the fact I am a Black woman in their territory. They don't like me, they can't. They don't know me, but I know what goes through the minds of White women, of White people. I know, that they know, that I know, I don't belong here.*

The day my “aha” began, it wasn't my first time at that studio or other yoga studios, where it's usually the same make up of a class—I'm the speck of pepper in a sea of salt. I was more concerned about what I had locked away in my body, more than the other folx in the room were concerned—and here are the details of how I knew: I went to class with something heavy on my mind, feeling awful about myself and about my situation. Holding onto my suffering and allowing it to dictate how I showed up during my yoga practice. About 10 minutes into the class, holding chair pose I began to sob. Unable to hold my weight anymore because my suffering knew no time boundaries or boundaries of a space with strangers, my suffering was ready to stop choking the life out of me and rose all the way to the surface. I crumbled, trying to hide my tears, and came to a child's pose planting my forehead on my mat. I got up and began to motion towards the door. The instructor reached for my wrist

like she was checking for my pulse, stared me in the face, and said, “Stay! You are okay. Stay on your mat.” From there she continued her instruction calling for high crescent lunge and said, “Stay in the fire and the heat, stay in the discomfort. You are not your pain. Stay and embrace whatever is rising.” I cried some more. I moved through the rest of the class distracted and clumsily practicing because my tears had yet to stop. The class was coming to an end, I prepared to take savasana (rest), and the two White women on opposite sides of me, who I had never spoken to, placed their hands on the insides of my wrists, as if they too were checking for my pulse. About five minutes went by, they never moved their hands. They were just with me. After we came out of savasana neither of them said anything, one winked at me, but they both picked up their mats and walked out of the room. The woman behind me crawled up to me, started wiping my face, and said, “Every time I see you come to class, I think, she’s so beautiful and sometimes I see you around town.” She chuckled and said, “I’m not stalking you; Lafayette is just small. But I see you and think, I wish I felt and looked as beautiful as I think you must feel about yourself; you’ve just got a glow about you.” I looked at her, bewildered, thinking *maybe she just sees me and is magnetized to something about me that I am missing about myself*. As she was walking out of the room she said, “By the way, my name is Kimberly, what’s your name?” I tell her, and she responds, “Well Valin, whatever it is, know it doesn’t define you and it will pass, give yourself some grace.” And with an enormous sigh, a weight began melting away.

## **SUFFERING**

Suffering doesn’t know class, gender, race, religion, sexuality, etc. The experience of suffering is just that, an experience, at the individual level, which could be coupled to the suffering of someone else in the same situation creating a collective suffering. The layers we choose to add to it are that of class, gender, race, religion, sexuality, so on and so forth. We add those additional layers attempting to give meaning to our self-preserved ideas of who we think we are, unconsciously continuing to choke ourselves and to be out of dialogue within yet expecting change without. When we do this, we unconsciously create more suffering for others.

Part of Buddhist teachings is to be aware of suffering created by attachment to views and our ability to impose our views on others. In Hindu traditions focused on yoga, the yogi is encouraged to become aware of the fixation on dualities. Our internal tensions exist because of our hold to dualities. In both teachings, the goal is to rid yourself of attachments or dualities so as not to create or reinforce suffering internally or externally.

bell hooks states in an interview in the Buddhist review magazine, *Tricycle* (1992), “To commit to love is to fundamentally commit to a life beyond dualism.” In Jewish and Christian traditions, we’re shown that suffering ends when you give up holding onto what does not serve you authentically—think Jonah and the whale. We see the same thing in the book of Daniel as he tells Belshazzar his days are numbered because he spent time giving energy and focus to all of the wrong things and now his time was up. “Conflict and suffering are often caused by a person not wanting to surrender his concepts and ideas of things” (Nhat Hanh, 2009, p. 76). We have a duty to human life to not create more suffering, and we have a duty to engage mindfully in ways that invoke compassion and forgiveness for the greater benefit of transforming a society. As a social justice educator I have a duty to educate in ways that encourage an understanding of suffering with the goal of changing spaces that continue to create harm for many on and off of higher education campuses.

### **ATTACHMENT AND DUALITIES**

Attachment or fixed notions are the antithesis of liberation; our intellect often leads us to a place of attachment. And, that attachment creates a crochet of resistance within us that holds us locked as prisoners to ourselves. We seek liberation yet haven’t done the work of freeing ourselves of the dualities we have been conditioned to uphold. Dualities create a sense of Other. Please do not allow this to land as blind ideology, because by no means is it. What I advocate and position for here is a closer look at Self that carries around notions of dualities that, when left unexamined, can continue to create the very oppressive functions we claim to want to dismantle. We have not yet created the liberating experiences we wish because we have not become free of dualities—we have not

committed to putting alternatives into practice (Holland, D. C., Lachicotte Jr, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C., 2001).

Yoga offers a path towards non-attachment and non-duality through practices that still the body and mind so that the spirit can elevate and connect back to the Source. As academics, our very nature to want to intellectualize this work stunts our spiritual development and growth as positioned by Teresa of Avila. Teresa of Avila invites readers of her journals to recognize that the embodiment of spirit comes through contemplation and concentrating the mind, similar to what Krishna teaches Arjuna. Dualities and attachments begin to dissolve with practices of separating from the temporal world. I do not seek to diminish the experiences of classism, homophobia, racism, or sexism, and as a Black woman scholar it is important that I articulate my recognition of the real weight of systemic oppression. What I call up in this paper is simply that each individual can bring awareness to the dualities and attachments we are led by that continue to create oppressive experiences and, ultimately, suffering.

## **ALTERNATIVES IN PRACTICE**

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras teach that truthfulness must be part of the path towards liberation—*satya yama* (book 2 verse 30). Our first move towards social justice work is coming face to face with truth: the truth that we are all tied to someone else's suffering and their suffering is tied to us. We aren't at a place of identifying our own role in the suffering of each other, which in turn creates an internalized suffering and suffering that keeps us from liberation and freedom. We haven't moved our gaze inward yet as a society. Not until we are truthful, not until we untangle the dualities that consume us will we be liberated.

In an interview (1998) captured in *Shambhala Sun* (now *Lion's Roar*), a magazine focused on Buddhist traditions, bell hooks talks with Maya Angelou. The two discuss the need for compassion and forgiveness, highlighting that compassion and forgiveness are what keep a society moving forward, that attachment to one thing allows for lopsided values essentially destroying the spirit and the human condition. hooks asks, "How do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their

capacity to be transformed?” Angelou responds, “We can’t be in a position of choosing either/or.” Essentially, dualities must be removed.

This is yoga. This is the work of yoking body-mind-spirit for the means of social justice. Maya Angelou expresses in her poem “A Brave and Startling Truth” that as humanity we must be ready to come to the idea that we are “the true wonder of the world” upon letting go of our sanctimonious piety. John tells us the same in Chapter one verse fourteen, that the Word became flesh: we are the flesh of the Word that provokes us to act with grace, humility, and truth.

### **REFLECTIONS FROM A SILENT RETREAT**

October 2019, I participated in a silent retreat led by a Buddhist Zen master. Participants were given an exercise, called child’s practice. We were to take a walk and find something captivating—get close to it, study it, and be with it. I headed out on my journey and made my way down to the beach. I spotted a plant sprouting up out of the sand. It had locked roots in the sand! Sand is so wishy-washy. It’s so unstable. Not suitable for growth. And yet this tiny plant is part of a competitive ecosystem just trying to stay nourished and survive. So, like any good researcher, I start messing with the sand around it. I start trying to figure out how it’s rooted in there. I start messing with its home. Harming it. Disturbing its conditions for growth. The opposite of what the Zen master instructed. I paused from disturbing the plant’s home only because I noticed my footprints in comparison to the size of the plant trying to live and do the best it could for itself.

I started walking around the plant, hyper focused on *my* footprints. I was so enthralled by *my* footprints that I began walking with my head down, oblivious to where I was headed. I completely cut off my periphery because as humans we can. I began to notice another set of footprints. That of birds. I slowly lifted my head only to realize I was standing just about seven feet away from about 30 birds. I was captivated again, spellbound; mostly because I feared if I had moved the birds would have swarmed me. For 10 minutes I watched these birds and they (probably) watched me. As I slowly backed away; my mind started to do its thing.

I began to think: the footprints in the sand are a lot like every social justice educators' footprints, they will wash away. But not before we attempt to root ourselves in the sand and not before we compare our foot size to the size of another, unconsciously framing an ecosystem of competition about who has the right answer<sup>1</sup>. Not before we find a way to insert ourselves where we are not needed—and yes, sometimes we are not needed, like weighing in on someone's choice to heal through hugging his brother's murderer. We created more harm for Botham Jean's brother when we decided we needed to give history lessons on why forgiveness is unnecessary towards White folk. We became voyeurs to someone's healing process, to someone's pain, almost pornographizing it and making it gross. We created more suffering by inserting ourselves where we were not needed. We stole his moment of healing in an attempt to act as gatekeepers of normalcy about where, when, and to whom forgiveness is allotted. Bryan Stevenson (2015) writes, "It's when mercy is least expected that it's most potent—strong enough to break the cycle of victimization and victimhood, retribution and suffering" (p. 294).

We stole his moment of healing for the purposes of sizing up our footprints in the sand compared to what he needed to release in his body: resistance. Not forgiving creates resistance. When we hold resistance in our bodies, we increase the stress on our organs slowly limiting their function. Resistance is actually harmful to the body. Yet, as social justice educators we promote ideas of resistance. Our job as social justice educators should be to do no harm—to do nothing that will potentially cause more suffering. Yet, we tend to do exactly that. We tend to not look within but to look without, size it up, and say, "You've got it wrong! Let me tell you how to do it right." (I'm sort of doing it right now). Our tendency to look outwardly just allows us to be distant from what needs to be unpacked internally. Doesn't it make sense to discover what's deeply rooted within, before making any considerations of what happens beyond the self?

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<sup>1</sup> Similar to critiques of this work that call for a secular and scientific approach that focuses in solely on mind-body connection severing the meaning of the spirit. Such a critique is injurious; it is spirit injury to me as a Black woman seeking to articulate the need for a more revitalized humanity concerned with the interconnectedness of our suffering.

## **YOGA FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE + HIGHER EDUCATION**

To reiterate, nuances of the spirit have yet to be infused within the fabric of many institutions of higher education in highly effective ways. But if we can begin to provide community members with teachings as to how the spirit, not just the mind, informs our structures on campus and off campus, we can reach incredible heights. The position of yoga for social justice is to engage a philosophy of yoga which encourages the development of a yogic mind. The yogic mind is one of heightened consciousness that transcends Western ideas of knowledge; it's a consciousness informed by an inner knowing. The yogic mind is one characterized by non-attachment and surrender of dualities, and if social justice educators were to practice different forms of self-inquiry with the goal of developing a yogic mind, then our practices of social change would be filled with "honesty, truthfulness, nonviolence, compassion, and devotion" (Frawley, 2008, p. 31). As a social justice educator, I believe my position is to engage in yoga as both a method of pedagogy and inquiry to create compassionate and transformative social justice praxis.

## **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

We need a soul force! Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was a suffragist who was born a free Black woman in Baltimore. At the 1866 Women's Convention she stated, "We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul." A soul that clearly needs healing. We need to move with soul force! Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pronounced in the March on Washington speech that we must move with soul force (those were his actual words). Soul force is a yogic phrase coming from the Sanskrit word *satyagraha*. *Satyagraha* was also pronounced as a means of social change by Gandhi. Soul force! Through actions of *ahimsa*, Sanskrit for nonviolence, we move from the depths of our soul, from the parts of us that remind us about humanity. We move using Martin Buber's teaching on the I-Thou relationship, a relationship that denotes each person is concerned for the other. Or we use Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of interconnectedness, that we are all connected.

This is what I position we need. We have a responsibility to do no harm. We have a responsibility to acknowledge the truth of our connections to suffering, our own and that of others (Jordan, 2018). We have a responsibility like that presented to us by the prophet of Deuteronomy to choose life (chapter 30 verse 19). And *that* I position is what yoga invites us to do: it invites us to choose life.

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