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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Yoga and Brahmavihārā: Expanding the Concept of Self to Include Others

By John Paul Gauer

Abstract: Yoga is a method that practitioners use to expand their sense of self. According to Stuart Ray Sarbacker, yoga has been used to attempt two types of goals: the numinous which bestows special powers upon the practitioner, and the cessative which brings the process of *saṃsāra*, the endless cycle of rebirth, to an end. Both of these are goals that are focused on an individual self. In modern American yoga, a commodified practice has served to solidify the sense of individualized self by focusing solely on the body-based practices such as *āsana*. But yoga has a history of adaptability, and some practitioners may include other practices outside of Classical Yoga's eight limbs. We can see that happening as yoga teachers incorporate practices such as the *brahmavihārā*--lovingkindness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekṣā*)--into their teachings. These concepts, found in South Asian dharmic traditions, complement modern yoga by providing an expanded sense of self – one that includes one's own self and others. The *brahmavihārā* are vitally important for practical reasons, breaking down the physical and psychic divisions that are heightened during this time. By incorporating the *brahmavihārā* practices into yoga practice, it helps temper the tendency for modern yoga to emphasize the individual self, thus opening the door for an expanded sense of self.

Keywords: Yoga, Buddhism, *brahmavihārā*, lovingkindness, *maitrī*, compassion, *karuṇā*, sympathetic joy, *muditā*, equanimity, *upekṣā*

Yoga is a method that practitioners use to expand their sense of self. According to Stuart Ray Sarbacker, yoga has been used to attempt two types of goals: the numinous which bestows special powers upon the practitioner, and the cessative which brings the process of *saṃsāra*, the endless cycle of rebirth, to an end.¹ Both of these are goals that are focused on an individual self. In modern American yoga, a commodified practice has served to solidify the sense of individualized self by focusing solely on the body-based practices such as *āsana*. But yoga has a history of adaptability, and some practitioners

¹ Stuart Ray Sarbacker, *Tracing the Path of Yoga: The History and Philosophy of Indian Mind Body Discipline* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 19.



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may include other practices outside of Classical Yoga's eight limbs. We can see that happening as yoga teachers incorporate practices such as the *brahmavihārā*--lovingkindness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekṣā*)--into their teachings. These concepts, found in South Asian dharmic traditions, complement modern yoga by providing an expanded sense of self – one that includes one's own self and others. The *brahmavihārā* are vitally important for practical reasons, breaking down the physical and psychic divisions that are heightened during this time. By incorporating the *brahmavihārā* practices into yoga practice, it helps temper the tendency for modern yoga to emphasize the individual self, thus opening the door for an expanded sense of self.

Looking at yoga practiced in modern transnational spaces, with its focus on yoga postures, we may immediately see a divergence from that of yoga practices founded in dharmic traditions. An observer may make a conclusion that such "modern yoga" will continue to evolve to the point that it is unrecognizable when compared with premodern yoga, with anything but *āsana* being disregarded. Instead, if one steps back, it can be argued that we are witnessing new yoga traditions currently in the making -- ones that speak to the concerns of modern practitioners. As Yoga has risen in popularity, so too have practices from Buddhist traditions. For example, modern practitioners know versions of Buddhist meditations as "mindfulness meditation." Like the way modern yoga practitioners reduce the broader practice of *yoga* to a singular focus, *āsana* specifically, so too is Buddhism reduced to simply "mindfulness" – a term which allows for simple categorization and adoption into the modern, non-renunciant "householder" lifestyle. Many mindfulness programs consider themselves to be "secular" in that they have altered or removed religious and mystical tones in order to appeal to modern sensibilities. It is an indication of the preeminence of scientific, secular thinking that disregards religious or theological oriented points of view.

Like Yoga, Buddhism is also a collection of practices that has historically had aims to enable the practitioner to transcend mundanity. The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path (*astāṅgamārga*) is like the Classical Yoga of Patañjali in that it has components that emphasize discipline of behavior and discipline of the mind with a component of contemplation (*samādhi*). Another similarity with Classical Yoga exists in that Buddhism has a cessative goal that addresses eternal suffering of rebirth and life itself. Both Yoga and Buddhism developed under the dharmic traditions of South Asia and so they have at their roots some common underlying assumptions. Dharmic traditions hold the assumption of an interrelation among all beings called *karma* – an acknowledgement that our actions impact other beings and vice versa. The other important concept that is foundational among the dharmic traditions is the cycle of rebirth called *samsāra*. It is important to recognize that modern Yoga is sourced from this thinking, but for many modern yogis, dharmic notions are divorced from the practice. If one were to ask the typical modern yogi about their goal for Yoga, it might be for a good workout, to reduce stress or to

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feel calmer. Many who have taken a ubiquitous yoga teacher training or workshop may be familiar with dharmic concepts on the surface, but few might say that liberation from the cycle of *samsāra* is truly their goal.

Modern yogis and mindfulness practitioners practice in different contexts than those of premodern practitioners, but there are some themes that are still relevant. For example, most modern, transnational practitioners are householders, people who are invested in the practice, but still engage in other life activities such as working and raising a family. A part of Buddhist and yogic life for some premodern practitioners would have included renunciation of material goods, but for modern householders there is less likely to be a shunning of material goods. To the contrary, modern yoga practice is attached to consumption of yoga accessories and lifestyle goods. On the other hand, modern mindfulness practitioners may require less in terms of material goods, but there is still an industry in which mindfulness teachers are part of a media empire with global reach.

Without a clear link to the premodern focus of spiritual liberation, why do modern yogis and mindfulness practitioners come to studios and meditation centers? If we look at the context of yoga and mindfulness meditation, we see that it takes place in a world that is largely urbanized and technologically connected. The economic forces of a globalized system of capitalism demand centralized systems of finance and material production and in the process humans and natural resources are exploited. Modern yogis also live within the context of mass media images and social media that influence people's desires and feelings of separation. Scholar Sharon Betcher states that there is a "loss of circles of belonging and psychic wellness" and "bodies may become overly stimulated and anxious, and thus ill."² With the rise of urbanism and decline of religions as a source of respite from suffering there is a need for modern yogis to have tools for survival in a context that is nothing like what premodern yogis have experienced.

Modern yogis in the United States are rooted in a different philosophical context than dharmic South Asia. Ideas derived from European culture, such as the Enlightenment, influence American thinking as much as religion. Scientific thinking is thought of as absolute truth by many Americans and scientific standards are used to establish truth in contexts such as the legal system. For example, DNA evidence is used to establish guilt of crimes. This standard is so entrenched in American thinking that there is evidence of a shift happening so that religion has been replaced by atheism for up to as many 26% of Americans, by some estimates.³ A shift toward non-religious thinking is taking place and further

² Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh: A Secular Theology for the Global City* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 3-4.

³ Konrad Szocik and Kyle J. Messick, "Breaking the Spell: Reconsidering Cognitive and Evolutionary Approaches to

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evidence of this change is the recent promotion of an atheist to the position of head Chaplain at Harvard University.⁴

Stuart Ray Sarbacker's characterization of the cessative goal is one concerned with ending the cycle of rebirth and suffering known as *samsāra*. These goals are ones that have endured through the history of Yoga, but the goals of a modern yogi are influenced by a theological environment that contends with science and secularism. As Paul Grilley says in Sarah Power's *Insight Yoga*, a method of yoga that integrates Buddhist, Taoist and Yoga practices, "To be sure, all peoples have asked questions of their existence, but most were satisfied with answers given in their holy texts or traditions. Modern people question all traditions; in fact, they mistrust them. It is the modern dharma to build up new traditions of science, medicine, and religion based on explicable, reproducible, testable principles."⁵ Grilley uses the term *dharma* to describe the order of life, something that humans require in order to feel stable. And yet, modern yogis are faced with incredible discomforts in the form of anxiety and societal pressure that is amplified by living in a more urbanized and technologically connected environment. Despite the plenitude of material wealth now available, there is still a sense of uncertainty and groundlessness that pervades life for the modern yogi.

Whether a practitioner's theological perspective is clearly tied to a religion or remains undefined, modern Yoga practitioners show up for the practice because it provides some embodied benefits. Many practitioners build physical and mental strength, stamina and concentration, finding an analog to what historical yogis sought in attaining *vibhūti*, magical or superhuman powers. Others may find techniques that help them cultivate qualities of being. In a modern context, there is a rising lack of trust in the United States, as Vallier demonstrates in his newspaper article.⁶ Yoga practitioners may instinctively feel the need to remedy this situation by seeking Yoga because it not only fulfills their needs for physical benefits, but it also directly impacts their abilities to get along in community. This may be seen in modern practice leaders that combine *haṭhayoga āsana* and Yin Yoga with Buddhadharma, the

Atheism," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 32, 4-5 (2020): 302, doi: <https://doi-org.electra.lmu.edu/10.1163/15700682-12341501>.

⁴ Stephen M Lepore, "Harvard University names a devout ATHEIST as its new head chaplain who describes himself as 'humanist rabbi': Ivy League school says it's catering to the 40% of students who are NOT religious or agnostic," *Daily Mail*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9929315/New-Harvard-chief-chaplain-atheist-ordained-humanist-rabbi.html>.

⁵ Paul Grilley, Forward to *Insight Yoga: An Innovative Synthesis of Traditional Yoga, Meditation, and Eastern Approaches to Healing and Well-Being*, by Sarah Powers (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), IX.

⁶ Kevin Vallier, "Why Are Americans So Distrustful of Each Other?" *Wall Street Journal*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-are-americans-so-distrustful-of-each-other-11608217988>.



Buddha's teachings. For example, in Sarah Powers' *Insight Yoga*, which is a textbook for many Yin Yoga teacher trainings, an entire chapter is devoted to "Basic Buddhistharmā" in which loving-kindness and compassion are encouraged to be included during lengthy Yin Yoga poses.⁷

At first glance, some may suspect that the combination of two different traditions may represent a diluted version of each. However, both traditions arose in dharmic South Asia and thus have had overlapping practices. Though we may more often see Buddhistharmā or Mindfulness classes in separate spaces from Western Yoga, the practices of *brahmavihārā* are an example that are found in both traditions. The *brahmavihārā* are essential practices that cultivate the state of lovingkindness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekṣā*). Two of these are eminent examples of Buddhist concepts that have transcended the yoga/Buddhism dichotomy and even become popular terms in culture. Both lovingkindness (or kindness) and compassion have become buzz words and internet memes and are seen in many environments from business, to schools, government, entertainment and beyond. Some may say that this demonstrates popular culture's need to take new ideas and amplify or sell them. However, looking at the popularity of mindfulness practice in centers and apps, we can see that practitioners have found a need for these practices.

Focusing on *karuṇā*, most often translated as "compassion," the practice receives mention in a Buddhist text called *Visuddhimagga*. In it, the practitioner arouses the feeling of compassion for someone who is suffering. The practice expands the feeling for a dear person, a neutral person, and next for a hostile person.⁸ Such practices are not foreign to Patañjali. In I.33, of Patañjali's Yoga Sutras it is stated:

Clarification of the mind [results] from the cultivation of friendliness toward the happy, compassion for those who suffer, sympathetic joy for the good, and equanimity toward those who lack goodness.⁹

Here Patañjali makes explicit that practice of the *brahmavihārā*, though not named thus, are a method for clarification of the mind. It is listed among other techniques, such as expulsion or retention of breath, having sorrowless illumination that result in clarification of the mind. This seems to indicate that it is a

⁷ Sarah Powers, *Insight Yoga: An Innovative Synthesis of Traditional Yoga, Meditation, and Eastern Approaches to Healing and Well-Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), 169.

⁸ Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2010), 77.

⁹ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous: Patañjali's Spiritual Path to Freedom* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 119.



step separate from the state of *samādhi*. Still, modern Buddhist practitioners such as B. Alan Wallace, believe that one can achieve concentrated attention (*śamatha*) from the practice of *maitrī* (lovingkindness).¹⁰

Patañjali's mention of the *brahmavihārā* practices are terse, but, in Buddhist texts, there is more to dig into. Again, in the *Visuddhimagga*, a list of benefits is provided to the practitioner, "from protection by the deities, fire poison and weapons do not affect him, his mind is easily concentrated."¹¹ Concentration, absorption and a still mind are also espoused by Yoga, but Buddhism's attention to *brahmavihārā* brings up another way in which the practice deviates from Yoga. The *brahmavihārā* directly address one's relationship with other beings and directs the powers of attention and imagination to one's relationships with other beings. Examples of the effects of the practice of lovingkindness and compassion are as follows: "he is dear to human beings" and he is dear to non-human beings" and there is an ease to life "he dreams no evil dreams" and "he wakes in comfort" and "he sleeps in comfort." The author of the *Visuddhimagga* states that such benefits are common among the four *brahmavihārā* and it is no surprise that modern practitioners continue to find the practices rewarding, especially in the context of a world that sees many people at odds with each other.

Yogic and Buddhist texts alike hold concentration, meditation and absorption as necessary states for realizing the end-state of the respective traditions. With a focus on *brahmavihārā*, the practitioner also enables powers of imagination. With Grinshpon's re-reading of the Yoga Sutras, we can see the practice of yoga in a whole new light.¹² Rather than the "male"/Siva-focused deep focus of *samādhi*, the practice of *brahmavihārā* utilizes other facets of our being, namely our creative abilities. In modern times, with gender equality being a big focus, these practices may appeal to practitioners who would like to find other expressions of discipline and transcendence. Reorienting away from the concentrative, "male-focused" practices also speaks to the modern yogi who wishes to decenter yoga away from classes of people who hold societal power. Enoch Page refers to the top class as "superordinates" in the American hierarchy within the Yoga community, "Yoga's Westernization in America would segregate men over women, rich over poor, whites over nonwhites, colonizers over the colonized, and

¹⁰ B. Alan Wallace, *Boundless Heart - The Four Immeasurables* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1999), 121.

¹¹ Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification*, 306-307.

¹² Yohan Grinshpon, "On Metaphysics and Imagination (*Bhāvanā*): A Note on Patañjali's *Siddhis* as Yogic Visualization," in *Thinking with the Yoga Sutra of Patañjali: Translation and Interpretation*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple and Ana Laura Funes Maderey (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 19.



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heteronormatives over the sexual or gender minorities.”¹³ Thus the cultivation of mindsets that promote the breaking down of barriers are naturally finding a home in modern yoga practices.

Such rejection of “male” ways of practice also has precedent in historical Buddhist practices. Looking at the Hindu tradition, the Bhagavad Gita focuses on the yoga of action and many scenarios in it, and in the Mahābhārata are presented in war or conflict scenarios¹⁴. Looking at Buddha Gautama’s life, we can see that his life represents a rejection of the warrior class into which he was born. He was also a part of the yoga tradition, practicing extreme asceticism so that his body was emaciated. Yet, he concluded that this was not the way to enlightenment. He instead taught the Middle Way and the Eightfold Path as a way of liberation from suffering, which includes *samādhi*. It is because of this approach of a Middle Way, that many modern yogis who already have enough structure and discipline in their lives are also attracted to Buddhist practices.

Looking at the Hindu tradition through reading the Bhagavad Gita, we see that meditation is the focus, in which *samādhi* is a “superconscious state where one savors bliss that endures.”¹⁵ Here the end state is bliss-like, which in everyday language is “complete happiness.” Resting in this state may help us access a sense of an indestructible self, but it does not provide a feeling of interrelatedness that some modern yogis may crave. One may ask if modern practitioners only want to feel better connected in this life or are they looking for some goal outside of themselves. In comparison, Buddhist practitioners may find realization of the non-self (*anatta*) through the practice of compassion. The practitioner may realize the truth of non-self by placing attention in stages upon oneself, others and finally the greater world.¹⁶ One can see that there is a difference in the two practices in that yogic *samādhi* is focused on the individual’s experience of the indestructible self, whereas the experience of non-self deliberately contemplates others.

Outside of the spiritual domain, there are still reasons for practitioners to practice the *brahmavihārā*. The emergent popularity of *brahmavihārā* practices such as *maitrī* and *karunā*, among modern yoga practitioners speak to a need to engage the imagination and create an expanded sense of self. They may also bring us to a heightened state and even support a deep concentration practice as B.

¹³ Enoch H. Page, “The Gender, Race, and Class Barriers: Enclosing Yoga as White Public Space,” in *Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis*, ed. Beth Berila, Melanie Klein, and Chelsea Jackson Roberts (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 50.

¹⁴ Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press: 2014), 6.

¹⁵ Huston Smith, foreword to *The Bhagavad Gita: Twenty-Fifth-Anniversary Edition*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), xvi.

¹⁶ Parattukudi Augustine and Melville Wayne, “Understanding the Phenomenon: A Comparative Study of Compassion of the West and Karuna of the East,” *Asian Philosophy*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Feb. 2019): 16, doi:10.1080/09552367.2019.1584970.

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Alan Wallace stated, but it also supports a need to materialize conditions in one's life that seem to be missing to many in the modern world. Looking at Grinshpon's work analyzing the place of imagination in Indian traditions, we see that, "Likewise, the practice of creative imagination (*bhāvayitvā*) of compassion towards suffering creatures brings about power (of compassion); yogic practice of imagining (*bhāvayitvā*) of satisfaction (*muditā*) towards pure people, brings about greater power (capacity) for satisfaction.¹⁷ Such use of the imagination provides a richer experience of the inner human landscape. One in which human needs for connection and societal peace is elevated to a goal that is akin to the numinous attainment of special powers. While the *brahmavihārā* might not be a part of a limbed system, there is potential to create a system that upholds these heart practices at the same "gold standard" that *samādhi* is held in yoga practices.

In modern life, we're constantly confronted with information that supports the notion that all beings are interconnected. From the global COVID-19 pandemic, to wildfires that are scorching the United States, to storms that flood low-lying areas and other phenomenon, it has become clear to many that our actions impact each other – yet others still have not made that realization. In a world that is physically and psychically shrinking, the need for practices to support greater connection has become ever more important. As Betcher explains, "Vedic thought, in its American circuits, has married well with the individualism generated within the West. But urbanism today presents humans with new challenges, such as learning to form attachments amid difference or learning to think beyond kin and kind."¹⁸ We can also look at the changing demographics of the US for indicators of how yoga may be supporting a need for looking beyond ourselves. Looking at the results of the 2020 census, we see that the US population is increasingly multiracial.¹⁹ As the world becomes increasingly populated and encounter people beyond their "kin and kind," practices that can support greater communication, collaboration and conflict resolution are required. For example, looking at Augustine and Wayne's comparison of the term Compassion among "Western" and "Eastern" traditions, we find that there is an inherent difference in the Buddhist concept of compassion, which includes the application of compassion with no conditions.²⁰ Utilizing compassion meditation practice, we may develop the capacity to see that others are deserving of our compassion as much as we are, helping us move beyond

¹⁷ Grinshpon, "On Metaphysics and Imagination (*Bhāvanā*)," 27.

¹⁸ Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh*, 3-4.

¹⁹ "Improved Race and Ethnicity Measures Reveals U.S. Population is Much More Multiracial," United States Census Bureau, August 12, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html>.

²⁰ Augustine and Wayne, "Understanding the Phenomenon," 16.



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an intellectual notion of interrelatedness to a true realization that one's sense of self is inextricably linked to everyone and everything else.

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