

Who am I? – The Quest for Personal and Universal Transformation through Yoga and Cross-Cultural Competence

by Julia Gaspar-Bates

As human beings, we are constantly on the quest for our identity. Discovering who we are is a multi-million dollar business fueling mental health practice, self-help books, motivational speakers among many other areas that foster self-development. As intercultural and diversity practitioners, we tackle this topic from a different angle—to enhance self-awareness of our identities through the lens of culture. Indeed, much of our work as trainers and educators is to help our clients and students examine the impact culture has had on shaping our behaviors, values, beliefs, and assumptions. To do this requires probing deeper into ourselves, to better understand the different cultural influences that have contributed to our identity and to recognize and accept differences in others when looked at in the context of their culture.

Nudging our clients and students towards greater awareness and appreciation for the role of different cultures requires a certain amount of patience and perseverance. We often need to fortify ourselves to handle the barrage of challenges that can come our way as our clients and students grapple with alternative ways of thinking and behaving, particularly if they adamantly believe that their way is the “right” way. We also need to have stamina and find ways to ground ourselves. The intercultural and diversity trainer and educator’s role is both demanding and delicate. We are frequently required to address highly sensitive topics, respond rapidly and tactfully to potentially loaded questions, constantly be alert to the dynamics in the room and find ways to manage our audience’s reaction to certain information that may shake their belief system.

Mindfulness is often defined as an ability to bring our awareness to the present moment in a non-judgmental way. Developing a mindfulness practice through applying the principles of yoga is one means to strengthen our intercultural work on multiple levels. First, it can provide us with deeper insight into ourselves by opening the channels to discovering our personal truth. Since yoga is an internal journey with the goal of ultimately reaching a higher level of consciousness, we are continually peeling off layers, or sheaths, of ourselves, known as *koshas* in Sanskrit, to ultimately draw closer to the *atman*, or universal spirit. As interculturalists and diversity specialists, we embark on more of an external journey to create understanding of the impact culture has on our social relationships. The ultimate goal as interculturalists is to reach that higher state of cultural intelligence¹ (CQ) or to develop cross-cultural competence. Secondly, the practice of yoga can provide us with simple techniques that we can use in our daily work. It is important for us to be grounded so that we can successfully brace ourselves for the multiple challenges we may encounter, from our own fears and inhibitions when it comes to addressing an audience, to confronting our

personal biases, to placating a difficult student or workshop participant. This article will address the ways that yoga can be effectively used to further enhance our work to create transformation, both on a personal level as well as with our clients and students.

The definition of yoga is “to unite” or “to yoke” the body, mind and spirit. While in the West, we often associate yoga with the physical practice of doing a headstand or sitting in lotus position, this is one small part of the larger scope of the practice. Indeed, in what is known as the eight limbs of yoga, *asana*, or the physical poses, are only the third limb. *Asana* is preceded by the five *yamas*, or abstentions, which are the ethical rules of conduct for “right” living in our external worlds, and the five *niyamas*, or observances, which are essentially the moral and ethical rules by which we should live in our internal worlds to foster spiritual growth.

Pranayama, the fourth limb, is the extension of our *prana*, our life force or our breath, and is frequently taught in tandem with *asana* in many western yoga studios. The purpose of *pranayama* is to slow down our breath sufficiently to help us develop a steady mind and endow ourselves with the self-discipline needed to make sound judgment. It is also known to enhance our perception, which is an essential skill to cultivate in our intercultural work. When we consciously align our body’s movement with our *prana*, our breath, we are able to allow the vital energy to flow effectively through our bodies which ultimately helps us stay more centered and helps keep us in the present moment. Staying centered and in the present is core to our work in the intercultural and diversity fields to enable us to address some of the aforementioned trials. Taking a deep breath and finding our foundation are often crucial to calming our sympathetic nervous system which is responsible for triggering the fight or flight response. This is one of the first principles we can use to find our balance as we often stand on the precipice in our daily work whether we’re dealing with stage fright or encouraging others to stretch themselves to explore new depths of their identities. It can also be used to help us with our own interactions, be they cross-cultural or even with our spouse or co-worker, when we find ourselves jumping to conclusions or forming a negative impression about the other’s behavior. Instead, intentionally developing the ability to pause momentarily, to breathe deeply from our diaphragm, and find our footing may allow us to defuse the emotional response we have and to explore ways to find out more about the other’s perspective.

There are many parallels between the yoga and the intercultural field. Both practices emphasize the importance of developing self-awareness and are a continual journey towards consciousness and self-actualization, to be more in tuned with and understand the higher Self. The yogini, or yoga practitioner’s, journey is internal; to stretch her physical, mental and spiritual abilities, while the interculturalist’s journey is external and focuses on creating the tools needed to interact competently with others who approach life from a different value and belief system to our own. Yoga stresses that we live in a world of duality, of yin and yang, or reciprocity in relationships. Our internal thoughts impact our external actions and vice versa. The duality of forces is essential to our composition and

one cannot exist without the other. Therefore a deeper awareness of the higher Self is critical to be able to co-exist harmoniously within ourselves and with others. As intercultural and diversity practitioners, we are committed to fostering self-awareness and awakening our ability to connect more authentically with people different from ourselves to create transformation.

Today our work as interculturalists and diversity specialists is rife with obstacles we must address. Intolerance, stereotyping, mistrust, misunderstanding, and conflict are just a few of the areas we must address that frequently cause uncertainty and anxiety. Yoga helps us manage these challenges as it also teaches us the philosophy of non-attachment while at the same time emphasizing the interconnectedness between all living matter. This concept of non-attachment mitigates our emotional reaction to negative stimuli surrounding us and yet it may also inspire us with the power to feel compassion towards others thereby fostering both social and environmental consciousness since we are able to take a step back to recognize ourselves as part of the greater whole. Likewise, enhanced cultural intelligence provides us with the ability to engage in deeper dialogue with others about critical issues that we are all facing. As our world becomes progressively smaller and more interdependent, this awareness and consciousness are fundamental to our long-term survival.

From an intercultural perspective, the self-awareness we strive to teach and develop ourselves comes from much reflection into the various factors in our external existence that have shaped our identities, such as our family and social infrastructure, our educational systems, and other micro and macro cultural components from our gender, religion, race and ethnicity, region, etc. When we are successfully able to metaphorically peel away the various layers that have been influenced by our culture, we develop more clarity into who we are from the ways we communicate, behave and the more deeply rooted beliefs, values and assumptions we hold. We then develop certain skills that allow us to navigate through the multiple layers of our identities to connect with others. Yoga's purpose, however, is to draw us inwards, to travel the rocky roads of our internal world to control the *citta*, or the mindstuff, that clogs us with often illusory thoughts that ultimately impact our actions and behaviors towards others. As we peel away the four external sheaths, or *koshas*, we strive to arrive at the *adandamaya kosha*, the sheath of pure bliss, when we have found our truth and have been able to align it with the *atman*, or the universal spirit.

For this transcendence to occur, we therefore need to blend the state of non-attachment with the need for interconnectedness. In the ancient text the Bhagavad Gita, the god Krishna stresses to the warrior Arjuna the importance of non-attachment while at the same time fulfilling the *dharma*, or duty, required of him.² In essence, this is a fundamental teaching that we can apply to our work as interculturalists and diversity specialists. The more we're able to detach ourselves from our ego (which often hinders our ability to speak in public), from our desire to acquire a tangible result, and from any attacks that come our way, the more we can focus our attention of fulfilling our duty to educate others. The purpose of this work requires that we stress the universal connection between each and every one of us, regardless of our culture, by engaging our students and clients in dialogue to foster mutual understanding and encouraging compassion.

In summary, the yogic principles discussed in this article can be interwoven on many levels into our work as interculturalists and diversity specialists. The first stage is to step back and

to observe our surroundings. In our internal worlds, we can do this by deepening our practice of yoga through *pranayama*, *asana*, and even meditation, to seek our personal truth. In our external worlds we achieve this by conducting the cultural due diligence necessary to examine our own cultural identities as well as others' cultural beliefs and values to gain a better understanding of their "truths." The next stage involves practicing non-attachment to our emotional reactions when we recognize that other cultural worldviews may differ radically from our own and at the same time compassion for others whose values may be contradictory to ours. This requires us to eradicate the "us vs. them" mentality in order to recognize that we are all universal beings. The final stage is acknowledging the importance of this duality—in this case the need to be both spiritually and culturally intelligent—to provide us with the essential tools to rise to new heights. It is only in traversing these difference stages that we are able to fully transform ourselves and support others to develop our higher Self as we continue along our respective journeys.

REFERENCES

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