

## Yoga and the global wellbeing

Shonil Bhagwat, The Open University, UK

*Can yoga help humanity achieve the Sustainable Development Goals? On the international day of yoga, Shonil Bhagwat explains the yogic way of understanding how individual actions relate to global challenges.*

As a spiritual practice, cosmic energy is important in yoga. This makes the day of summer solstice in the Northern Hemisphere, when the earth's North Pole is most inclined towards the sun, of special significance. In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly declared 21 June as the International Day of Yoga after the idea was first proposed by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his address to the Assembly in 2014 (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/un-declares-june-21-as-international-day-of-yoga/articleshow/45480636.cms>) and unanimously accepted by all 193 member states ([http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/69/131](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/69/131)).

In addition to the positive effects of yoga on mind and body, and its benefits to health and well-being, Modi also argued: "By changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can help us deal with climate change" (<https://www.narendramodi.in/text-of-the-pms-statement-at-the-united-nations-general-assembly-6660>). In 2016, the United Nations went even further and proposed yoga as a means to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (<http://webtv.un.org/watch/yoga-for-the-achievement-of-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs/4964711635001>). How can yoga help to deal with the global challenges (<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/what-are-the-10-biggest-global-challenges/>) such as climate change, and to achieve by 2030 the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>)?

### ***The theory and practice of yoga***

*Yoga Sutras*, a treatise on the theory and practice of yoga, is attributed to *Patanjali*, a notable scholar in ancient India, who lived over 2000 years ago. He laid out an eight-fold path to yoga which put forward a code of conduct for individuals. Out of these so-called eight "limbs" of yoga, three are better known than others. These are *asanas* (physical postures), *pranayama* (breathing exercises) and *dhyana* (meditation). The remaining five are less well-known. These are *yamas* (ethical restraints), *niyamas* (ethical observances), *pratyahara* (withdrawal of senses), *dharana* (concentration) and *samadhi* (superconsciousness). Collectively, these limbs attribute to the spiritual practice of yoga and can potentially have a transcendental effect on the practitioner – meaning that they are alleged to open up experiences fundamentally different to, or beyond, those accessible through ordinary actions. The withdrawal of senses, concentration and superconsciousness are to do with the spiritual aspirations, while the ethical restraints and ethical observances are to do with everyday actions (<http://www.journalofyoga.org/yogaandsustain.pdf>). These are most relevant to addressing the global challenges and achieving the SDGs.

The ethical restraints include qualities such as non-harming; truthfulness; non-stealing; non-possessiveness; and maintenance of vitality. The ethical observances include cleanliness; contentment; purification through discipline; self-study; and devotion to a higher power (<https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/live-your-yoga-discover-yamas-niyamas>). The argument is that these ethical restraints and observances can collectively develop a morality that can help deal with the global challenges such as climate change and help in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (<http://webtv.un.org/watch/yoga-for-the-achievement-of-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs/4964711635001>). The Sustainable Development Goals are underpinned by a strong moral agenda that appeals to the human yearning for harmony with fellow human beings and with the natural world of which we are part. The theory and practice of yoga therefore seems like a natural fit with this moral agenda.

## ***The benefits of yoga for health and wellbeing***

Yet, yoga today is primarily driven by the attraction of physical postures, breathing exercises and meditation. From its roots in ancient India, millions of people around the world now practice yoga and attend their weekly yoga classes, often in the bespoke yoga studios around the world (<https://theconversation.com/from-india-with-love-how-yoga-got-its-stretch-back-79593>). Yoga has quickly risen in popularity: a 2016 study showed that in the US, for example, there are 36.7 million yoga practitioners, up from 20.4 million in 2012, and they spend over 16 billion US Dollars on yoga classes, gears and accessories ([http://media.yogajournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2016\\_YIAS\\_American-Public\\_FactSheet.pdf](http://media.yogajournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2016_YIAS_American-Public_FactSheet.pdf)).

Yoga has proven beneficial in treating mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorders and generalized anxiety disorders (<https://theconversation.com/can-yoga-help-treat-mental-illness-96822>). Yoga classes in the workplace have helped to reduce back pain, reduce sickness absences and increase the productivity of employees (<https://theconversation.com/yoga-in-the-workplace-can-reduce-back-pain-and-sickness-absence-87375>). Yoga postures can go a long way in improving the practitioner's mental and physical health, and boosting self-esteem and happiness through their positive benefits on autonomous nervous system (<https://theconversation.com/how-yoga-makes-us-happy-according-to-science-77840>).

Yogic exercises and breathing techniques have proven beneficial in reducing stress in Australian schools (<https://theconversation.com/why-we-should-put-yoga-in-the-australian-school-curriculum-89962>); promoting well-being and employment of young people in Africa (<https://theconversation.com/yoga-is-bringing-well-being-and-employment-to-young-people-in-africa-78855>); and helping to alleviate childhood trauma for girls in the US juvenile justice system (<https://theconversation.com/how-yoga-is-helping-girls-heal-from-trauma-78161>). The benefits of yoga for personal health and wellbeing have been observed in different settings and among different social groups.

But can yoga make that leap from the individual wellbeing to global wellbeing as the International Day of Yoga seeks to celebrate?

## ***From individual wellbeing to global wellbeing***

The first International Day of Yoga celebrations in New Delhi, India, on 21 June 2015 saw over 35,000 people – including Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi – performing 21 yoga postures for 35 minutes (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyPZGhA-rMU>). In 2016, the celebration took the form of a “mass yoga demonstration” in Chandigarh, India, attended by over 30,000 people (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/good-governance/chandigarh/PM-celebrates-International-Yoga-Day-in-Chandigarh/articleshow/52847826.cms>). In 2017, the outdoor yoga session in Lucknow, India, was attended by over 50,000 people (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yoga-day-india/thousands-join-indias-modi-hit-the-mat-for-international-yoga-day-idUSKBN19C0Q3>). The 2018 event to be held at the Forest Research Institute, Dehradun, India (<http://www.travelwhistle.com/event/international-yoga-day-2018-dehradun-registration/>), is set to attract over 60,000 people. These grand gestures to promote the benefits of yoga for health and wellbeing certainly have a mass appeal as the number of people attending these events shows. But can they really achieve the lofty ambitions of global wellbeing that the International Day of Yoga seeks to promote?

The focus of these mass celebrations is far removed from the ethical restraints and the ethical observances (<https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/live-your-yoga-discover-yamas-niyamas>) that form part of the theory and practice of yoga as *Patanjali* envisaged over 2000 years ago. These restraints and observances have the potential to help people and nations to deal with the global challenges and for the world to achieve the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals. But for that to happen, yoga needs to go beyond the

grand gatherings, and into people's hearts and minds. Only by appealing to people's ethical and moral values, can the practice of yoga promote global wellbeing.