

Swamiji and Ammaji have talked about it. Now I am talking about it. Over the past five decades, the main common thread was the struggle to share Yoga in its wholistic, cultural context in other parts of the world where this cultural context doesn't exist or is seen as suspect and primitive. When trained, students go home and want to know how to replicate and bring traditional Yoga alive in their environment. Without exception, everybody struggles. They go back where value may not be put on what is valued here. And value may be put on what is not valued here. Students want to keep what they have learnt in the ashram alive when teaching in their own country but the culture and lifestyle is not the same.

In the ashram you get up in the morning, you do an *aarati* and you have deities like Ganesha, Muruga, Lakshmi and Saraswati. You have the Guru. You sit for morning meditation and contemplation. You do hatha Yoga, karma Yoga around the ashram, then Raja Yoga, relaxation and pranayama mid-noon. In the afternoon, there is Yoga Chikitsa, mantra or yantra. In the evening we have *satsanga*, music, *bhajans* and Samskrut. On Sundays at Sri Kambaliswamy *Madam*, students join ceremonies done for the Guru *Parampara*. We work with young children in Yoga, dance and cultural infusion.

Ananda Ashram is definitely not a cookie factory where all cookies come out the same size and shape. Each individual who comes out of the ashram, grows into who they can be, manifests who they are to the best of their ability, and then continues to grow on a trajectory that is the individuals' alone. You are on your own path. There is no comparison. We have seen people's struggles going back to different religious, local, cultural and societal perspectives. Over a long time, we have seen it, although this group has been very organic.

Another side is inorganic development. People come to India for a few weeks, get a Yoga certificate affiliated to some Yoga alliance type of organisation — and many will affiliate you. When they go back, suddenly they are an expert who says, "I studied in India." If you talk, interact and observe them, you wonder if they really were in India or just the body while the "rest of them" was not at all "here". These people take Yoga as a commodity and start selling it. Then they take one of two sides. Both create issues because they have gone to extremes. Yoga lies in balance.

2. Sinister Methodology of misappropriation

The first is when they **remove everything Indian or Sanskrit. Sanitized Yoga** is just a fitness regime, **ayoga Yoga**, **viyoga Yoga**, not Yoga. There

is this **misrepresentation** of Yoga either without the Sanskrit or by creating unions. Up-donkey, down-donkey, why not when you have up-dog or down-dog? Sanskrit, the original sound, has a certain vibration that gets altered when you translate it. Take '*adbo mukha*' — *adbo* means downward + *mukha*, face + *shwana* is dog + *āsana*. In our tradition it's *meru āsana*, the mountain posture. Some call it *parvatāsana*. Not the dog. To put it in context to see how things have got mutated and mutilated, say the word *adhomukhashwanāsana*. It has a beautiful poetic melodious vibration and flow. Then it gets translated to downward facing dog. It's as if you are abusing someone. *Adhomukhashwanāsana* is as if you are blessing them. I have been in conferences and sessions where instructors yell at the top of their voice: "Down-Dog! Up-Dog! Down-Dog! Up-Dog!" Hundreds of participants, just like a dog, are going down and up. It is insulting to the core values of humanity itself.

Samskrut (Sanskrit/Samskruta) is not just a language. **Samskrut is a vibration**. When Yoga terms are used in the Sanskrit, that divine language, known as Samskrut *Bhasba*, has a certain vibration. When I say Yoga, Yoga has a certain vibration. If I just translate it as a union, that word union doesn't have the same vibration that the word Yoga has. When I say *āsana*, it has a certain vibration that has, behind that vibration, **infinite meanings and associations**. When I say pose, it doesn't have that. When I say Nataraja, it has infinite connotations. When I say the dancer pose, it has none of those connotations.

The other side is they **glamourize and then use sacred symbols and sacred concepts without understanding** what they are or where they are appropriate. Without realising what the cultural symbolism is, it is put up as show pieces. Tattoos are one case. Or they start a studio decorated with colourful objects they bought in India, like bedsheets and blankets. Ganesha, Durga, Shiva everywhere but no idea what they are. It may be the Gayatri mantra written there.

*Om bhurbhuvahswahah, tat saviturvarenyam,
bhargodevasyadhimahi, dhियोyo nahpracodayate.*

Deep, primordial, most important sacred Gayatri is put on the floor. Or a very beautiful image of Ganesha used as a tablecloth. Natarāja is not a statue to be put in your lobby, or just a nice statue picked up someplace for a thousand dollars. Don't think it is exclusive to only what is happening in the west. Cultural misappropriation happens in many Indian five star hotels. You go to any five star hotel in India and in the lobby, they'll have a huge Natarāja that should have been put in a temple and worshipped. Anybody who understands what Natarāja is will get

offended. Symbols that are sacred are being **misused and misrepresented** without an iota of understanding.

3. Importance of a living culture

Culture means a **living tradition** of a society developed so it can grow—culturing. With gardens it's horticulture. With crops, it's agriculture. Working with worms, it's sericulture. In microbiology we do cultures of your blood, semen, urine, or stools to see what microorganisms are growing. Culture means to grow. Every culture, especially ancient culture, has amazing teachings. Asia, India, South America, South Africa, I respect them greatly. India is a living culture. It confuses many Indologists who would like to put India in a box in a museum and study it. There is a **living culture** which is constantly evolving, transforming, and **Yoga is an integral part of this**. You won't see that if you go to five star hotels. People come to India, stay in hotels where they have a "keep fit" gym, have a smart Yoga instructor teach a few asanas in the morning and afternoon and spend the rest of the day sightseeing at the Taj Mahal, Qutub Minar and enjoy Mussoorie. **When you take Yoga out of the culture, you have the body but not the soul.**

4. Differences between cultural appropriation and appreciation

Let's change the way people debate this. **Cultural misappropriation** is when people wear Indian clothes as a trend, to fit into the Yoga scene, or wear a whole set of Rudraksha malas and embellishments like a fancy dress party just to look cool. These are not worn as ornaments in India. Rudraksha and other malas have special meanings, and are used for specific types of practices or effects, are worn or not worn, kept covered and hidden, or allowed to be visible, for different purposes. When something so very sacred, a symbol of renunciation is taken and misappropriated to serve your temporary fancy trend, you have just killed the whole spirit. Wearing a Rudraksha is a great responsibility, something you need to live up to in thought, word and deed.

On the other hand, there is **cultural appreciation**, adoration, love, and respect. A majority of our western students sincerely adore Indian culture and get deep into it. When a westerner loves Indian culture, they realise wearing a sari is an art. Many of our students have mastered it well. They love wearing saris because it feels good. They connect to the Universal Divine Feminine power through it. They are not doing it for Instagram followers.

We Indians here love such people who love our culture and understand it with depth. **Sir John**

Woodroffe was one such westerner who came to India. He wrote one of the finest books on tantra, *The Serpent Power* under the name Arthur Avalon. He fell in love with India, learnt Samskrut and went into the depths of tantric texts. He was a Judge and wore Indian clothes even in the High Court, no matter what fellow judges thought. He became what those teachings were. He loved them so much and we respect it. Nobody in any sense would ever say there is cultural misappropriation by someone like that.

Taking the teachings without credit to the source is also **cultural misappropriation**. In an academic research paper, find out who has done what, collect this information and then write different statements of people who have worked before, put it together and cite them. In the references or bibliography their paper or the book or the chapter is appropriately cited and the context in which their work is used is given. This is academic integrity. Taking somebody's published work and pretending it is one's own without mentioning or citing the name or the reference is academic dishonesty and intellectual property theft. **Same thing with the culture.**

Appropriate means everything is as it should be. When you have respect for the culture, when you use the cultural symbols or cultural context and you give proper reference, you are respecting it, you are quoting it, you are appreciating it and you are using it as it is meant to be used. Then the term is **culturally appropriate Yoga**. **Culturally appropriate Yoga is what we need**. We need to understand it, not take something and then say this is mine and package it. That is the digestion of Yoga. Many people take practices, repackage it, and there's no reference to the source at all or there's a trademark, a copyright on it.

When many of the Yoga masters from India went to the west, instead of standing up for what Yoga is, they modified it to suit whatever agenda would get them an audience. It got diluted into something so far from Yoga that today we are struggling. If you retrace the roots of it, much of the blame rests on some of the great Yoga masters who went to the west. Even people who trained with legitimate masters ended up with this type of total mutation occurring in the name of adaptation.

Studying in India doesn't mean anything. People could have stayed in India for seven years smoking weed. I remember a singer at a festival in Milan who said he had stayed in Varanasi for seven years and studied in the traditional method. He announced he would sing for Shiva. And then he sang, "Sarva mangalamāngalye, Shive savārthasādhike." This is a mantra for Mother Goddess. This guy didn't even understand that the Shive in that stanza refers to the

consort of Shiva that is Shakti. That is misrepresentation and that is what hurts. This is not about someone with a pure heart, respect for the culture, wanting to know more about the culture of Yoga, understanding the fertile Indian culture from which Yoga has sprouted and which is sustaining, nourishing the growth and transformation of Yoga even these days. Someone who wishes to understand the culture, who has humility, love, adoration and appreciation for the culture is valued by anybody who has any brain cells working

5. Is being “Indian” enough?

Many people in the west think that just because they are Indian, or Indian origin, that they can do anything they want and it will be culturally appropriate. Indian five star hotels are doing cultural misappropriation by the way they misuse our sacred symbols. So, what is happening is there is a lot of **misrepresentation** and **misappropriation**. That has to be fought. That has to be pointed out. That has to be brought to the front. And that has to be worked on because it is wrong. It is wrong to take this thousands of years old culture, and just try to sell it as though you are the first one who has invented it. You are not the first one and you will not be the last one also. Because this is timeless, **Santana Dharma is timeless**.

Just because somebody is white doesn't mean cultural misappropriation of Yoga. We have to be very careful because there are huge smear campaigns against legitimate people who love the culture. There are people who love the culture, who adore the culture, who follow the culture, who live Yoga. It boils down to that **age-old duality — us versus them**. This is not a black versus white, or white versus brown or anything like that. This is about whether you are valuing, respecting, using it as it is meant to be used.

My father said that ‘everything is there for your use, that Yoga is the science of right use-ness.’ **Right-use-ness is righteousness — dharma**. Be in tune with dharma by doing the right thing in the proper context. Then it is culturally appropriate Yoga. When taken out of context, it becomes mis-appropriation. Never think this is about Indian versus non-Indian, white versus brown, white versus black, Hindu versus others. **Sanātana Dharma is a culture that blesses everyone. This is a culture that blesses the pure heart.**

6. Purity of intent is paramount

The most important component for Yoga is a pure heart. If purity, *saucha* is there, Mahārishi Patañjali so beautifully tells us “You stop getting caught up with

the other person's body: *svaṅgajugupsāparairasamsargah.*” You are not worried whether the other person is white, black, green, blue, pink, tall, short. That doesn't matter because you have elevated yourself in *saucha*, or purity. You are witnessing the divine manifesting in the other. There is no duality. There is purity. He says: “You then manifest cheerfulness: *saumanasya*. You start to have one-pointedness: *ekāgrya*. You start to master the senses: *indriya jaya*; and you become fit to witness the Self: *ātmadarśanayogyatvāni ca.*”

What beautiful teachings Mahārishi Patañjali has given us. It is based on *saucha*, purity. Are you a *visuddhātma*, a pure soul? Are you someone who can manifest purity and transcend bodily limitations, bodily hang-ups? By saying you are white, black, tall, skinny, you have six fingers, six toes, one leg, your pancreas, brain or heart doesn't work? When you have transcended the bodily limitations, gone into *svaṅgajugupsāparairasamsargah*, then you connect with each person, each living being as a human being, respecting them for the divine manifest through them. The divine in you is bowing to the divine in them because you have got established in that purity.

So many people have come from other cultures who have understood and respect the Indian culture and context of Yoga. They try to practice, teach and share it with respect. This is **culturally appropriate Yoga**. If somebody is just trying to steal something it is **misappropriation**. **Stena is misappropriation**. You have not earned it and are not worthy for it. When you work on yourself, love it, respect it and value it, at that point you start to become worthy of it. You have the *yogyata*, the worthiness. Just because you are different to someone else, never let anybody say you are misappropriating Yoga. **Misappropriating Yoga comes when credit is not given** to the source, when it is not presented in the context and when the person is not living the teachings and is just showcasing something for the sake of packaging. When culture is used as a packaging tool to sell your body based practice, it is misappropriation

7. Some ideas on moving forward mindfully

I have students who are Indians and non-Indians and find people who love Yoga, who live Yoga, across the globe. **The teachings of Yoga are universal at the highest level**. When we start to come into that spirit of Yoga, let Yoga live with you. Every breath should be a breath of Yoga. Don't worry about barking dogs. As Swami Vivekananda used to say, “The elephant walking through the marketplace, doesn't bother with the barking dogs.” Think about this because it is so important. There are always going

to people to criticise you. I have my own share of people who criticise me. They enable me to see a perspective I would not see otherwise. Whenever there is another perspective, acknowledge it. **Listen to it, contemplate it and see whether there is some truth.** Find that truth and try to reflect on it. If change has to come, let it come from within. But not if you are true to Yoga and somebody is criticising just for the sake of marketing or pulling you down because they are jealous. There's a lot of jealousy in Yoga land and the easiest way is point out what someone stands out for then to poke them about it. **Integrity, fidelity and commitment to Yoga is of prime importance.** When you have that and you have love and respect for the culture, it is totally **culturally appropriate Yoga.**

8. Conclusion

I hope that this will enable many of you to take a stand on this. When people are misappropriating it, let us call them out. Let them know. Let us try to help people change for the better. But just because you don't like somebody, if their Yoga studio is the competition down the street, don't misuse this cultural appropriation tag. It is like the #metoo tag being misused. Cultural appropriation is a big problem, but it is also being misused. We have to understand that. Let us get to the root. The root is Yoga. Yoga is universal. Yoga is thriving, nourished by the culture of Sanatana Dharma. Love the culture.

Love Yoga. Live Yoga. And let that manifest in every cell of your existence.
