

Embodied Awareness and Action: Kundalini Yoga & Meditation as a Foundation for Social Education

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Resumo

À medida que entramos no século 21, deparamo-nos com uma era de saturação de informação, de stress generalizado e contínuo, de falta de tempo e de crescentes exigências sociais e pessoais. A atividade humana tem um impacto direto e negativo na teia da vida à escala global e no entanto a nossa consciência enquanto espécie é ainda limitada e egocêntrica. Como podemos ir além do nosso eu-ego limitado, desenvolvendo capacidade espiritual e uma real conexão com os outros? Como conservar flexibilidade e resistência mentais, emocionais e físicas e integrar o aspeto espiritual da nossa vida com o material e o tecnológico? Como compreender profundamente a interligação de todas as coisas e agir consciente e corajosamente a partir dessa profunda compreensão? A Yoga e Meditação Kundalini ensinadas por Yogi Bhajan proporcionam um enquadramento para uma mudança interna de paradigma – do “eu” para o “nós”; do conhecimento intelectual para uma nova relação com a intuição, a emoção e o instinto; da confusão para a clareza; do isolamento para a união; do medo e da insegurança para a ação consciente e corajosa. Este documento apresenta elementos fundamentais da prática de Yoga Kundalini – Pranayama, Kriya, Meditação e Mantra – e explica como esta prática espiritual incorporada desenvolve a sensibilização, a consciência e a coragem para agir a partir do coração enquanto guerreiros espirituais neste tempo de caos planetário sem precedentes. A Kundalini Yoga ensinada por Yogi Bhajan e as práticas pedagógicas libertadoras de Paulo Freire partilham algumas bases filosóficas fundamentais: o despertar da consciência pessoal é a chave para a emancipação e para a mudança social; cada pessoa possui um mestre interno/uma sabedoria interna inatos, que devem ser respeitados; o papel do professor não é o modelo-padrão hierarquizado de poder sobre, mas, antes, o professor age como um facilitador do processo de desenvolvimento, pelo aluno, do seu próprio mestre interno. Finalmente, o objetivo da Yoga Kundalini é a verdade/libertação através da experiência de vida incorporada.. Estando plenamente presente na sua vida, o (a) yogue testemunha o fluxo do Espírito enquanto este se manifesta na experiência individual, na experiência interpessoal partilhada e na experiência universal. Foi por esta capacidade de ser uma testemunha presente, informada e emancipada da sua própria vida, por esta «aventura na revelação», para usar a frase da Pedagogia da Esperança (1992, p.1) de Paulo Freire, que Yogi Bhajan caracterizou a Yoga Kundalini como a Yoga da Consciência. A consciência dá-nos escolhas nas nossas ações. Neste trabalho e através de um seminário experiencial, apresento esta tecnologia incorporada da Índia como uma base para a Educação Social.

Palavras-chave: Yoga, Meditação, Educação Social, Espiritualidade

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Abstract

As we move into the 21st century, we find ourselves in an age of information overload, widespread and constant stress, lack of time, and increased social and personal demands. Human activity is directly and negatively impacting the web of life on a global scale, and yet our consciousness as a species is still limited and self-centered. How can we move beyond our limited ego-self, building spiritual capacity and authentic connection with others? How do we maintain mental, emotional and physical flexibility and stamina and integrate the spiritual aspect of our life with the material and technological? How do we understand deeply the interconnectedness of all things, and act consciously and courageously from that deep understanding? The ancient Indian practice of Kundalini Yoga & Meditation as taught by Yogi Bhajan provides a framework for an internal paradigm shift --- from “me” to “we”; from intellectual knowledge to a new relationship to intuition, emotion and instinct; from confusion to clarity; from isolation to connection; from fear and insecurity to conscious, courageous action. This paper introduces critical elements of Kundalini Yoga practice – Pranayam, Kriya, Meditation & Mantra – and explains how this embodied spiritual practice develops awareness, consciousness, and the courage to act from the heart as spiritual warriors in this time of unprecedented planetary chaos. Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan and the liberatory educational practices of Paolo Freire share some key philosophical underpinnings: personal consciousness-raising is the key to empowerment and social change; every person has an inner teacher/innate inner wisdom that is worthy of respect; the role of the teacher is not the standard hierarchical model of power-over, but the teacher acts as a facilitator for the student to develop their own inner teacher. Ultimately, the goal of the Kundalini yogi is truth/liberation through the embodied experience of life. Being fully present in his/her life, the yogi witnesses the flow of Spirit as it manifests in individual experience, shared interpersonal experience, and universal experience. This ability to be a present, informed and empowered witness of one’s own life, this adventure in unveiling to borrow a phrase from Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of Hope* (1992, p. 1), is why Yogi Bhajan characterized Kundalini Yoga as the Yoga of Awareness. Awareness gives us choices in our actions. In this paper and through an experiential workshop, I offer this embodied technology from India as a foundation for Social Education.

Key Words: Yoga, Meditation, Social Education, Spirituality

Introduction

As we move into the 21st century, we find ourselves in an age of information overload, widespread and constant stress, lack of time, and increased social and personal

demands. Human activity is directly and negatively impacting the web of life on a global scale, and yet our consciousness as a species is still limited and self-centered. How can we move beyond our limited ego-self, building spiritual capacity and authentic connection with others? How do we maintain mental, emotional and physical flexibility and stamina and move beyond fear and anger to positive, productive social action? How do we understand deeply the interconnectedness of all things, and act consciously and courageously from that deep understanding? As educators, how do we model a balanced, holistic “being” in the world and “be the change” we wish to see?

The ancient Indian practice of Kundalini Yoga & Meditation as taught by Yogi Bhajan provides a framework for an internal paradigm shift --- from “me” to “we”; from intellectual knowledge to a new relationship to intuition, emotion and instinct; from confusion to clarity; from isolation to connection; from fear and insecurity to conscious, courageous action. This paper offers a very brief overview of yoga’s Indian origins and the migration of Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan from India to other countries; a discussion of the shared key philosophical underpinnings of Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan and the liberatory educational practices of Paulo Freire; and an introduction to critical elements of Kundalini Yoga practice – Pranayam, Kriya, Meditation & Mantra. I will explain how this embodied spiritual practice develops awareness, consciousness, and the courage to act from the heart as “spiritual warriors” in this time of unprecedented planetary chaos. In this paper and through an experiential workshop, I offer this embodied technology from India as a foundation for Social Education.

The Origins of Yoga

The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit *jugit*, which means “to join together,” or “to unite.” Yoga is the union of our individual consciousness with the Infinite Consciousness, and a yogi is a person who surrenders and merges the unit self with the Supreme Self (Bhajan, 2007, p. 14). Kundalini is our creative potential – the flow of energy and consciousness which exists within each one of us (Khalsa, 1996, p. 48). Kundalini yoga is simultaneously a philosophy of righteous living and a set of techniques used to put that philosophy into practice. This synthesis of practice and attitudes/beliefs is rooted in Indian culture, as explained by Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani in her essay, *Returning to the Roots; Classical Yoga*:

Yoga was a way of life, a culture, a lifestyle which encompassed not just techniques, practices or ideas, but also eating habits, bathing habits, cultural use of the body, prayer, social interaction, and work. Yoga included a vast body of “attitudes towards being”, an ingrained sense of morality and ethics so strongly etched on the character that it would be literally “unthinkable” to transgress the limits set by those moral-ethical rules. Yoga was the bedrock of the personal-social-cosmic order which developed in that part of the earth known as Bharata [India] (“Yoga History,” n.d., para. 5).

Georg Feuerstein (1998) notes that yoga “belongs to the earliest manifestations of India’s cultural heritage” (p. 121).

The beginnings of yoga are prehistoric and unknown. The earliest written references to yoga are found in the Vedas, particularly the Rig-Veda. These books of knowledge, written in India somewhere between 4500-1000 B.C.E. (scholars vary in their periodization), are recordings of hymns spoken and sung by sages who were in a direct state of merger with Divine consciousness. The longest war in recorded history is chronicled in the Mahabharata, a poem that is a source of much lore about yoga in this period. One of the strongest messages of the Mahabharata is that the liberated state is beyond all opposites: good and bad, right and wrong, pain and pleasure (Bhajan, 2007, p. 39). Moving forward to 100 B.C.E. – 800 C.E., what is considered the Classical Age in the cultural history of India (again, scholars vary as to the dates of this period), we see the creation of the Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali. This great work on yoga and its philosophy brought together diverse yogic practices that had developed over previous centuries, and is still considered one of the most important treatises on yoga today.

Kundalini Yoga as Taught by Yogi Bhajan – Migration from East to West

Part of the yogic tradition that developed during the Upanishadic Epoch – the time between the Vedic and Classical Ages – is the Sant tradition of guru/chela, or teacher/student. After the Classical Age, the Puranic Epoch (800 C.E. – 1469 C.E.) emphasized tantrism - the use of psycho-physical technology based on esoteric knowledge of the chakras, the glands and the individuals' electromagnetic field. During the Bhakti Epoch (1469 C.E. – 1708 C.E.), which corresponds to the time of the 10 Gurus of the Sikh faith, we see a synthesis of the Sant tradition with the Tantric path and the Bhakti tradition (emphasizing devotion as a means to transcend the confines of the structures of the mind) (Bhajan, 2007, p. 40-41). This synthesis is Kundalini Yoga.

Harbhajan Singh Puri, more commonly and affectionately known as Yogi Bhajan, was born in 1929 in the district of Gujranwala in what is now Pakistan, but at that time was still a part of India. (Khalsa, 1979, p. 18). He was declared a Kundalini Yoga master at the age of 16 ½ by his teacher, Sant Hazara Singh. During the turmoil of partition in 1947, at the age of 18, he led his village of 7000 people, near what is Lahore Pakistan today, 325 miles on foot to safety in New Delhi, India, where he arrived with only the clothes on his back (Obituary, 2004, para. 8). Traditionally, Kundalini Yoga was a secretive practice that was passed from teacher to student and only available to the higher castes in India. But Yogi Bhajan felt that Kundalini Yoga was the powerful and transformative path needed by people to meet the challenge of the times, and so he left a lucrative position with the Indian government in 1968 to travel to North America. When he arrived in the United States in December of 1968, Yogi Bhajan stated his mission quite clearly. He said, "I have come to create teachers, not to gather disciples." He was not a philosopher or a preacher. He was a spiritual activist transmitting the same mastery that he achieved (Khalsa, Ed., 2002, p. 69).

In 1969 when Yogi Bhajan taught his first class in Kundalini Yoga in the United States, hardly anyone had accurate information about this ancient, sacred, and up until then, secret, science. Despite scriptural warnings that whoever taught Kundalini Yoga

publicly would not live to see his next birthday, Yogi Bajan flaunted tradition and began teaching the practice openly to all who were willing to learn (Bhajan, 2007, p. v). By the time of his death in 2004, he left behind a global legacy of teachers, teacher trainers, and institutions, including the 3HO Organization which became an NGO of the United Nations in 1994.

Kundalini Yoga and Progressive Education – Addressing the Challenges of the Times

Kindred spirits and contemporaries, Yogi Bajan and Paulo Freire dedicated their lives to their particular visions of Social Education. On my own journey, I have drawn inspiration from these two larger-than-life yet humble teachers -- their boundless compassion, courage, persistence, and passion for elevating the human condition. Their work shares three key fundamental beliefs, which frame a new paradigm for power relationships in the struggle for social change.

1) Personal consciousness-raising is the key to empowerment and social change. Being fully present in his/her life, the yogi witnesses the flow of Spirit as it manifests in individual experience, shared interpersonal experience, and universal experience. This ability to be a present, informed and empowered witness of one's own life, this "adventure in unveiling" to borrow a phrase from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope* (1992, p. 1), is why Yogi Bajan characterized Kundalini Yoga as the "Yoga of Awareness". Awareness, or in the language of Freire, "conscientization," helps us to see the role that fear plays in our disempowerment so that we can work to move beyond it.

2) The role of the teacher is not the standard hierarchical model of "power-over", but the teacher acts as a facilitator for the student to develop their own inner teacher. Freire framed for us and summarily rejected the concept of the "banking system" of education, an approach to learning that sees students as empty vessels that consume information fed to them by a professor so that they can memorize it and store it (hooks, 1994, p. 14). Freire stressed that the educator must begin with the educands' "here" and "now," and not with her or his own. He specified that ". . . the educator must not be ignorant of, underestimate, or reject any of the "knowledge of living experience" with which educands come to school" (Freire, 1992, p. 47). When Yogi Bajan came to the West and began teaching, he refused to participate in the hierarchical model of initiating yoga students – historically standard practice. He taught that students must "self-initiate" and, in this time of information overload, accept responsibility to develop their own inner wisdom and capacity to make choices (Bhajan, 2007, pp. 4-5).

4) Education alone is not enough for personal or social change. Yogi Bajan (2007) states, "Just because you know about or believe something is true, does not mean you can act on it. But if you discover a truth and act on the path of that truth, and if you can

find bliss, success, and fulfillment in yourself as a result, then no power on Earth can make you veer from that truth or do wrong” (p. 14). Implicit in this statement is the absolute need for education, for “discovering truth,” and simultaneously the acknowledgement that knowledge in itself is incomplete without action. He also said, “Study alone, knowing a truth alone, will not be important. Real value will come from truth embodied in practical actions and in the internal caliber and qualities of your mind and heart” (p. 4). In creating social change, Paulo Freire (1992) maintains, “Let me make it clear, then, that, in the domain of socioeconomic structures, the most critical knowledge of reality, which we acquire through the unveiling of that reality, does not of itself alone effect a change in reality” (p. 23). Awareness/education is a critical first step that allows us to examine structures of power, see clearly where we are in those structures, and make the inner commitment to claiming our own power.

Director, writer, actress, activist and teacher Lib Spry (1994) writes, “While most of us can and do exercise some choice in our lives, we are all part of power relationships that allow dominating and exploitative structures to maintain the status quo. Often people are so alienated from their reality that they are unable or unwilling to recognize what power they have or where they stand in the hierarchy” (p. 173). Spry (1994) continues her examination of this concept of “power-over” by quoting from the book *Dreaming the Dark* by Starhawk (1988), the California-based feminist, political theorist, peace activist, psychologist, and witch:

For though we are told . . . that rape is an issue separate from nuclear war, that a woman’s struggle for equal pay is not related to a black teenager’s struggle to find a job or to the struggle to prevent the export of a nuclear reactor to a site on a web of earthquake faults near active volcanoes in the Philippines, all these realities are shaped by the consciousness that shapes our power relationships. Those relationships in turn shape our economic and social systems; our technology; our science; our religions; our views of women and men; our views of races and cultures that differ from our own; our sexuality; our Gods and our wars. They are presently shaping the destruction of the world. I call this consciousness “estrangement” because its essence is that we do not see ourselves as part of the world. We are strangers to nature, to other human beings, to parts of ourselves. We see the world as made up of separate, isolated nonliving parts that have no inherent value . . . [This] allows the formation of power relationships in which human beings are exploited. Inherent value, humanness, is reserved for certain classes, races, for the male-sex; their power-over others is thus legitimized. (pp. 4-6)

One of Yogi Bhañan’s oft-repeated aphorisms is “It’s not the life you live, but the courage that you bring to it”. He recognized the power that fear and insecurity have to paralyze us – sending us into states of denial, depression, alienation. The Dalai Lama warns us, “In our present state of affairs, the very survival of humankind depends on people developing concern for the whole of humanity, not just their own community or nation. The reality of our situation impels us to act and think more clearly. Narrow-mindedness and self-centered thinking may have served us well in the past, but today will only lead to disaster” (Macy & Brown, 1998/2011, p. xvi).

Kundalini Yoga is an antidote to the “estrangement” consciousness that has shaped our power relationships, limited our thinking and creativity, put us at odds with our fellow humans and the earth on which we depend for our existence. Through the practices that will be described below, a Kundalini yogi acquires wisdom that comes from the experience of the interconnectedness of all life. Through specific movements, postures, breath work, hand positions, optical focus, sounds, mental focus and relaxation, this ancient practice helps to bring all the systems of the body into balance and alters the frequency of the mind and the state of the brain. The depth of this experience is a true knowing – *gian* – which opens us to a consciousness of unity and gives us the power and discipline to act from that truth.

Starhawk (1987) remarks that we have been so shaped by the power-over paradigm “that the insides of our minds resemble the battle field and the jail” (p. 9). It is through the transformation of this individual consciousness that we change the collective consciousness. Imagine for a moment that in every school across the globe, students, teachers, and administrators begin each day with a practice of long, deep breathing. As the children close their eyes and focus on their breath, the teacher reminds them that there are children all over the world breathing this same air – that this air is in fact breathing life into all creatures on the planet. As the children experience their breath, they experience their connection with all living creatures, and the importance of having clean, fresh air to breathe. As this practice is reinforced each day, the children move from individual consciousness to a collective consciousness that is the foundation for action that serves a life-sustaining society.

The Path of the Spiritual Warrior: Fundamental Elements of Kundalini Yoga & Meditation practice as taught by Yogi Bhajan

Kundalini Yoga is a Raj (royal) path that incorporates all eight limbs of Patanjali’s Yoga-Sutras: ethical precepts called yamas and niyamas, asanas (postures), pranayam (breathing techniques), pratyahar (controlling the thought waves in the mind), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and ultimately Samadhi (liberation, or complete absorption in Spirit) (Khalsa, 1996, p. 176). The practices of Pranayam, Kriya (which includes asana), Meditation and Mantra (which include pratyahar, dharana and dhyana) are all essential to Kundalini Yoga. In the West, the concept of kundalini has not always been understood, resulting in Kundalini Yoga sometimes being called “dangerous.” When asked about this, Yogi Bhajan explained:

It is just an energy. Kundalini is a latent energy that can be used for total consciousness. The only dangerous thing is the person whose kundalini is raised properly. That person is totally conscious. He cannot be lied to or cheated or politically swayed. The kundalini is essential. As long as you practice a total discipline or a complete and balanced kriya, there is no difficulty. In Kundalini Yoga, you will notice that every meditation and kriya has some form of mantra in it. This ensures the channelization of the energy (White, Ed., 1990, p. 144).

In the context of this paper, two points are particularly important in the above quote. First – through the proper raising of the kundalini, the practitioner reaches a higher level of awareness/consciousness. Attaining this level of awareness, s/he “cannot be lied to or cheated or politically swayed”. In other words, s/he is able to see rhetoric and actions of fear, greed and separation for what they are. Second – Bhajan refers to the importance of practicing a “total discipline”. The elements of the Kundalini practice described below work together in a very specific way to awaken the kundalini in a controlled and safe manner. Kundalini Yoga & Meditation, as taught by Yogi Bhajan, follows a specific framework and is a discrete set of techniques that are to be practiced without alteration.

Pranayam

When a baby is born, we eagerly listen for that first breath – the first inspiration. As the breath breathes us, we live, and with our last exhalation, we expire. Yogis claim that breath is not just the transporter of oxygen and carbon dioxide, but the carrier of prana – the subtle life force that rides on the breath. As the oxygen feeds our cells, so prana feeds our subtle life energy, and opens us to the realms of emotions, thoughts, intuition. According to Yogi Bhajan, (2007) “Pranayam is the science of breath, controlling the movement of prana through the use of breathing techniques” (p. 91).

There are many pranayam techniques in Kundalini Yoga, and learning to breathe fully and completely without excess tension is one of the most important and fundamental elements of the practice. “Stress causes poor breathing – shallow, erratic, upper-chest breathing with a faster breath rate, which leads to chronic tension and weak nerves” (p. 91). Poor breathing then creates more stress, which puts us in a feedback loop that can lead to emotional imbalance, physical illness, and/or mental instability.

The practice of long deep breathing is a simple yet profound technique of inhaling and exhaling to the maximum capacity of the lungs. This simple practice alone can produce many profound benefits -- relaxation and calmness, due to influence on parasympathetic nervous system and stimulating endorphins; reducing and preventing the build-up of toxins in the lungs by encouraging the clearing of the alveoli; increased alertness through increased circulation of cerebrospinal fluid ; cleansing of the blood and regulation of the body’s pH (Bhajan, 2007, p. 92). Pranayam functions as a mechanism to increase our physical health and control our mind and emotions. Each breath is a reminder that Something beyond ourselves breathes in us, and serves as a reaffirmation of the Divine presence in all (Khalsa, 1996, p. 20).

Kriya

“A kriya in yoga is a sequence of postures, breath and sound that are integrated together to allow the manifestation of a particular state” (Bhajan, 2007, p. 100). Kriya means

action - not just random action, but action that is free of blocks, leading to a completion of the seed of the action. Over the course of Yogi Bhajan's 36-year teaching career, he taught hundreds of different sets of yoga exercises, or kriyas, each set with a specific sequence, and all claiming to have a unique therapeutic value (Shannonoff-Khalsa, 2006, p. 2).

Within a kriya, each asana (posture) serves as an exercise, a meditation, a connection to energy flow, and a tool for self-diagnosis (Bhajan, 2007, p. 100). One of the signature asanas in Kundalini Yoga is Sat Kriya, which is practiced in a sitting posture with the arms stretched above the head, eyes closed and focused at the 3rd eye point (in between the eyebrows and slightly up). As the practitioner chants the word Sat (truth), she pulls the belly button in and up, like squeezing a sponge. As she chants the word Nam (name/identity), she releases the belly button. As an exercise, Sat Kriya stimulates the digestive system and strengthens the parasympathetic response. The meditative aspect of Sat Kriya occurs with the recitation and focus on the mantra "Sat Nam", which is considered a bij or seed mantra that establishes a quality of neutrality in the body-mind. The connection to energy flow is perhaps the most profound effect of Sat Kriya. To understand this connection, one must first understand the yogic concept of chakras. In his book *Kundalini Yoga Meditation* (2006), Dr. David Shannanhoff-Khalsa states:

Ages ago, yogis devised a practical and systematic view of consciousness that involves eight discrete levels. Each level is related to what yogis call chakras, repositories or centers of psychic energy, and an individual's consciousness is then determined and affected by the amount of energy and activity in these eight centers. Each chakra or center is both symbolic for and instrumental in determining the mode of behavior, personality structure, and level of awareness. . . The intensity of activity in any one chakra imparts an effect that reflects a world perspective, understanding of cause and effect, and source of motivation and desire that is unique to each center. (p. 31)

The first 3 chakras, the "lower triangle", relate to survival/security, reproduction/creativity, and ego/will. Because the lower triangle forms the basis for our basic survival in the world, Shannanhoff-Khalsa remarks that "much of society's ills are the result of an imbalance in the first three chakras" (2006, p. 31). Sat Kriya works specifically on balancing the energies of the lower triangle through mixing of the prana and the apana at the navel center, generating a heat in the system which opens the nadis (channels for prana – comparable to meridians in the acupuncture system) to the upward flow of energy. A regular practice of Sat Kriya is said to help reduce phobias and transcend fears and emotional disarray, and channel creative energy (Bhajan, 2007, p. 113).

Through the practice of kriya, we put ourselves under specific short-term pressure (i.e., holding the arms up for a period of time, as in Sat Kriya) to build up our internal systems and mental and psychic strength so that we can withstand the pressures we face as agents of social change. When confronted with other people's fear, anger, resistance,

the yogi is able to maintain his/her center, be calm under pressure, and stand up for truth.

Meditation

In the rich and vast body of work that is Yogi Bhajan's legacy, perhaps the most important and fundamental to moving beyond limiting and self-centered attitudes into the experience of interconnectedness are his teachings on the mind. He challenged students to have "an intelligent confrontation with your own experience" (Bhajan, 1998, p. 3). Yogi Bhajan characterized the mind as an essential faculty that is faster than time and space. It can be the agent of our destruction, leading us into delusional, manipulative, unintentional behaviors, or, conversely, it can be so beneficial that we can create miracles (p. 3). One of his oft-quoted aphorisms is that the mind makes a wonderful servant, but a horrible master. He emphasized that mastering the use and command of the mind is the gateway to living peacefully, truthfully, and prosperously.

A Kundalini yogi works to master the mind by first understanding what the mind is and is not. In Western culture, we put a premium on intellectual activity. "S/he has a brilliant mind" is considered one of the highest compliments one could receive. Particularly in an academic setting, we begin to think that we ARE our minds. But when we operate from the mind alone, leaving behind the heart and soul, it becomes easy for the ends to justify the means and for human beings to become pawns to dictators, government experiments and corporate manipulation. In a Kundalini Yoga practice, the mind is disciplined so that it can serve the heart and soul – not the individual ego.

To be a spiritual warrior, one must deal with and move beyond fear, denial, and other self-limiting patterns in the mind. The breath practice of pranayama slows down the mind and strengthens and opens the heart center, which is where we can physically hold fear. Kriya strengthens and balances the endocrine system and the nervous system so that we can slow down, relax and still the body for meditation. Other important elements of pranayama, kriya, and meditation practice are drishti (specific eye focus), mudra (specific positions or movements of the fingers and hands), and bhandas ("locks" or pressure applied in different parts of the body to move energy). Meditation is ideally practiced after one has performed a kriya and/or pranayama.

Through meditation, we learn to build and hold our awareness. Paradoxically, we use the mind to move beyond self-limiting patterns of the mind. Yogi Bhajan (1998) taught:

This is the key to training the mind. Use the mind to project to and stay at a point beyond the mind's own nature. When your mind stays with the self-illuminated soul within you, then all pains and suffering disappear and your presence radiates and works. If you try to train your mind by confronting your ego and desires, it only causes pain. Train the mind by directing it to confront your unlimited soul. The mind will be elevated, and you will be elevated. That consistent projection and training is called a

permanent state of bliss. . . It only takes one clear mind that acts beyond its intrigues to seed the world with truth (pp. 56-57).

The mind determines our attitudes, emotions and actions, and meditation is our most effective tool to discipline and control the mind, allowing the mind to act as a servant to the Soul. When the Soul is “in charge,” we are able to find meaning in social connection and service to others. John E. Weckerle (2003) beautifully sums up how meditation can give us the clarity and courage to stand up against corporations, institutions, even nations that have become consumed with the acquisition of wealth and/or power:

The practice of meditation and compassion can go a long way toward helping us break down the barriers between ourselves and the world around us. As we individually begin to understand our existence as a part of a whole, rather than a whole separate from other wholes, we begin to perceive that the health and well-being of the entire system is inseparable from our own. As meditative discipline advances, so does clarity of thinking and our ability to discern the broader range of effects that result from organizations’ behaviors. As attachment to worldly benefit decreases, so does the fear of losing such benefits. The wisdom needed to recognize wrong action, and the courage to point it out and object to it, become a part of us – a greater benefit to us and to the world around us than quiet acceptance of that which we know to be wrong (p. 28).

Mantra

We live in an ocean of vibration. All matter vibrates at certain frequencies. The sacred science of mantra uses special sounds that tune us to the frequency of the Infinite. Georg Feuerstein (1998) explains “a mantra is that which saves the mind from itself, or which leads to salvation through the concentration of the mind” (p. 67). The power of mantra is described in both physical and metaphysical terms, as it operates simultaneously on both levels.

Yogi Bhajan taught that the particular sounds of mantras used in Kundalini Yoga come from one common source and are therefore part of a universal code behind language and human communication. When the sounds are chanted with proper pronunciation, the correct rhythm and intention, the movement of the tongue in the mouth stimulates meridian points which causes chemical changes in the brain. We can alter our consciousness by changing the chemical composition of the brain fluids (Bhajan, 2007, p. 66-67).

When chanting mantra, we can think of ourselves as a Cosmic stringed instrument. The vagus nerve acts as the “central tuning string”, which activates the central channel or sushmuna in the spine. This activates the vibration of the two supporting energy channels – called ida and pingala, which reverberate through the whole system. When we begin chanting, we are creating *ahad*, or “struck” sounds as our breath strikes our mouth and vocal chords. As we continue, surrendering our concentration to the sound current and the pulse of the correct rhythm, our central nervous system begins to vibrate

the sound. The sound at this point becomes anahad, or “unstruck” – we can listen as our nervous system vibrates the mantra without our conscious effort, and the mantra is attuned to the frequency of the Infinite.

At this point, our entire being is vibrating in concert with a pattern beyond anything we could create from our finite self/ego (p. 68). The mantra has acted as a key that opens one to the direct experience of the vastness of Being, bringing intuition, an unlimited source of inner strength, joy, and relaxation. This direct experience of Oneness gives us a completely different paradigm for social action – it is what author, teacher and spiritual activist Ram Dass (2003) calls “the soul-view.” He says, “When we are creating social action out of that kind of consciousness, it’s coming from a totally different space, a different motivation, than when it’s coming out of our egos with all their conflicting wants and needs” (p. 26).

The use of sound current – chanting or singing together as a group -- is one of the most effective means of creating group consciousness and solidarity. Sound current plays a crucial role in all religious traditions and most social movements. It is hard to imagine the Civil Rights Movement in the United States without the spirituals that were sung at every gathering, during marches and demonstrations, and in the jail cells. Singing or chanting together in community is one way of creating a spiritual culture that reminds us of the sacred in our lives and cultivates joy and the ecstasy of being.

Conclusion

As an embodied liberatory practice and path of the spiritual warrior, Kundalini Yoga can serve as a foundation for Social Education in the 21st century. Feuerstein (1998) offers:

The Indian liberation teachings – the great Yogas of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism – clearly represent an invaluable resource for contemporary humankind. We have barely scratched the surface of what they have to offer us. It is obvious, however, that in order to find our way out of the tunnel of materialistic scientism, we require more than knowledge, information, statistics, mathematical formulas, sociopolitical programs, or technological solutions. We are in need of wisdom. And what better way is there to rejuvenate our hearts and restore the wholeness of our being than on the wisdom of the East, especially the great lucid insights and realizations of the Indian seers, sages, mystics, and holy folk? (p. xxx)

The disciplined practice of Kundalini Yoga & Meditation gives us tools to create and maintain healthy, strong, disease-resistant bodies and meditative, resilient minds so that we can handle increased stressors, multi-task, and make decisions quickly and effectively. Through meditation, we develop intuition and an expansive sense of self – one that acknowledges our interconnectedness with the entire web of life. We develop the wisdom to see and the courage to stand up to injustice. Through group practice, we create a group consciousness that helps us work together in collective action. The practice of Kundalini Yoga & Meditation does not promote self-improvement, but gifts

us with the wisdom of self-acceptance – reminding us that our True Identity – and everyone’s True Identity -- is Spirit. As spiritual warriors, we cultivate rich inner realities that manifest as transformative action towards a life-affirming, life-sustaining society. We answer the call that Julia Butterfly Hill (2003) puts forth:

There is a tendency for social activists to experience the Divine by going outward – toward causes, rights, social issues – while “spiritual” people tend to experience the Divine by going in . . . Now more than ever, the world is asking for a marriage of the two, an active practice that will assist in transforming lives. Try asking yourself in every moment, with 100% consciousness and without judgment, “What would the Divine do in this moment?” (p. 35)

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