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Decolonizing Yoga: Restoring My Seat of Consciousness

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Can we have peace without healing the experience of violence? Would there be union without remedying the harm of separation? These questions are integral to my story. Intergenerational trauma has weighed heavily upon me; only in my thirties was I able to understand this obscure grief and deep fear. I inherited cellular memories of shame and rage from colonial indoctrination: the racist civilizing mission of the British Raj and the violence of divide, rule, and partition.

I'd like to situate myself. I am of mixed heritage – European and Muslim Indian descent with a Hindu family. I am second-generation Indian from the diaspora, raised in Wales in a home filled with Delhi Sufi Vedic traditions and stories. My social-political-historical body has been a source of shame, pain, confusion, and even collusion. Accepting this as the premise to which I can evolve realities of freedom has been radical. Clearing the ghosts of the past has allowed me to be more grounded, present, and compassionate with myself and others. I have nurtured my *agni* and *buddhi* to immerse myself in *sattvic* love. Decoloniality as a praxis informs my personal and professional work, and I practice yoga to clear my karmic baggage, purifying my *samskara-vritti-karma* cycle from the grip of racism, sexism, and fundamentalism.

It has been a struggle to make sense of my identity, belonging, and purpose, not unlike others who have colonial wounds. Cut off from my roots meant that I was detached and aloof. It is how I found myself being oppressed and oppressing others in yoga – a painful way to finally wake up.

Ten years ago, I was commissioned by the British Wheel of Yoga to carry out research to identify the barriers that BAME (Black, Asian, Minority, Ethnic) women face entering yoga classes and studios; the research lasted over a 12-week period. My project was to focus on the South Asian Muslim community. What I came to realize was that by undertaking this type of research, looking for problems or identifying features, I was in effect pathologizing my own community. I was trapped in collusion, re-traumatizing myself and others. Once I acknowledged this, I felt anger and returned back to the evaluation day confused and annoyed. A more pertinent and necessary question I felt we needed to ask then was: who is holding power in yoga? What narratives, norms, and structures exist within yoga groups and organizations that create barriers to inclusion? These were not answered. I still find myself coming back to these questions today. Who wields power in our yoga community and how does this mirror general dynamics of privilege or racism in our society?

When Audre Lorde says, “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house, they will never enable us to bring about genuine change”, she speaks to me to challenge oppressive practices and epistemologies that are being used in the Western yoga world (2018, 19). In my work, I consciously disconnect from the hegemonic, Cartesian-based knowledge systems that bolster white, patriarchal power through the privileging of mind and reason. In my



Figure 1 – Between Heaven and Earth, I find You within my heart (Photo Credit: Tariq).

teacher training experience (incidentally, I was the only brown person amongst all white women), the teaching methods used were flat, didactic, monological, and highly cognitive; we had to know everything and have everything explained. Undoubtedly, we were getting competent at writing essays about the *niyamas* and *yamas*, but could we really feel these principles and take time to know them in our hearts?

During this training, I remember missing the intimate talks and stories that my father shared with me as a child. Story and experiential transmission is part of my Indian heritage; as a cultural form of teaching and knowing, story has survived colonial epistemic violence. It is not ironic that most of my learnings about Indian culture, spirituality and philosophy happened experientially in a lounge in a home situated in South Wales. This is how one ancestor passed spiritual wisdom to his descendant, lineage-based transmission surviving at the intersection of the ecstatic and mundane. Telling stories to a child is an essential Indian tradition. I carry it on today to my children, remembering my father saying, “Your heart is open and warm, plant seeds of wisdom now that will grow with you as an adult.” I remember embracing the story of Krishna and Arjuna, falling in love with Arjuna, and admiring how he rode his chariot with courage, boldness, five sense clarity, and devotion. I also learned about Mullah Nasruddin riding his donkey (ego) backwards, concerned not with his destination but with the shit that came out of his

backside, and the impact his footprint made in the world. One story was Sufi, the other was Vedic; there was no contradiction between them because both had equal status in my imagination and heart. In awe and wonder, I sat for weeks, if not years, digesting these metaphors and learnings. I also absorbed wisdom through jokes with teasing uncles, at Indian sacred sites and graveyards, from the songs and poetry of devotional artists and squatting on the kitchen floor, peeling ginger with wise aunties. All this contributed to living and feeling yoga values and ethics because it was embedded so holistically. Such knowledge took time to settle and become integrated, meandering through my body to my heart, the seat of consciousness.



Figure 2 – On Focus and Steadiness (Photo Credit: Tariq Selih)

This living epistemology is how my ancestral spiritual and cultural practice found ways to live on, and how I came to truly honor, understand, and love yoga. Healing my colonial trauma has allowed me to reconnect with this practice. Even when it is not validated by whiteness, my ancestral wisdom shows me the way to teach yoga today, through creative, intimate, and relational means.

Whiteness in Western yoga culture prefers to center academics studying South Asian philosophy, religion, or history from an embodied distance. They exert rationality and so-called objectivity. This white lens controls the discourse and feels like cultural erasure to me. It engulfs other narratives and the South Asian diasporic voice, which already emanates from a precarious sense of belonging. bell hooks writes,

There is no need to hear your voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. I want to know your story and then I will tell it to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Rewriting you, I write myself anew I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer the speaking subject and you are now the center of my talk (1989, 22).

At the same time, the yoga industrial complex profits from romanticizing the culture of India while excluding real people like myself of South Asian heritage from taking up space or positions of leadership. As a second-generation immigrant, I witnessed the hard work, sweat, and labor put in by first-generation immigrants to build a post-war nation. I have navigated integration into a host culture and the onslaught of micro-aggressions – the slights, put downs, jokes (that masquerade as insults), and the traumatic stress they cause. As a result, I have felt cautious and ashamed to express my Indian and Muslim heritage in white yoga spaces.

Trauma-informed yoga classes do not acknowledge racism as a trauma, and teachers who do not address how whiteness works within the yoga world will perpetuate racial weathering. This has been my experience through my interactions with the UK yoga teacher community. I have received comments such as, “Are you really Indian if you don’t wear a bindi?”, “Why didn’t you learn Sanskrit as a child?”, and “Isn’t yoga Hindu anyway?” These microaggressions demonstrate that there is no comprehension that I can be Muslim and Indian and practice yoga as all part of my heritage. I have been criticized to “leave the politics out,” “not to put people in categories,” for “amplifying negativity,” for “being a victim,” and for “predatory listening.” Unexamined whiteness in the minds of yoga teachers exhausts me.

Another experience of personal weathering occurs at the other end of the spectrum through horizontal racism. A huge sadness that I feel as a Muslim Indian woman is to see resurging religious fundamentalism penetrating Indian diaspora communities in the UK. This emerges in the yoga community so that nationalist South Asians voices in the UK/US create a marginalization and reinforce binaries in their efforts to reclaim yoga as solely Hindu or *dharmic*. My decolonial responsibility is to critically evaluate these narratives so that I do not take learning from Muslim-prejudiced sources that hold in contempt the sanctity of Hindu spiritual traditions and I do not engage with Hindu fundamentalist or nationalist voices that erase a Sufi Islamic Vedic heritage. At present, I have connections with other progressive South Asians from Hindu, Christian, and Sikh backgrounds who teach yoga and have similar values, working towards community cohesion wherever they are. Thankfully, decoloniality has shown me how normalized violence and internalized racism sit at the root of right-wing nationalism and fundamentalist actions. Fanon said, “Violence is a cleansing force that frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair” (1990, 74). So I can understand that fundamentalism and ethno-nationalism are cathartic expressions of internalized oppression, rage and the unhealed self-belief that Indians are inherently beastly. Yet my choice is to use anger righteously, to revive a dignified history that my father spoke of: religious fluidity and complex cultural identities, a past of co-existence, despite colonial strategies of cultural annihilation and divide and rule politics.

This fire of anger burns coherently and lucidly in my practice today. I resist the objectification of people and support those I work with to find their own power and agency. I challenge the anonymity of large classes, the non-relational demeanor of the teacher, and the shortened class times. These are, in my view, harmful developments in yoga that stop us from working with and seeing real people. I dedicate my time and energy in my yoga teaching-therapy work to hold space, to feel more, to listen more, to work with smaller groups, and to give people

a chance to express themselves, and share their experiences. I center on building relationships to break the isolation and dissonance between mind and body that oppression creates.



Figure 3 – Taking a 10 Day Ayurvedic Cleanse in Honor of Navrati (Photo Credit: Sophia Ansari).

When I invite someone to raise an arm or breathe into their belly, I am thinking about how to stay in connection to the humanity of this person, to consider this individual's experience moving and being moved in this world. I stay curious about what personal memories, difficulties, or hidden potentials there are for this person. I understand that the power of racism and patriarchy lies in how it dissociates the personal from the political, building a private interiority away from socio-cultural context. Therefore, I aim to promote an intimate process for people to slow down, to be in touch with the truth of their emotions and their experiences. I feel at peace that I have finally come to a place where I can do this for others, in service for liberation and from the seat of my consciousness.

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