

## **Yoga, Social Justice, and Healing the Wounds of Violence in Colombia**

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### **The Wounds of War and Discovering New Methods for Peace**

Colombia went through a violent armed conflict that lasted over fifty years (1964-2016) ending with a peace agreement on November 24, 2016 between the Colombian government and FARC-EP, the oldest guerrilla in the world (Colombian National Government and FARC-EP 2016). Throughout this longstanding war, violence became a model for behavior and permeated Colombian society, transforming social dynamics and exerting a long-lasting impact on the population's mental health (Chaskel et al. 2015, 95). War tactics by left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries included massacres, kidnappings, gender-based violence, and one of the highest rates of internal displacement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century resulting in over eight million official victims (Colombian National Information Network (CNIN) 2018), out of which more than seven million are internally displaced persons (CNIN 2018).

Violence left deep wounds in the victims, especially those living in remote areas of the country where violence was the harshest because of a lack of government presence and resources. Violence has thus become a structural part of the Colombian psyche perpetuating the wounds even in the youngest members of the population. Healing these wounds is now a priority of the peace agreements (Colombian National Government and FARC-EP. 2016), but resources are short even in the largest urban centers (Chaskel et al. 2017). Peacebuilders identified an important challenge to helping victims emotionally and mentally recover: many communities have been resistant to the limited offer of psychosocial attention when it does not take into account the particularities of a community such as difficulty verbalizing experience in traditional psychotherapy sessions (ICTJ, Colombian Ombudsman, ASDI 2009, 110). Moreover, reaching rural and small-town victims has become one of the largest challenges for the transition to peace, especially when unequal access to health services and psychosocial attention has been identified as one of the main causes of the civil armed conflict in Colombia (Historical Commission for the Conflict and its Victims 2015, 14).

Persistent inequality created a class of underprivileged citizens that have not only been affected by the violent actions of illegal armed groups, but also by the abandonment of the state and its institutions. The complicated geography of three mountain ranges in the Andes that run across the country contributed to the difficulty of reaching victims, many of whom had to relocate as internally displaced persons because of the violence that remained for more than 15 years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many of these victims are racial minorities, like Afro-Colombians and Indigenous peoples, who are traditionally excluded from basic government benefits such as public education and health care. They are also excluded from wealth and upward social mobility (De la Cruz et al. 2016 2017, 62; Escallon, 2017). Social mobility is quite limited due to a poor quality of public education outside the biggest cities. It is unsurprising that the wounds of violence in Colombia are heavily concentrated in this underprivileged class because leaders have been concerned with preserving the social and economic status quo. In this context, civil society has become increasingly important in healing the wounds of war, especially for the most underprivileged victims that are far from receiving adequate psychosocial and mental health attention from the government (González et al. 2016); these populations could benefit from alternative strategies that do not require verbalization.



**Figure 1 – Rural Context of Programs. Aracataca, the region of Montes de Maria, Colombia (Photo Credit: Maria Adelaida Lopez).**

As a response to this reality, Dunna, a local non-profit, was created in 2010 with the purpose of bringing complementary mental health and psychosocial attention to those affected by violence in Colombia. Dunna, is an Arhuaco word used by the mamos (Indigenous spiritual leaders from la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta region of Colombia) to refer to the positive substrate of human beings manifested in physical, mental and spiritual equilibrium. The name Dunna was gifted to the organization by the mamos. Dunna aims to contribute to an integral and sustainable peace in Colombia by designing, applying and evaluating yoga and body-movement programming for both individual and social recovery.

Since the inception of the organization, more than 5,000 people have received attention for emotional and mental wounds caused by the war, focusing on those underprivileged persons that would have less access to government attention in mental health and emotional recovery. Private corporate donors such as the Bolivar Davivienda Foundation as well as the Colombian government – including the Victim’s Unit (UARIV), the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR), Social Prosperity, and the Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) – have sponsored Dunna’s work.

### **Yoga as a Tool for Social Justice**

Against this backdrop, it is important to explain our understanding of what yoga means in the context of Dunna. Today’s modern conceptualization of yoga is said to be a product of “India’s dialogical encounter with the worldwide physical culture movement” (Singleton 2010, 81). Conversations on what constitutes yoga and who ‘owns yoga’ are connected to the dilution of a sacred practice and the cultural appropriation of yoga with Indian roots, particularly in the Global North. The mainstream yoga industry is critiqued for being too closely related to consumer and material culture, which can be defined by neo-colonialist appropriation of an ancient heritage and cultural or religious symbols (Askegaard and Eckhardt 2012, 47). Many also argue that modern yoga is mostly a physical or *asana*-based practice, with multi-national corporations increasingly fetishizing consumption and purporting an ideal body image that is white, slim and fit (Webb et al. 2017, 94) detracting from what many believe to be the core goals of the practice (Blaine 2016 132). We have taken these critiques into account in the design of our programs and have witnessed how mainstream yoga can be a highly stratified activity most commonly practiced by upper and middle class participants, a largely white/global north demographic, according to reported global trends (Shift.com 2018). Yoga is reported to be the 4th fastest growing industry in the world, with 300 million people practicing, 83% of which are female (Garg 2016). Yet, despite yoga’s rise in popularity globally, barriers to access persist in terms of class, race and ability.

Given these realities, some might wonder how yoga can be used as a tool for building peace and as a method of social justice for vulnerable populations. Much of the yoga landscape in Colombia conforms to mainstream trends with several offerings from high-end studios with classes ranging from \$30,000-45,000 pesos per class, which is roughly \$10-16 USD. It is also common to find private classes that range from \$100,000-\$150,000, which are roughly \$36 -54 USD. Hence, in a country where the minimum wage is 737,717 pesos, or \$246 USD per month, yoga remains marketed to and consumed by those within the elite strata of Colombian society. Further, as with trends in the Global North, much of the yoga being offered are *asana*-based and exercise focused and serve as another element of class-based gatekeeping with high participation fees, exclusive locations, and an ideal fit-slim-white aesthetic maintained by the most famous yoga teachers in the country.

## Social Justice and Yoga in Colombia

At Dunna, we challenge these norms by offering yoga through a not-for-profit model so that we can bring yoga to those who need it most. These are often the most disadvantaged members of society, particularly victims of the conflict, demobilized persons, low-income and displaced persons, each dealing with their own complex traumas and lived experiences. Our yoga programs are carried out across the country, including geographically remote and difficult to access regions where the effects of the conflict have been most rife. In our programs, participants are not charged to take part and there is no equipment required. Mats and blankets are provided by the organization, and generally distributed to participants for continued practice at home. Further, instructional yoga manuals and audio CDs, which are particularly designed for a given population, are offered to participants as tools for home practice.



Figure 2 – Project Engaging Victims of the Conflict. Mampuja, Colombia (Photo Credit: Maria Adelaida Lopez).

The type of yoga we offer is integral and holistic, combining *pranayama*, meditation, yoga *nidra* or guided relaxation, and *asanas*. The approach is trauma-sensitive, offering options to participants in their own practice, and focuses on facilitating a restorative state of relaxation inspired by the Satyananda Yoga tradition (Satyananda 1996). Facilitating the relaxation response is key in the recovery of trauma survivors, especially when the fight-or-flight response has begun to affect daily functionality for survivors. The guided meditation and yoga *nidra*

portions of a yoga session are also designed to focus on the challenges specific groups of participants are facing such as emotional regulation and coping with anxiety or aggression. What we facilitate in a yoga class is highly translatable to participants' everyday lives. Furthermore, regular feedback and input is received from participants and programs are adapted as per their recommendations allowing them to be co-creators of knowledge. Classes are also modified to be culturally specific by drawing on communally-held beliefs and practices. Our programs are led for Colombians by Colombians, without Global North intervention, which we believe performs as a counter-narrative to the dominant aid and peace-building industry that is commonly top-down and often disconnected from specific needs of participants.



Figure 3 – Yoga Nidra. Mampuja, Colombia (Photo Credit: Maria Adelaida Lopez).

Our bottom-up approach not only provides a way of integrating the body into the healing process, but it also integrates the specific context of each group into the protocols. For example, deep relaxation/conscious sleep exercises in demobilized persons have been modified to prevent emotional disturbances caused by lying down or keeping their eyes closed, which, in some cases, triggers very violent and traumatizing memories of mass graves and death. Further, the vulnerability of closing the eyes can cause anxiety and flashbacks accompanied by physiological manifestations such as violent shaking or vomiting. Therefore, participants co-create the practices that make them feel more comfortable and familiar with the techniques that might empower them towards their own healing.



**Figure 4 – Demobilized Former Combatants. Bucaramanga, Colombia (Photo Credit: Maria Adelaida Lopez).**

On many occasions, participants integrate traditional techniques into the yoga class such as “active listening” techniques for meditation in the case of Indigenous participants. In Indigenous cultures in Colombia, listening is more important than speaking, and they believe that listening only happens when the mind of the listener is free of thought. The techniques that they use to reach this state were incorporated into the meditation in that specific group. In other cases, participants contribute to giving shape to the actual yoga space itself. For example, a circle yoga mat alignment for women who have been victims of sexual abuse instead of regular rows has been important to make participants feel secure in knowing that no one is behind them that they can’t see. Our programs also offer the option of practicing in novel ways that take into account disabilities. For example, victims of landmines can practice mentally by visualizing each posture or by crafting postures that can be performed without prosthetic devices. This approach has also proved critical for elderly participants who might practice sitting on chairs rather than the traditional method of yoga on a mat on the floor.



Figure 5 – Demobilized Former Combatants and Amputees. Medellin, Colombia (Photo Credit: Maria Adelaida Lopez).

Dunna's attempt to incorporate social justice into yoga has integrated local culture into class discussion so that participants may put into practice what they have learned in ways that are meaningful to their families and communities. In fact, Dunna's model is designed to train local instructors who want to become agents of change in their communities, and their training is focused on integrating the local culture into the practice so that it may become more relevant to their communities when Dunna leaves the region. As part of this process, Dunna accompanies instructors for an average of three years during which the training is completed and assistance is provided in finding sustainable ways of spreading the practice in the new instructor's community and neighboring towns. Voluntary participation is key, where possible, hence eliminating perceived imposition as yet another social justice programs sponsored by the government. This allows victims of the conflict to be in charge of their own healing processes. Furthermore, Dunna has always been respectful of local spiritual and religious traditions, omitting devotional aspects of yoga and explaining clearly the possibility of coexistence between yoga and spirituality of all kinds. Finally, all yoga classes taught by Dunna are given in Spanish, with no use of Sanskrit or other languages to describe postures or exercises to ensure participants relate more easily with the practices.



Figure 6 – Graduation of Victims Project. Zona Bananera, Colombia (Photo Credit: Maria Adelaida Lopez).

### Concluding Thoughts

Our approach to yoga challenges many aspects of the imperial and colonial norms within the modern yoga industry. Yoga may seem to be a distant and foreign strategy for the general Colombian population, and more so for the racial minorities affected by the violence of the armed conflict, but in Dunna we strive to transform yoga into a basic emotional health tool that can be adapted to the reality and context of the population receiving the classes. Breathing, stretching, and meditating are universal tools that can be found in communities across the world, in many cases these tools are in practices that have been forgotten or that are known only to the elders. Because of this universality of the elements of yoga, we believe that it has the potential of becoming a powerful tool for healing the wounds of violence everywhere, taking into account the particulars of each community and their territory.

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