

**China, Higher Education, and an Integral Approach:
Inclusive Practice through the Creation and Implementation of a Staff Yoga Program**

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“As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence”
(hooks 1994, 1)

Teaching Yoga in Higher Education in China

This personal narrative recounts my experience creating and running an inclusive staff yoga program at University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) between 2014-2019. It is my hope that this personal narrative offers a fresh contribution on discourses in *Race & Yoga* by focusing on a different site of analysis. Discussions on how race intersects with economic class is hardly new but considering this with the rarer combination of the China context and the context of yoga in international higher education is. I also wish to bridge the gap between the philosophy of yoga education and the real-world practice of teaching yoga that adopts an integral approach as a western European woman in China.

The interest in yoga – particularly for all manners of well-being – continues still across the world. Modern societies have taken a tremendous interest in yoga over the last several decades, reflecting the increased popularity of Eastern spiritual traditions among Americans and other western European societies (Taylor 1999). From having lived in six countries across three continents, I have been able to witness first-hand this ever-increasing interest in yoga and other contemplative practices over the years. I began my formal in-depth study of integral yoga of the Dharma Ananda tradition while living in Spain from 2010 to 2013. Practicing and studying yoga completely shifted my worldview, as it does for many, because I had previously been living – unknowingly – so far away from my body. Although captured by the cultural currents of daily life and an avid reader of many of the world’s spiritual-philosophical texts, I was viewing life through a theoretical, and thus, disembodied lens. Like many, I had no prior appreciation for embodied practice or inner work and consciousness-centered living and self-awareness as it was never taught in conventional Western schooling. And because of my professional experience in education, I began to see yoga not only as educational — and coherent *in* education — but as *an* education unto itself.

Where did my journey teaching yoga in China begin? Following three years in Spain, I taught academic writing skills at the University of Loughborough in the UK during a summer before moving to China in 2013 for a new and exciting academic role at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), the first Sino-foreign university to open its doors in China just a decade earlier. At that time, Spain was experiencing severe economic crises, and the

young adults I was teaching were fleeing to find professional opportunities overseas. I eventually chose to do the same. I immediately noted the stark contrast between Spain and China at that time: China was buzzing with optimism and opportunity when I arrived. Aspiration and a growth-oriented mindset permeated the air. It was a truly promising time. I had always been excited and intrigued by the cultural currents of daily life, but my time in China remains an exceptionally formative period of my life.

During my six years living and working in China, I ran the first-year introductory International Communications program. I had a long background in adult and higher education teaching; I taught English and Italian, then academic writing and research skills, and then communication-related studies. Teaching this discipline in China was an interesting endeavor because it is not typically taught or known. The university webpage says,

International Communications degrees explore the complex world of communications, media and culture through the study of the different forms of visual and linguistic communication, new technologies, politics, popular and high culture, and news media. These courses train students in theories of digital media and mass communication, combined with a strong emphasis on language proficiency (“International Communications,” n.d.)

What is more, teaching first-year students, whose first educational experience at a British university explores intersections and representations of identities, is especially rare. I had, however, grown disappointed teaching the intellectual orthodoxies pervasive within the humanities and social science disciplines, all of which were embedded in the International Communications program. This program is rooted in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory in the intellectual works of theorists Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Max Horkheimer as well as other later developed critical off-shoots such as the works of Judith Butler. These key thinkers have been enormously influential and impart interesting and radical ways to make sense of the modern world in terms identity, injustice, and power. Yet I found the overarching narrative of these works, and therefore, my classroom teaching was consistently reduced to discussions on – or even angered obsessions with – power, dominance, hierarchy, and oppression. While these detrimental forces undoubtedly exist in societies and cultures, and such themes prompt thought-provoking discussions in the higher education classroom, I found that they tend to result in a nihilistic, destructive thinking of sorts. For example, we draw our students’ attention to the controlling aspects of messaging in popular culture, media reportage, and socio-political gatekeepers with the unwritten promise that this type of awareness-raising education is liberating. Yet there is nothing offered to replace the systems and structures that students might have once taken for granted as reliable, valid, and truthful. Destruction is prevalent, reconstruction and creation are not. The teachings tear down tradition and maintain a cynicism that hierarchies, institutions, and leaders are not to be trusted. While that might be true, if only partially, the destruction of those very prevalent entities does not offer an alternative vision for the world and for living. I was still heavily influenced by education scholars like bell hooks, whose work I find consciousness-centered, liberating, and reconstructive. Building on the work of bell hooks, Becky Thompson (2017) writes, “the rise of feminist theory, trauma studies and contemplative practices can all contribute to a more expansive and humane pedagogy” (17). So, I see contemplative practices in higher education as bridging the gap between the intellectual orthodoxies of theorizing about injustices, inequalities, and power, and engaging in embodied action by expanding individual and collective consciousness through contemplation, introspection, reflection and connection with oneself, with others, and the world/beyond.

I was already a qualified yoga and meditation teacher so as soon as I arrived on the China campus, I was eager to establish a regular integral yoga teaching schedule of a few classes per week while also exploring my passion for yoga and other contemplative practices through scholarship and educational research. After a year of renting a studio space, promoting yoga through my monthly ‘yoga &’ articles in the city’s local magazine and teaching at a handful of charity- and school-based events in the city, I wanted to make practicing yoga a fully integrated part of my teaching within the university. This was because – put simply – yoga was an integrated part of my worldview and educational ethos since I am a contemplative educator, researcher, and scholar. At that time, I was also completing my doctorate within the field of contemplative education. I wanted to bring that contemplative spirit to my place of work, a place that was full of diverse, multicultural, well-travelled, scholarly, and open-minded professionals from China and all over the world. Additionally, supporting mental health and psychological well-being was very much on the agenda at the time – and still is – for western universities.

Yoga, Race, and Economic Class in China

During my time in China, the emerging economy was steadily expanding the middle classes. This meant that expressions of entrepreneurship, cosmopolitanism, and modernity were at the forefront of daily life in major Eastern belt cities such as Ningbo, Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Shanghai. Although understood as an embodied spiritual practice originating in the Indus Valley region, yoga is also coherently aligned with China’s 400BCE indigenous spiritual tradition Taoism, a contemplative-philosophical system that emphasizes living in alignment with the creative principle of supreme nature (like the Sanskrit concept of notion of *paramātmān* in yoga philosophy). Taoism later evolved to incorporate esoteric, embodied or ‘energetic’ practices including *tàijí* (t’ai chi, 太極) and *qigong* (ch’i kung, 气功), which are akin to yogic techniques involving effortless movement, conscious breathing, and stillness meditations.

As discussed previously, I was not a staunch believer in some of the intellectual orthodoxies within the humanities and social sciences. Although awareness is the first step to becoming a liberated being, I worried that an over-focus on power and oppression might also be disempowering and overwhelming for students. In fact, when I originally submitted this piece to *Race and Yoga*, I was worried that I would come across too judgmentally, like a cantankerous academic that complains about the eastward travel of western liberal education. But, when I first looked at establishing the program it became quite apparent that there was an economic divide on the campus, mostly-but-not-entirely defined by racial and/or ethnic identity. I could no longer paper over it with my optimism. Staff and students come from around 70 countries and regions around the world. The China-based campus had around 1,000 members of staff at the time, split across academic and professional services with ratio of around 1:1. A largest proportion of academic staff was from overseas, while all professional services staff were Chinese nationals. We also had around 500 PhD students, most of whom were international on funded scholarships. These students were also involved in research and teaching in one form or another. While this is an estimation, there are several highly cited Chinese scholars on our campus in important senior roles and the picture is certainly not that all Chinese nationals hold administrative roles within professional services. However, there is a noticeable income disparity between most professional services roles and most academic roles. Despite opportunities for professional growth and role diversification, and the possibility of earning bonuses, an average salary for an administrative

role is up to 10 times lower than an average salary for an academic role, a far wider disparity than is standard at a UK-based university.

The picture looks something like this: most-but-not-all Chinese nationals are professional service staff; most-but-not-all overseas staff (many from the Anglosphere) are academic staff, and most-but-not-all academic staff members earn up to 10 times more than the average professional service staff member. This seemed to be an important disparity that affected how inclusive – at least economically – I made the staff yoga program. This is where I could clearly see that economics intersected with race.

Many have already pointed out that yoga has long been highly commercialized in the West (Blaine 2016). Yoga is anything but inclusive of *every* body (Miller 2014; Plummer 2012; *Yoga and Body Image* n.d), there is a need to decolonize yoga (Barkataki 2015), and, modern postural yoga is disconnected from its spiritual origins, taught as a form of physical exercise (DeMichelis 2005; Singleton 2010). Today, stand-up comedian Zarna Garg can even hold a mirror up to us to point out some of the incongruences and absurdities of western-style yoga as a practice of competition and commodification in her show *One in a Billion* (Garg 2023). In China, I came to realize that yoga was becoming a far-from-inclusive practice not only in the West. In China, yoga is deemed a “luxury activity” and it is typically associated with the wealthier middle class. This fact is clearly reflected in the cost of yoga classes, which exceeds affordable rates as per the GDP of the average citizen. Budding yoga practitioners and yoga students should expect to pay at least 150RMB (approximately \$21 USD) for one yoga class. This pricing is colloquially referred to as “western pricing” as opposed to “local pricing.”

Reconciling the Contradictions

As I firmly held onto the belief that yoga was inclusive and that the dominant model in the West was just poorly interpreted, I slowly realized that there were several contradictions that I needed to reconcile.

Contradiction 1: Yoga is inclusive . . . and it is a “luxury activity”

My classes needed to be affordable for all. I believe this is important in any context, but I found it especially true within UNNC since we were a small, friendly campus. It felt particularly uncomfortable to establish an offering predominantly for staff (and potentially student) well-being that would be inaccessible for some. I also wanted to allow PhD students to join as many were mature students treated with the status of academic colleagues. They especially benefited from having well-being practices to mitigate the stress and anxiety that are part and parcel of undergoing their four-year minimum PhD study. I would have gladly opened the classes to all staff and students, but a) many staff felt less keen to possibly share the class with their own students; and b) students must select one physical activity as part of their government-mandated education journey, and yoga taught in Chinese was already available to them. Ultimately, I needed to find ways to keep the cost and overheads of yoga within an accessible price range for all at the university.

Contradiction 2: Yoga is inclusive . . . and it is grounded in Indian philosophy

While I honor and pay homage to the roots of yoga as much as I can, I began to sense a few ambiguities within myself. My first was that although I do not promote a westernized, anglicized version of modern postural yoga, I have never believed it is solely from South Asia.

There are Tibetan, Nepalese, Chinese, and more embodied practices and traditions of meditation across cultures, time, and space. Essentially, because I have always viewed yoga as a meditation practice, I have tended to cast a wider net to see it from an anthropological perspective. Some 5,000 years ago, Pali and Sanskrit spiritual texts came out of an undeniably rich, advanced civilization, but all civilizations had practices akin to yoga that were intended for radical truth-seeking. I recognize that yoga is commonly taught from the perspective of one of the six schools of Hindu philosophy (e.g. through *The Yoga Sutras* of Patañjali) yet this is also not the only system of yoga originating from South Asia. I find myself in awe and praise of the Indian origins of yoga, the incredible texts, teachings and the sophisticated system, and use Sanskrit and textual references as much as I can in my teaching. Simultaneously, I tend towards seeing yoga with a small ‘y’, as being universal and far-reaching. I believe that being inclusive means to also be culturally responsive. So, when teaching in China, I draw upon language and gesture that makes sense to the Chinese. For example, I use the word tantien (dāntián, 丹田) to refer to the “core” during my classes because this is the language used for teaching Taoist practices integral to the principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). To give another example, I draw upon more metaphoric language of nature, and especially water, and notions of yin/restoration and yang/expression as this too emanates from Taoist philosophy.

Contradiction 3: Yoga is inclusive . . . and it is taught according to level or ability

Interestingly, I found there was a greater emphasis in China on “yoga for weight loss” and “yoga for beauty,” and a greater emphasis on perfecting challenging poses, and of course, looking good in the poses! I thought yoga was only so extreme, instrumental, and poorly interpreted in the West! There was a focus on perfectionism in the poses, which I wanted to encourage students to reassess. I noted another contradiction. In China, I found far greater receptivity towards meditation – in cherishing stillness and silence – than in Europe. I found that because of the powerful underbelly of Taoism (and to a degree Chan Buddhism), which permeates daily life even in hyper-modern/super-complex secular Chinese society, there is a common cultural understanding of the value of sensing/feeling rather than thinking alone. In higher education, this is what Rendon (2009) terms *Sentipensante* (Sensing/Thinking). I needed to be mindful of the cultural context in which I was teaching to embody inclusive practice.

Establishing an Inclusive Staff Yoga Program: An Integral Approach

I am forever grateful to my first ever yoga training and lifelong dear teachers Ananda Vir Kaur and Tao Prajñananda because adopting an integral approach has helped me make sense of ever-complex intertwined worlds within worlds. Still, two questions emerge: what does ‘an integral approach’ even mean? And, how does ‘an integral approach’ relate to inclusive practice in higher education?

To start, the word integral can be understood in many ways. Integral implies a non-dual worldview, an integral worldview. It recognizes the multi-dimensional nature of reality. It implies an emphasis on teaching and learning for the development of the whole person. It also implies an approach to teaching and learning that embraces the multi-facets of existence as the same unified whole. An integral approach views the body and mind, spirit and soul, science and spirituality, the self and the other, the sacred and the profane, as whole as well as multi-facets of the same whole.

Adopting an integral approach is to take seriously that all cultures teach us about personal growth, human flourishing, and spiritual development, which ultimately leads to the evolution of individual and collective consciousness. Attempting to find the point at which these teachings meet is the first step, and synthesizing this knowledge is the second step. The third step is rooted in embodiment: embodied inquiry and practice, which over time develops into embodied knowledge and understanding. An integral approach to teaching and learning therefore embodies and lives by that very comprehensive, open, and culturally responsive system. Over the past several decades, there has been more convergence of systems and models of personal growth, human flourishing and spiritual development – from shamans to sages to philosophers to scientists – that distil practices as essential elements for unlocking and facilitating the evolution of consciousness.

I believe to adopt an integral approach is to nurture an inclusive mindset and engage in inclusive practice. Informed by Ken Wilber’s Integral Theory, DiPerna (2014) describes an integral approach as encouraging us to begin to understand the world working on the assumption that “everyone holds a piece of the puzzle that is both true and simultaneously partial” (33). This means that all backgrounds, cultures, ways of knowing, experiences, and perspectives are given credence and reflected within the resources, taught content, and discourses. In higher education, inclusive practice is described as all students being given an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background, or demographic characteristics. Higher education institutions have ethical, moral, and legal obligations to ensure that equal opportunity happens in practice, from teaching and learning to professional services on our campuses. Establishing the yoga program, in practice, looks like a relational, culturally responsive, adaptable and co-created teaching and learning environment. Inclusive practice is open-to-all and sees and hears all students. Adopting an integral approach essentially can help educators ontologically operationalize inclusive practice.

Three Main Goals to Inclusive Yoga Practice

On a mission to make yoga prolific, inclusive, and accessible at UNNC, my first goal was to acquire funding from my institution for the equipment and access to a suitable room. I felt proud of my achievement in this regard, but the nature of campus helped a great deal: campus is small, friendly, and internationalized. It felt like home-away-from-home for many of us. It took no time at all for colleagues to suggest establishing a staff yoga program where the university would offer annual funding to cover the cost of new equipment. Thankfully, yoga is a relatively inexpensive practice, all that was really required was around 30 yoga mats, 30 bolsters, 30 blankets, 39 yoga straps, and 60 yoga blocks, which was easily covered by the annual funding. Furthermore, the largest cost is room hire, but as the classes were serving staff well-being, I acquired generously sized rooms free of charge. Finally, to facilitate affordable-for-all regular/weekly class attendance, I started by determining the maximum number of students who could be in the class – approximately 25 – and I divided by the standard hourly teacher fee (there were eventually eight teachers including myself running several weekly classes), which came to approximately 30 RMB (less than \$5 USD) per class.

This was all feasible and made possible because of staff demand. Many colleagues I spoke to preferred to attend regular yoga classes on the campus embedded within their working day so making yoga accessible in terms of the average staff member’s schedule was important. And I was informed regularly how grateful staff felt for the program via emails from colleagues

upon registering for a new semester of classes. Additionally, my goals aligned at the time with the launching of the new sports center. Driving traffic in that direction was encouraged so much so that my classes received the communications support of the sports center as well. In fact, they were so pleased with the influence I made that I was awarded “Staff Contribution of the Year” in 2019. I found that especially humorous as I had always been so embarrassingly dreadful at sports growing up and never really saw myself as a yoga teacher in a sports-context. However, my goals and the goals of the sports center were aligned because bolstering mental health and psychological well-being on the campus, and making sports as accessible as possible on campus, was on their agenda.

I was especially happy that several of my students (that is, both Chinese and western fellow colleagues at UNNC) eventually trained to teach yoga themselves. This led to the expansion of the offerings on campus. We expanded from me teaching three two-hour classes per week to six teachers working alongside me teaching their own classes. This became a full-fledged staff yoga program, with two to three classes available for staff to join over five weekdays. This was the first time that I felt I was useful in a university role beyond the semi-private sphere of my classroom and lecture theatre. I was beginning to think in a more strategic whole-institution way, a professional mindset previously so alien to me.

My second goal was to be culturally responsive and adopt an integral approach that spoke to a 50% international and 50% Chinese yoga student body while also paying homage to the spiritual roots of yoga that I so deeply respect and have gratitude for. Partly in dialogue with Chinese yoga teachers, I began to grow more aware of framing language, as in the examples I provided, but this was not always necessarily planned. A lot of the insights came from questions and comments at the end of the class. To give one example, at the end of the class one student shared that she was unknowingly taught a similar meditation practice by her mother growing up, which her mother still practices as a form of mantra meditation on verses from ‘The Great Compassion Mantra.’ She had not realized that the breath as a preliminary object of focus in meditation for cultivating attention or focused awareness was similar. It helped her appreciate what her mother had taught her and better understand the spiritual teachings she was raised with. She also added that she was now equipped to draw upon both objects of focus in her meditation practice. This insight taught me to emphasize that a mantra or the breath is an object of focus in attention-based meditation and encourage them to recall any other objects of focus they had been taught in the past. It also encouraged me to research the mantra further, as it was previously unfamiliar to me. I learnt to remain open to the kinds of practice-based, philosophical, or both yearnings that students brought to me. My belief, which guides my teaching in an international context, is that we are here in this world to learn and know through service to others.

My third and final goal was to adopt an approach that went beyond the physical practice, leaned towards bolstering our mental health and psychological well-being to align with relevant higher education sector priorities at that time. This goal encouraged a deeper connection to the spiritual dimension of yoga without engaging in behaviors that could be seen as proselytization (which I doubt would have gone down well on a secular campus in China). Thankfully, through my doctoral studies, I was becoming better at articulating that contemplative practices, such as yoga and meditation, are congruent to student-centered pedagogies and inclusive curricula. The ethos of the program was that yoga as a practice ‘of oneness’ and ‘for wholeness’ and for remembering the ‘interconnectedness’ of all that exists seemed to be the most expansive, humane, and inclusive way to frame it within our China-based context.

Final thoughts on Adopting an Integral Approach

An integral approach teaches us to view ourselves, others, and the world in relation to us in more all-embracing, universalist, and inclusive ways. It can still feel unnatural for me to talk about this work as targeting institutional strategic goals for well-being, meeting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and being aligned with institutional core value of inclusivity, reflected in principles including community, openness, fairness, and respect. However, I have slowly come to realize that my work as a contemplative educator, researcher, and scholar need not rub up against the reality of the increased corporatization and neoliberal managerialism ever-present in universities today, if indeed I maintain values congruence and integrity regardless of the stringent external forces at play. There is infinite space for contemplative work in higher education where there is will and gumption, of course. I believe in the work I do. I believe in bottom-up transformation. While slower, it is somehow more organic and authentic. Slowly, however great or minimal our agency within a particular context, we can, with time and constancy chisel away at and sculpt the edges of the structures in place. I find that adopting an integral approach is sufficiently culturally responsive, creative, and open to meet that vision of an inclusive practice. We still do not know globally what a truly integral approach could look like. It is ever evolving to respond to the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties of the modern world. But I want to keep trying.

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Acknowledgements

Deepest thanks must be given to my unforgettable integral yoga teachers Ananda Vir Kaur and Tao Prajñananda, and to the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) Sports Centre, Wellbeing Services and Campus Life for consistently supporting and partially funding this work. Thank you to Campus Life, for continuing their support with my student and staff drop-in daily meditation sessions and the funding of the campus' first "slow space". And thank you to all students and teachers who have taught me so much.

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