

Returning to Fitra: Teaching Yogic Mindfulness through Meddy Teddy

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Introduction

My parents were both born in Patna (Bihar), India but forced to Pakistan after the Partition. As a Muslim woman of Pakistani descent whose family history is shaped by the displacement of Partition, my relationship to yoga, embodiment, and spiritual practice is inseparable from questions of migration, colonial aftermaths, and intergenerational resilience. As a Muslim Pakistani American woman, both my family's ancestry and the history of Islamophobia continues to prompt many questions, being the "face of Islam" for those who may be curious and also may have fear.

I came to yoga at a personal crossroads. As a South Asian American Muslim woman of color growing up in Fort Myers, Florida, a small, predominantly white town, I heard conflicting messages – some reverent, others suspicious. Yoga was discussed in affluent circles, but within my Muslim upbringing, I was warned it was a form of Hindu worship. After a torn anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) ended my competitive soccer career, my brother first suggested yoga as physical therapy to improve mobility. What began as rehabilitation with my physical therapist and public yoga classes at the local gym soon became a revelation. Yoga returned me to *nafas* (breath) as a sacred tether for my *nafs* (soul). In this union, I rediscovered something I hadn't realized was missing: space to meet myself and to remember God.

My teaching emerges at the intersection of faith, diaspora, and pedagogy, shaped by navigating predominantly white wellness spaces while representing for Muslim communities of color. After realizing other Muslim women are also engaged in this work, I find it more important to be visible in the yoga industry while contributing to this issue (Hassan 2020; Ternikar 2021). As Farha Ternikar (2021) states, yoga spaces that center whiteness and privilege often obscure the contributions and presence of Black, Indigenous, and women of color demonstrating how critical visibility is for reshaping wellness cultures. Similarly, Narin Hassan (2020) observes that Muslim American women build spaces of healing through yoga that challenge dominant narratives of who can embody yoga practice, highlighting the transformative power of representation in community wellness.

This narrative essay centers my experience as a Muslim yoga teacher working with children and using Meddy Teddy as a pedagogical and spiritual companion. Meddy Teddy is a mindfulness teddy bear designed to help guide meditation to children through yoga postures, serving as a playful yet meaningful pedagogical tool for embodied learning. I also served on the Board of the Meddy Teddy Foundation, a relationship that informs both my teaching practice and my critical engagement with the tool throughout this essay. Rooted in the Islamic principles of *dhikr* (remembrance), *muraqabah* (God-consciousness), *khushū* (humble focus), and *shukr*

(gratitude), my approach merges Islamic spirituality with the liberatory potential of yogic practice. In line with *Race and Yoga*'s commitment to critical race scholarship, embodiment, and decolonial inquiry, I offer a vision of sacred play and remembrance that resists dominant, whitewashed yoga cultures and instead centers children in healing through yoga – cultivating tranquility amid an increasingly loud and overstimulated world.

Yoga, Race, and Decolonial Practice

Contemporary yoga in the West is often severed from its spiritual and cultural roots and repackaged for predominantly white, upper-middle-class consumers (Berger 2018). This commodification transforms yoga into a product of lifestyle capitalism, often inaccessible to people of color, and especially those from spiritual traditions outside dominant secular paradigms. Decolonial theorists remind us that this sanitization is not accidental. Yoga was disrupted by colonial suppression; its lineages fractured and reformulated to suit Western palates (Singleton 2010). The whiteness of modern yoga spaces functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, subtly signaling that belonging requires cultural conformity. During my time managing Bella Prana Yoga Studio in Tampa, Florida – a space that saw over 2,000 students per week – I observed firsthand the barriers that Muslim women faced from entering wellness spaces that did not reflect their beliefs, such as assumptions that modest clothing signaled inexperience, music or chanting that made them uncomfortable, or the subtle forms of exclusion such as being stared at and tokenized. For visibly Muslim bodies – especially veiled women – such spaces often provoke both hypervisibility and erasure. Recognizing that whiteness itself is racialized is essential to disrupting its assumed neutrality.

In many wellness spaces, my presence continues to be met with surprise. Some have made comments such as, “I didn’t know Muslims did yoga,” or “Isn’t that a Hindu thing?” Such comments, while often well-intentioned, reflect the colonial logics that discipline spiritual traditions into mutually exclusive boxes. When I teach yoga to Muslim children of color, the practice becomes an embodied reclamation – a declaration of our right to presence, to joy, and to spiritual autonomy. As a practicing Muslim, Islam is not merely cultural – it is the ethical and spiritual center of my life. I understand practice as a path of purification (*tazkiya*), remembrance (*dhikr*), and radical compassion (*rahma*). In my teaching, Islam and yoga are not at odds, they are in conversation.

Returning to Fitra through Play

Having spent most of my life as an athlete, it was after a career-ending injury in college that I turned inward, seeking new modalities of movement and meaning in an introspective yet communal environment. After graduating and serving as a caretaker for both of my parents during their illnesses – and later navigating my grief after their deaths in 2013 and 2014 – I came to understand the power of breathwork in calming the nervous system. Four years into this healing process, while living in Dallas’s Uptown district, I found Gaia Flow Yoga, a studio rooted in what it called “love-based” instruction. Drawn to its ethos, I completed my 200-hour yoga teacher training over 10 months. Each class began with an engaging spiritual *sadhana* discussion (i.e. a dedicated discussion to a principle with intentional engagement), and was named for a natural biome – Ocean for fluid vinyasa, Desert for grounding twists, Mountain for strength and inversions.



Figure 1 – “Teaching”: Neda Ahson Facilitating a Family Yoga Class, Emphasizing Relational Learning, Intergenerational Presence, and Gentle Instruction Within a Shared Contemplative and Fun Environment (Photo Credit: Amy Fish).

After completing my yoga teacher training, I moved back to Florida in 2021 where I began teaching children alongside their families at Bella Prana Yoga Studio. It was always my passion to coach children’s soccer, and I realized that if I knew the fundamentals of breathwork and mindful movement in my youth, I would have been a much better soccer player. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, I witnessed heightened anxiety, isolation, and disembodiment among children, particularly children of friends and extended family, many of whom were limited in sports and social activity due to the pandemic. Many were withdrawn or hyperactive, disconnected from both body and community. Yet they arrived open, unburdened, and brimming with spiritual potential. They became not only my students, but also my teachers. Children absorb yoga most intuitively when they remain in their *fitra* – the state of natural purity and sacred orientation that Islam teaches every person is born with. Unlike adults, they have not yet accumulated the sediment of disconnection, self-consciousness, or inherited spiritual anxieties. They remain aligned.

The family yoga classes I teach reflect this knowing as infants rest on mothers’ chests, toddlers mimic animals, and preteens flow through sun salutations beside their fathers. The family yoga class was designed to bring families to learn and practice yoga together in a fun and informative way. In most sessions, after a playful sequence of animal-inspired movements, I

invite each child to share their favorite posture. One by one, they eagerly demonstrate – some chose lion’s breath with wild roars while others proudly showed Eagle pose with outstretched arms, a few quietly settled into Child’s pose, folding gently to the earth while saying they do it when praying. Another knelt in Hero’s pose (*virasana*) and said, “I’m sitting like Daddy does in *salah* [prayer]”, demonstrating an embodied recognition of the parallels between yogic posture and the seated form of Muslim prayer. These unscripted connections between yoga and prayer arise often – not through formal instruction – but through the children’s own embodied experience of postures, which they describe as feeling sacred, familiar, and safe. Through play, they find the courage to move, to share, and to recognize their bodies as vessels of worship and meaning. Rather than seeing yoga and *salah* as distinct disciplines, the children instinctively map their internal sense of alignment onto both. In these moments, joy becomes a bridge to spiritual presence.



Figure 2 – “Back to School Yoga: Neda Ahson Leading a Back-to-School Children’s Yoga Class. Grounding Eager Students through Collective Movement, Meditation, and Embodied Presence in a Circle (Photo Credit: Minal Ahson).

Decolonizing Wellness for Muslim Children of Color

I teach yoga in all family settings with a strong emphasis on storytelling and play, but especially in Muslim children’s classes. In Tree pose, we imagine being kind trees using the Arabic term *shajarah* as well as Sanskrit *vrksasana*. We take a break or commonly guided as a

trip away from everyday life by moving mindfully through new shapes and engaging through postures and play. Each class ends with *shukr* (gratitude). Children share what they are grateful for such as “my cat,” “breathing,” “my grandma praying for me.” We place our hands on our hearts and whisper ‘thank you’ to our mind and body respectfully for the ability to work and move together. These moments attune the heart to gratitude, humility, and presence, and I am reminded of bell hooks’ vision of engaged pedagogy of teaching that nurtures not just intellect, but emotional and spiritual well-being (hooks 1994). In our circles, this emerges as breath, giggles, awe, and sometimes tears. A ten year old once cried during *savasana*, later saying, “It felt like I was so relaxed in Heaven.” Her six year old brother added, “I saw angels!” I view the stories that children share not as fantasies, but sacred narratives unfolding in real time.

Dominant wellness culture often excludes such expressions through demanding silence and assimilation. In response, I cultivate a decolonial wellness space that validates Islamic values, affirms racialized identities, and refuses the commodification of peace. By “commodification of peace,” I refer to the ways in which contemporary wellness industries package stillness, meditation, and emotional regulation as purchasable products – stripped of cultural, spiritual, or political context – marketed primarily to affluent consumers. This framing treats inner peace as an individual luxury rather than a collective right (Rao 2025). The children I teach are mostly from Black, South Asian, Arab, and Latinx Muslim families. Many navigate trauma, Islamophobia, and multiple cultural frameworks. Teaching them to breathe, to be still, to feel, is not indulgence, it is liberation. As Audre Lorde reminds us, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (1988, 130). That care, when extended to children, becomes communal healing and, over time, it is a lineage of embodied remembrance, an inherited practice of breath, presence, and dignity that future generations can root themselves in.

Toward a Pedagogy of Sacred Remembrance: A Case Study for Meddy Teddy

In a circle of brightly colored yoga mats and even brighter, eager eyes, a soft poseable stuffed bear named Meddy Teddy sits in *sukhasana* (Easy pose), modeling grounding and stillness. Meddy Teddy sits at the front of the room, not as a toy, but as a gentle guide. We begin with breath: “Can you feel the life force inside you?” I ask. A four year old replies, “Is this how I feel God in my belly?” This moment – small but profound – encapsulates everything. We are not teaching mindfulness as something new; we are creating space for children to remember. Around Meddy, children mimic his posture – hands on knees, eyes gently closed. We begin, “Breathe in – *Bismillah* (In the Name of God). Breathe out – *Alhamdulillah* (Praise be to God).” Their bodies sway with breath, and in that rhythm, I witness something uniquely ancient: a return to *fitra*, the innate spiritual disposition Islam teaches every soul is born with. I emphasize cues and traits in English like “with deep roots and generous shade” inviting the children to inhabit qualities of creation rather than just creating shapes. In *balasana* (Child’s pose), a six-year-old once whispered, “Meddy is making *sujood*!” – recognizing the resonance between *Balasana* and Islamic prostration in prayer, when the body is closest to earth as well as our Creator. These spontaneous insights reveal the sacred literacy children already possess. Our role as teachers is not to impose knowledge, but to safeguard this intrinsic capacity for spiritual seeing.

Meddy Teddy is a mindfulness teddy bear that can be positioned into various yoga poses and serves as a playful yet profound tool for teaching meditation and mindful movement. Meddy Teddy was created by the Jordan family, and friends who turned into family, from Naples,

Florida (now in Los Angeles, California); they developed the bear as a mindfulness and yoga resource inspired by their interest in contemplative practices – and in turn, when practicing all together, found that their family grew stronger (for more information, see Meddy Teddy 2025). The Jordan Family created Meddy Teddy as a tool with the mission of making contemplative practice accessible to children across lines of race, culture, and language, especially in at-risk school programs, refugee camps, and orphanages. “By modeling stillness, breath, and posture in a joyful, nonverbal way, Meddy offers children a reminder that there is always a sacred, centered place within them, no matter what is happening around them in the world.

I collaborated with the creators on sponsorship proposals for at-risk youth after their travels to India in 2014 brought the idea to create a narrative that could move across racial, cultural and linguistic boundaries to life. As the Chairperson of the Foundation in 2017 while in my yoga teacher training, I immediately sensed its potential as a pedagogical companion for children’s yoga. At the time, I was increasingly aware of how mindfulness tools were either heavily commodified or culturally flattened, leaving little room for spiritual nuance. Meddy felt different: a very cute and neutral symbol that children could project meaning onto. I chose to teach with Meddy Teddy precisely because he creates a bridge between yogic and Islamic principles and traditions. When children see Meddy in different postures that can resonate with both prayer and wellness or when they synchronize his stillness with phrases of remembrance (*dhikr*), they begin to understand that breath, presence, and remembrance of God are not separate domains but intertwined forms of embodied worship. Meddy enables me to reconcile yoga and Islam not through intellectual explanation, but through play, a language children trust.

I enjoy bringing Meddy on the mat with me each time I practice to always have another way to demonstrate and cue how to safely and mindfully get in and out of postures; having additional Meddy bears in the class for students also demonstrates using left and right sides intentionally. I cue them to properly place Meddy in the poses by following instruction. I taught a few classes in the Los Angeles area in 2018 where the enterprise is based. During that time, I noticed the instructors were more often people of color and the student base was predominantly white. Rather than intentional messaging, the reality of the classes reflects the broader racial dynamics of the Los Angeles yoga community, which highlights how wellness products often circulate most visibly among white consumers even as pedagogical labor and innovation come from communities of color. In my work, I intentionally recontextualize Meddy Teddy as a tool of decolonial, culturally grounded mindfulness for all children. When Meddy sits with us on the mat – quiet, poised, receptive – he becomes not a commercial object, but an invitation back to *fitra*, quietude, and sacred remembrance.



Figure 3 – “Meddy and Kids”: Neda Ahson pictured with Three Students and Meddy Teddys after a Family Yoga Class, Illustrating the Use of the Tactile Tool to Support Emotional Regulation, Imaginative Play, and Mindfulness (Photo Credit: Claudia Wagner).

Conclusion

In mainstream school-based mindfulness programs, meditation is often marketed as a tool to improve performance, focus, grades, and behavior (Purser and Loy 2013). While practical, this approach reduces spiritual practice to neoliberal utility. In my pedagogy, we do not breathe to become better test-takers. We breathe to return to ourselves. Sood (2018) critiques how yoga has been stripped of its radical, spiritual dimensions and repurposed to serve dominant systems. In my classes, I reintroduce those dimensions – not through doctrine, but through sensation, story, and sacred presence. When a child places their hand on their chest and whispers “thank you,” they are engaging in *dhikr* (remembrance) that no standardized assessment can measure, transcending quantifiable metrics.

When taught with reverence, yoga becomes an act of decolonial remembrance. In my classroom, it flows alongside Islam. Where yoga speaks of *prana*, Islam speaks of *ruh* – the divine breath. Where yoga values stillness, Islam calls for *sabr* (patience). These are not conflicting truths but parallel languages of the sacred. To those teaching in marginalized communities, I offer this: center *fitra*, honor *dhikr*, embrace play, and resist commodification. Create rituals that affirm culture, spirituality, and joy. Listen to children when they speak of energy, light, or Heaven – they may be offering us the clearest theology of all. In the stillness of

a held breath, in the giggle of a child in Tree pose, in the quiet murmur of “Allah, Allah” on a small yoga mat – I see the shape of something whole. It is sacred. It is uncolonized. It is a way home.

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Neda Ahson (she/her) began her yoga journey after a torn ACL ended her competitive soccer career, transforming a search for physical recovery into a deeper exploration of emotional, mental, and spiritual healing. She completed her 200-hour yoga teacher training at Gaia Flow Yoga in Dallas in 2018 and has further trained in Vinyasa, 26&2, Restorative, and Yin modalities. As a woman of color, Neda is committed to creating inclusive, faith-affirming spaces

for embodied healing grounded in both yogic and Islamic traditions. She has taught and managed at Bella Prana Yoga in Tampa and now guides Muslim women and children across the US through mindful movement and breathwork in virtual sessions. Now based in Atlanta, her work centers family, faith, and holistic well-being, inviting students to reclaim stillness, safety, and sacred connection within their bodies.