

1-1-2008

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Raja G. Bhattar

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Recommended Citation

Bhattar, Raja G. (2008) "The New Raja Yoga: What Hinduism Has Taught Me About Life, Student Affairs, and Myself," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 29 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol29/iss1/9>

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The New Raja Yoga: What Hinduism Has Taught Me About Life, Student Affairs, and Myself

Raja G. Bhattar

What is the relationship of Hinduism to student affairs? In this article, I reflect on my Hindu spiritual and religious beliefs and how they have directed me to this line of work. Specifically, I look at the Hindu concept of Yoga (Jñana, Karma, Bhakti and Raja) and how it provides an innovative framework from which to look at the field and one's personal values. Written in the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) style, I reflect on significant ideas and scriptures that have helped me create my identity, and explore implications for student affairs. Critical to this reflection are the concepts of pluralism and inclusion and the development of Raja Yoga as a unique philosophy for the field.

Delving Into My Spiritual Basement

“What the heck is student affairs and what does it have to do with your life?” was my mom’s initial reaction when I announced my intention to attend graduate school for a degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration. I thought about this question all throughout my graduate school experience and finally decided to explore it for my Comprehensive Exam. Rather than searching for Western philosophies that I had been exposed to since grade school, I looked to my roots - 6,000 year-old Hindu roots - for the perfect tool that would help me filter my experience. Yoga. It is a word known across the world but rarely understood in its true form. I was intrigued by the concept of Yoga (“to join”) because it is intrinsically an action, one that calls for constant practice. When I realized there was a Yoga with my name in it, I had to see what it was about. The more I learned about Raja Yoga, the more I related to it. This article is my attempt to chart my new-found understanding as it applies to my life. “Student Affairs Yoga” simply provides a different perspective on our approach to student affairs. Before examining these ideas, I must describe my upbringing which has influenced my ideologies and development

Ancient Roots, New Branches

My parents moved to the United States to provide me with the best education

Raja G. Bhattar holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Boston University (Boston, MA) with a concentration in Psychology. He is a 2007 graduate of the UVM HESA program and currently serves as the Assistant Director of Diversity Affairs at the University of Redlands (Redlands, CA).

in the world. They wanted me to become a doctor and start a practice back in India. So my announcement was anything but a joy, though I was excited about my choice. In the following months, my mother would ask me everyday if I had changed my mind. Unfortunately for her, my answer was always “no.” As I was finishing my graduate program, my mom’s question re-entered my life. What *does* student affairs have to do with my life? When I was a kid, didn’t I always say that I would be a pediatrician and go around the world saving children’s lives? Didn’t my parents always teach me that *Jana seva* is *Janardhana seva* (serving the people is serving God)? So how the heck am I going to explain to my parents, family, and more importantly to myself that this is my calling? How did I, coming from a conservative Hindu priest family, decide on a career working with college students? Am I not supposed to become something “more respectable” like a doctor or an engineer or even a computer programmer? NO!

Somewhere along the way, I realized fulfilling these stereotypically prescribed roles in society was not how I wanted to create and live my life. Whatever I do, I want to do it in a way that is true to my heart and beliefs. So, what are these beliefs of mine? I am not entirely certain, but I know that having been raised in a temple and surrounded by Hindu *archakas* (priests), my religious and spiritual beliefs have played, and continue to play, a key role in how I live my life. From course selections to extra-curricular activities, I believe my decisions were influenced by these familial and cultural values. As I further my education and career, I seek opportunities to connect my work to my “basement values” founded in my Hindu upbringing (R. Nash, personal communication, February 7, 2007).

I grew up helping my dad in the temple from an early age by performing *pujas* (services), reciting *mantras* (Sanskrit chants), and decorating the deities. Through the years, the temple became more than a place of worship for me. When I had a bad day or would just need someone to talk to, I would go hang out in the temple, decorating gods and goddesses in traditional Indian clothing and jewelry while telling them my troubles. That is how I got through my teenage years. It was my healing mechanism when I was constantly being pulled in two directions. My parents wanted me to be the quintessential Indian son, while my “Western” environment and culture wanted me to assimilate into the “American melting-pot.” Even when I went to college, I maintained my spiritual practices and sought avenues to further understand my religious and cultural backgrounds and beliefs.

As an undergraduate, I enrolled in courses that specifically focused on Hinduism and Hindu philosophy. I developed an independent study course under the tutelage of a well-known Asian Studies scholar analyzing two major streams of Hindu philosophy and how they interpreted the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the major Hindu scriptures. I even started a joint venture with two of my cousins to visit all the major temples in the United States. We sought to analyze

the communities that built them and how they balanced the preservation and Westernization of Hinduism. Needless to say, my religious and spiritual beliefs continue to play a major role in my identity development and academic pursuits.

As I prepared to enter the “real world,” I felt the need to delve deeper into my spiritual beliefs and explore how they have influenced my worldview. Growing up immersed in Hindu culture, my graduate experience was difficult as there were few opportunities available for me to probe further into understanding the complexity of my spirituality, identity, and belief system. Before graduate school, I was always surrounded by people who had enough familiarity with Hinduism and Hindu culture to engage in conversations about these topics. In contrast, graduate school provided only a handful of opportunities to converse over my Hindu beliefs and how they continue to influence my work in student affairs. When selecting a topic for my comprehensive exam, my spirituality was an easy winner. Like most people at the brink of a new beginning and transition in life, I wanted to reflect on not only my graduate education but how the events, people, and places involved have helped me in delving deeper into my pedagogical foundations for a career in student affairs. The concept of Yoga is one that has helped me in reflecting and understanding my decision to enter this profession.

Being a Yogi

Yoga, one of the major Hindu imports in the West, is misconstrued merely as a popular form of physical exercise. Contrary to this Western definition, the Yoga I examine is something more essential to the core of who we are as human beings. “The word ‘yoga’ comes from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, which means ‘to join’ or ‘to yoke.’ Yoga is a practical aid, not a religion. Yoga is an ancient art based on a harmonizing system of development for the body, mind, and spirit” (Yoga Online, n.d.). Though overly simplified for this article, the essence of Yoga is learning the relationship between our minds, bodies, and spirits and utilizing this awareness to live a more balanced life. In fact there are three major Yogas designed to focus on these three aspects as defined in the *Bhagavad Gita* by Krishna: Jñana, Karma and Bhakthi. One who follows Yoga is known as a Yogi. In order to understand which path is best for my career in student affairs, I will reflect on each and how it relates to my life.

Jñana Yoga - The Art of the Philosopher

This Yoga is a purely intellectual pursuit to understanding the Supreme Being and one’s relationship with that force. Through logic and scholarly analysis, the *Parabrahma* (supreme being) and the *Atman* (soul) are seen as one and the same. The Vedanta Society defines Jñana Yoga as, “...the approach to God through discrimination and reason” (1978). By stripping away all human-constructed difference, the illusion of difference is shattered and we realize that Brahman and Atman are indistinguishable. In my life, I see Jñana Yoga as my formal education and graduate prepara-

tion. Analyzing identity development through theories and critiques, we strive to better understand how each person's experience is connected to the development of others. The study of literature and intellectual meditations are critical for this Yoga. This is best for those who have the time to ponder universal questions, describe observations, and formulate theory.

Karma Yoga - The Pure Practitioner

"Actions speak more than words" is the philosophy behind Karma Yoga. Karma is a tally list of one's good and bad actions from this and previous lives. Hindus believe that our current lives are results of our previous actions and by performing helpful actions we progress on our spiritual journey. "The path to God through selfless service to others is Karma Yoga. By working in this spirit, the God within each person is worshipped" (Vedanta Society, 1978). By performing our prescribed activities and dedicating our actions to God or to a social cause, our daily life becomes like a religious ritual and furthers our understanding of the Supreme Being.

As stated earlier, a common Sanskrit phrase states, *Jana Seva, Janardhana Seva* (To serve the people is to serve God). Such a connection of social service and religious ritual is crucial for me; in addition to helping others, service work furthers my spiritual journey. Coming from a religious background and finding such a well-founded basis for my social justice work has been my source of hope when I'm discouraged in this field. I believe that Gandhi's quote, "Be the change you wish to see in the world," is also rooted in this Yoga. From an early age, I knew I liked helping people, and it was something I wanted to do in my life. I wasn't sure how or who to help, but I wanted to make a difference. Being exposed to such a philosophy provided me an outlet to discover the social justice activist in me. Inherent in this quote is a belief that any person can be all they dream of being by simply believing in a cause and working for it. Furthermore, the beauty of this Yoga is the ability not to be focused solely on *Moksha* (salvation). Rather it allows for people to work collaboratively, improving the community as a whole and sharing in the community's overall success.

Bhakti Yoga - The Practice of Devotion

My family follows the Vaishnavite tradition, based in fully engaging oneself in the thought of a higher purpose. "This is the cultivation of a devotional relationship with God through prayer, ritual, and worship. In this practice, the human emotions are given a 'Godward turn.' Their energy is used in search for God within" (Vedanta Society, 1978). For me, this Yoga is the embodiment of passion for a cause.

I see some extremely passionate social justice activists fitting into this model of practice. Their zeal for the work is characterized by total immersion to their cause. There are several people in my life that I would place under this category. I admire their ability to devote their lives and work towards embodying their beliefs. A great

example for me is Stephan Dudenhofer whom I met in Guatemala. After running a successful company in the U.S. he moved to Guatemala where he has spent the past fifteen years fundraising for and building a school based on traditional Mayan teachings and healing practices. His commitment to the school and willingness to devote his life to the work is, for me, the true embodiment of Bhakthi Yoga.

Raja Yoga - Finding the Middle Ground

I am a person who seeks balance. Whether in my life, work, diet, or any other aspect of life, I strive for a balance of work and play and desserts and veggies. In terms of Hindu philosophy, I found that I identified somewhat with each of the previously mentioned Yogas but do not identify with any one as the singular philosophy for my life. Hence I began my journey to find a philosophy with which I can fully identify. I had always heard of Raja Yoga but never knew exactly what it was all about. Raja Yoga is defined as “a true system of developing psychic, intellectual, and spiritual powers and union with one’s higher self...” (de Puruker, 1999). To me, this Yoga seems to be the best fit because it is a philosophy based on balanced development of all aspects of ourselves and the previous three forms of Yoga. It promotes an understanding of the intricacies of ourselves and our relationship with a Supreme Being.

One of my favorite images in Hindu mythology is Ardhanaareeshwara, a form of God *Shiva* and Goddess Parvathi embodying the balance of male and female qualities. As a gay man, I have always appreciated this lack of a concrete gender binary in my religious roots. Even by himself, Shiva is often presented as a gender-ambiguous personality. I find it easier to be me and accept my masculine and feminine traits because of such images in my religious tradition. Similarly, the flexibility to practice Raja Yoga, incorporating aspects of Jñana, Karma, and Bhakthi into my life, provides an appropriate balance for my life.

This personal philosophy also flows into my student affairs work. I cannot see myself dedicating myself to the purely academic and intellectual study of student affairs. On the other hand, I cannot imagine being a pure practitioner, not engaging in larger conversations around theory and student affairs philosophy. Issues of social justice are important to me but I cannot devote my whole-self to that work. It is a part of my work and identity, but there are other components, such as family and need for financial stability, which prevent me from simply immersing myself in the advocacy work. Raja Yoga provides a balance of each Yoga and allows me to do the work I am passionate about while maintaining balance with other aspects of my life.

The Yoga of Student Affairs

Throughout this work, I have made connections between Hindu philosophy, student affairs, and their intersections in my life. Most people in the social

services are driven by deep spiritual (and even religious) beliefs and hopes for bettering our world. Individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, Dr. Howard Thurman, Mother Teresa, and others are great examples of such faith-based philosophies. These leaders have written extensively on how their upbringing and experiences have shaped their views and their work.

In our field, we do not take sufficient time to reflect on our own backgrounds and how they have formed our beliefs, work styles, and pedagogies, especially our spiritual and religious upbringings. Having been in a student affairs program that did not specifically focus on spirituality and self-reflection, I have had minimal discussion on these topics. I would like to see more done to infuse such ideas into graduate programs and the profession. If we want to be most effective as educators, we must be role models for our students. By delving deeper into our own beliefs and acknowledging these values and their importance in our daily lives, we will create space for our students to do so as well.

Hindu Ideas, Universal Values

Some may wonder why I am focusing on Hindu philosophy when there are only a handful of practicing Hindus in our profession. My reason simply is that I do not believe this philosophy is only applicable to those who identify as Hindus. As I have stated earlier, Yoga can be translated as “to join.” In other words, Yogas are meant to help people make and understand the intersections in our lives, work, and beliefs. These Yogas have universal applicability, especially when used as filters to examine concepts such as social justice or education. For example, in Karma Yoga one’s actions are centered on raising awareness of social justice issues through direct deeds. Regardless of one’s spiritual or religious beliefs, the action creates results. Without passion or any theoretical basis for the activity, however, such action is just pure action. When there is input of theory, passion, and action, there is a well-founded base for the concept. I like to think of it as a tripod; only with all three legs can the tripod be fully stable. Similarly, by learning to identify the three aspects (theory, passion, and action) of social justice, we can become better educators.

In fact I would even go as far as saying that each of us struggles at some point to determine which of the three we want as the major channel for our work in student affairs. Similar to the Raja Yoga, I believe our success only lies in understanding the need to seek balance among the three ideas and not the singular option that works. The Yogas present a framework from which to re-envision our idea of student affairs. The ingenuity of this philosophy goes beyond the current binary vision of our field (theory vs. practice) to include passion (for the profession and its values) as an equally important determinant in shaping the future of the profession.

The Mother of Pluralism

Student affairs holds inclusion as one of its values, but I feel we are still struggling

to find a framework that successfully incorporates these values into practice. Having been credited with developing one of the first concepts of pluralism, Hinduism provides a suitable framework for discussion on how pluralism and inclusion can be imbedded into all aspects of our field. If we as a field examine our own approaches to education and community building through the lens of the Yogas presented here, it would create a dialogue that I believe has the power to redefine student affairs for the next century. Creating an environment, similar to what the temple was for me, where students and practitioners can be fully comfortable with all of their identities, is critical for this process. In fact, student affairs' commitment to fostering a pluralistic and inclusive environment was a major factor in my decision to enter the field.

Being a Student Affairs Yogi

I feel that thoughts, actions, and beliefs are crucial for any effort, especially social change. As a group of people playing a critical role in developing the future generations of leaders, we must devote more energy to strategic planning and pondering the following statement: You are what you think, you are what you do, and you are what you believe. This philosophy is the essence of the three Yogas condensed into one: the Raja Yoga. For me, this process of self-discovery began in the temple as a child and continues today in the spiritually-rich environment I have created for myself. Even in the midst of my hectic life, just reflecting for a few moments on those experiences rejuvenates me and my connection to something beyond my comprehension. An easy way for all professionals to incorporate this idea into their work is to set aside a few moments each day to simply reflect on the tasks at hand and how they help you become a Student Affairs Yogi. Additional research on this idea of reflective and holistic professional development would be beneficial to the future of the profession. Furthermore, comparative evaluations of the philosophy presented here and other religious/spiritual philosophies would add to this growing body of knowledge. Understanding our spirituality or reflective journey is essential because it is “a search for self-knowledge, a search for the divine within ourselves...We are never lost. At worst, we are living in ignorance of our true nature” (Vedanta Society, 1978). Since Yoga can be seen as a practice, it is logical to see the Yogi as a practitioner and furthermore a seeker. By learning to look within ourselves and taking time to reflect on our experiences, we can envision a holistic future, personally and professionally. Once we understand the great strengths we carry and our abilities to embody the change we wish to see, we will truly be the social change agents we claim to be.

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