

Avoiding Cultural Appropriation in Yoga

Cultural appropriation occurs when elements of one culture are taken and used by another, often without permission, respect, or understanding. In the context of yoga, a practice deeply rooted in Indian spiritual traditions, cultural appropriation can manifest when individuals or organisations strip yoga of its cultural and historical essence, commodify it, or misrepresent it. Avoiding cultural appropriation in yoga is essential to honour its origins and preserve its integrity.

1. Understanding Yoga's Roots

Yoga originates from India and is a holistic practice that integrates physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions. It is rooted in philosophies from texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. Recognising yoga as more than a physical exercise is crucial to respecting its origins.

- **Educate Yourself:** Learn about yoga's history, its philosophical foundations, and its connection to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.
- **Acknowledge Its Spirituality:** Understand that yoga includes practices such as meditation, pranayama (breath control), and ethical principles (yamas and niyamas).

2. Respecting Sacred Symbols and Practices

Sacred symbols like Om (ॐ), mandalas, and Sanskrit mantras are integral to Indian culture and spirituality. Misusing or commodifying these symbols can be disrespectful.

- **Use Symbols Appropriately:** Avoid using sacred symbols as mere decor or marketing tools without understanding their significance.
- **Pronounce and Use Sanskrit Correctly:** Learn the correct pronunciation of Sanskrit terms and mantras rather than simplifying or misusing them for convenience.

3. Avoiding Commodification

Yoga's commodification often involves packaging it as a trendy workout or lifestyle brand, divorced from its cultural context. This can reduce a profound spiritual practice to a superficial product.

- **Steer Clear of Exoticisation:** Avoid portraying yoga as an “exotic” practice or misrepresenting Indian culture.
- **Avoid Cultural Stereotypes:** Don’t use imagery or language that reinforces clichés about India or Indian spirituality.

4. Giving Credit Where It’s Due

Acknowledge yoga’s Indian origins in your teachings or practice.

- **Honour Lineage:** If you teach yoga, share its history and origins with your students.
- **Avoid Renaming Poses:** Use the original Sanskrit names for poses rather than inventing new names that detach them from their roots.

5. Engaging with Authentic Sources

Seek out authentic sources of knowledge and practice. This includes learning from Indian teachers, studying classical texts, and engaging with the culture respectfully.

- **Learn from Qualified Teachers:** Choose instructors who have a deep understanding of yoga’s cultural and spiritual dimensions.
- **Participate in Cultural Exchange:** Engage with Indian communities and learn directly from those who have preserved yoga’s traditions.

6. Being Mindful of Representation

The modern yoga industry often underrepresents Indian voices while profiting from an Indian tradition.

- **Amplify Marginalised Voices:** Support Indian and South Asian yoga practitioners and platforms.
- **Diversify Yoga Spaces:** Ensure that yoga spaces and organisations include voices from the culture that created yoga.

7. Avoiding Tokenism

Tokenism occurs when cultural elements are used superficially without genuine engagement or respect.

- **Go Beyond Surface-Level Engagement:** Instead of merely incorporating Indian elements for aesthetics, understand and integrate their deeper meaning.

- **Respect Traditional Practices:** Avoid modifying or diluting traditional practices to make them more “marketable”.

8. Promoting Cultural Appreciation

Cultural appreciation involves a genuine effort to understand and honour the culture you are engaging with.

- **Be Humble and Open-Minded:** Approach yoga with respect and a willingness to learn.
- **Credit the Culture:** Acknowledge and celebrate the Indian roots of yoga in your practice and teachings.

9. Educating Others

Share what you learn about yoga’s cultural context with others to promote awareness and respect.

- **Foster Inclusive Discussions:** Encourage conversations about the importance of cultural sensitivity in yoga.
- **Challenge Misrepresentation:** Speak out against practices or portrayals that misrepresent or appropriate yoga.

10. Supporting Ethical Practices

If you are a teacher or studio owner, ensure your practices align with ethical and respectful engagement with yoga’s origins.

- **Avoid Profit-Driven Exploitation:** Ensure your offerings honour yoga’s spirit and are not solely focused on profit.
- **Give Back to the Community:** Support Indian and South Asian communities through donations, collaborations, or educational initiatives.

By approaching yoga with respect, humility, and a commitment to understanding its origins, we can practise and share it in a way that honours its rich heritage. This fosters a deeper, more meaningful connection to yoga and ensures its traditions are preserved for future generations.