

Traditional Indian Philosophy: A New Model of Cross-Cultural Competency By Kendra Carpenter and Vivek Saxena, Tradewinds Consulting

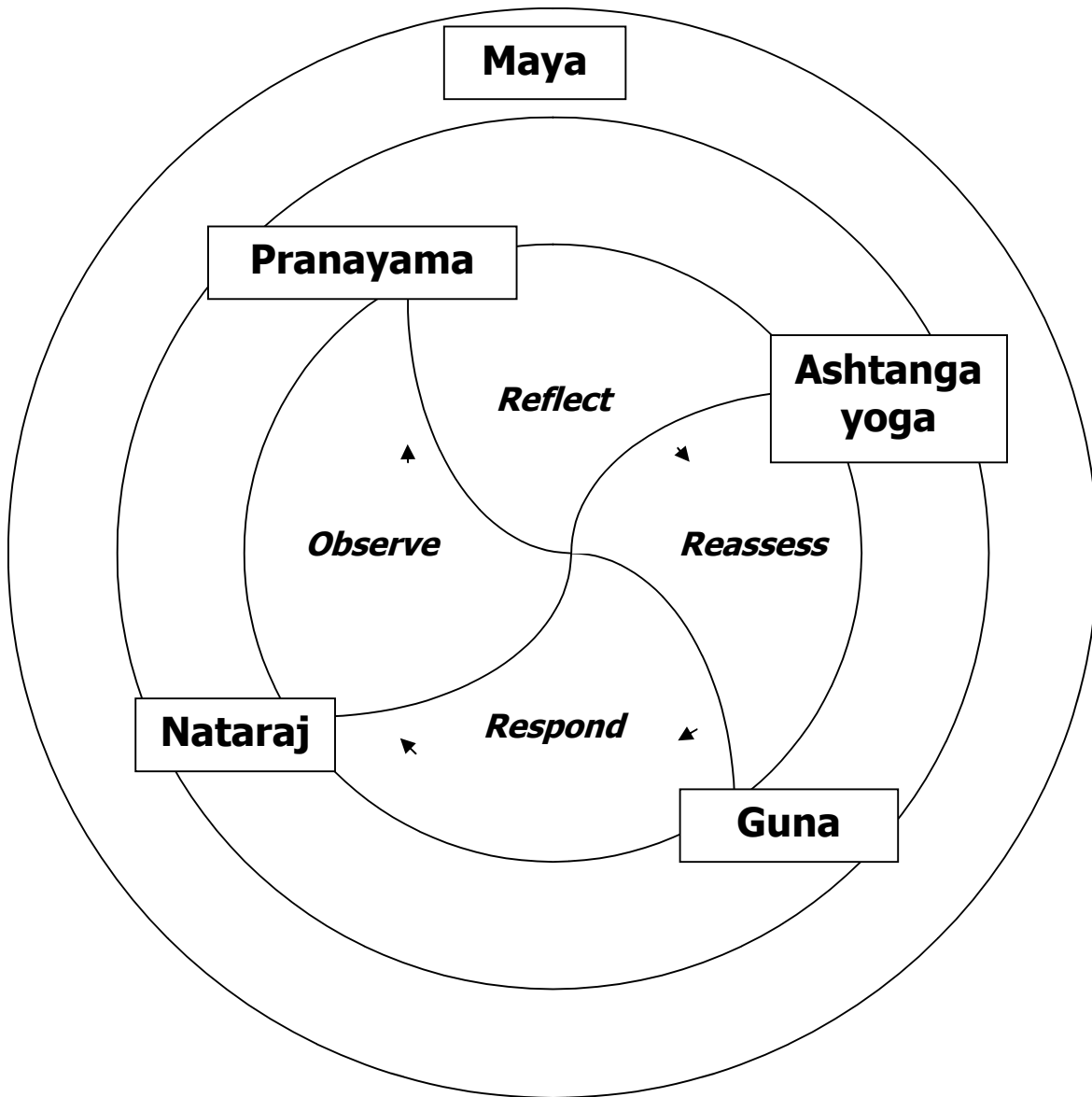
In the course of our work as intercultural trainers and researchers, we came to realize that competencies when working across cultures such as awareness of self, knowledge of others and personal qualities like flexibility, equanimity and a non-judgmental attitude were also the very same qualities that as yoga practitioners we strove to embody. We asked ourselves, can yogic and other aspects of traditional Indian philosophy inform our cross-cultural work? The answer we found is yes, and in our presentation at the recent SIETAR Conference in Chennai, we decided to share our framework of cross-cultural competency which connects powerful concepts in Indian philosophy with the contemporary competencies deemed necessary when working across cultures.

Although the modern concept of cross-cultural competency has originated in and been developed mostly in North America and Europe, there are cultures that have historically held values, thought processes, and practical beliefs that in fact match those that are considered essential to cross-cultural qualities and skills. Traditional Indian Vedic and yogic philosophies, around for over 5,000 years, offer us just this comparison.

As Indian philosophy is vast, we explored only some aspects of it through the concepts of pranayama, yoga, nataraj, guna and maya within a framework of cross-cultural competency. Additionally, we are not experts in these philosophies. They do, however, hold a place in our hearts, and impact us in practical ways. We hoped that participants would gain a better understanding of aspects of Indian philosophy, its alignment with intercultural competence, and how this connection can inform intercultural training/education, as well as trainer facilitation skills and trainer credibility with Indian audiences.

Our model, shown below, displays three concentric circles. Within the innermost circle is the cycle of self-reflection and corrective action that skilled global workers bring to interpersonal interactions across cultures, which we'll term ORRR: observe the situation, reflect on one's own reactions and interpretations, reassess the situation from multiple perspectives, and respond effectively. This understanding is not new, as it is represented in various ways within the intercultural field.

We've housed the ORRR process within two outer circles, however. The middle circle includes the concepts of pranayama, ashtanga yoga, guna and nataraj from Indian philosophy; these concepts represent tools that can assist one to be more successful in the ORRR process. The outer circle, where maya resides, represents what could be holding one back from success.



Maya

Let's start with the concept of maya, a concept that indicates that the way we understand the world is in fact an illusion, as all is impermanent. We attach ourselves to the maya of physical reality, wealth and our own version of reality and keep ourselves in ignorance. In terms of culture, we tend to see the world through our own maya, through our version of reality, while often failing to see other equally valid realities. This may keep us from being successful, as we remain stuck in our own perceptions, biases and habitual style, unable to see our cultural blindspots and limiting our effectiveness. This happens, for example, when a foreign national comes to Bangalore and expects an indirect and relationship-oriented cultural style that is reminiscent of a more traditional India and instead finds herself in a more task-oriented environment. This is maya. MNC IT-driven

Bangalore has a unique culture which continues to evolve rapidly. One has to be careful of preconceived notions and stereotypes. In fact, foreign nationals may find many urban Indians to be quite direct and task-oriented, particularly in the IT field.

The question becomes... How do we break out of the maya to see more clearly and interact more effectively? We feel that the yoga concepts of pranayama, yoga, guna and nataraj can help us. Let's start with examining how pranayama from yogic philosophy can help us to break out of the maya.

Pranayama

Prana is the vital force or energy that sustains us and our breath is a manifestation of this vital force. Pranayama is the control of the breath, of the inhalation and exhalation, and is considered a way to access and control the mind and emotions. Think about it – when you are experiencing a strong emotion like frustration or anger, your breathing becomes shallow and restricted. That's when someone might suggest taking a deep breath. When you slow and regulate the breath, you are in a state of attention to whatever emotions and thoughts that arise; you become conscious of what's happening in the moment. In this state of consciousness, you are able to reflect on your thoughts and emotions and pause. Rather than reacting from the emotions, the pause and self-reflection allow you to respond from a more effective place. This is mindfulness, where in any given interaction, you are able to notice your breath and your reactions and respond rather than react. Although simple to understand, it's a very difficult practice indeed.

In a coaching session with an Indian global manager, this concept of responding rather than reacting through a practice of mindfulness was discussed after a particular intercultural encounter. Ideally we would like to support this manager in becoming aware of her reactions with a foreign colleague, and support her movement from her automatic to a more conscious response. This manager, let's call her Smita, was developing a relationship with a European colleague, let's call her Jacqueline. Smita was invited over Jacqueline's home and met her husband and child. After some time in the relationship, Jacqueline shared with Smita that her 'husband' was not in fact her husband but her live-in boyfriend of eight years. Smita was in her words 'scandalized.' She had difficulty reconciling what she considered to be different ethical values between her colleague and herself. How does she reconcile? By beginning with the breath, and coming to a place of self-reflective mindfulness. Closing down emotionally and physically was Smita's initial reaction – a valid reaction from her perspective – however, this shut-down could negatively impact this growing relationship with her colleague. Even if she cognitively comes to understand Jacqueline's life choices within the context of Jacqueline's own culture, emotionally and physically (through body language) she could unwittingly display hostility and rejection. It would be a good idea for her in this case to return to the breath, and hence to awareness of her own body and mind.

Her reaction is steeped in maya. Jacqueline's life choices in her own cultural context are reasonable and quite common. The fact of her not being married is not in itself upsetting (fact is neutral); it is Smita's reaction based on her own context that creates this upset. For Smita, the challenge is to come to a state of mindfulness through awareness of her breath and hence, awareness of her mind and emotions. With mindfulness, she will be able to see she is reacting from her own cultural context, and view Jacqueline's behavior from Jacqueline's own cultural context. Smita may never, in fact, feel comfortable with Jacqueline's lifestyle and that is okay – as long as she is able to accept that discomfort as it is and accept Jacqueline as she is without judging. Cultural intelligence is described by Earley and Mosakowski as 'suspending judgment' and doing just this will allow Smita to continue to effectively do business and interact with Jacqueline. And, hopefully, build a stronger relationship.

Hatha/Ashtanga Yoga

How does one sustain this practice of mindfulness? By strengthening through practice; hatha/ashtanga yoga is just that practice. Indian yogic philosophy is sometimes understood in the Western world as postures, but postures or asanas, are one part of the discipline. Yoga is a path to understanding the self through practice and discipline – a way to sustain habits of responding rather than reacting. It is a way to strengthen one's capacity to self-reflect, pause and choose mindful responses, and is a way to build competency to break out of one's own maya or perceptions. The practice strengthens at all levels of being – cognitively, emotionally, and physically – and cultivates equanimity in life. Equanimity is an important quality to have when dealing with difficult, ambiguous or conflictual situations – situations that can commonly occur when interacting across cultures. In Smita's case, she may mentally learn to accept the situation, but needs to reconcile it emotionally, so that she will not hurt the business relationship. This is critical for intercultural competence, as we must engage at all levels when doing business globally, even when we have a hard time accepting aspects of other cultural contexts. We must integrate our levels of being (called kosas) when working across cultures, which means operating with a high CQ or measure of cultural intelligence which includes physical, mental and emotional components (see Earley and Mosakowski for more info on cultural intelligence).

In the physical practice of yoga, there is the concept of 'dynamic tension' that yoga master B.K.S. Iyengar discusses in his book *Light on Life*. Rather than focusing on stretching to the wall in a posture, one must attempt to stretch from one's center. This focus changes the balance and poise of the pose. Occasionally in some of our trainings in India, participants will raise fears about losing one's identity in the quest to emulate global (which is often quite Western) behaviors and cultural identities. This is where we invoke this concept of dynamic tension. Stretch from your center by staying grounded in who you are and your strengths while simultaneously expanding your repertoire of perspectives, skills and options to increase your success. You don't have to give up who you are, but rather leverage who you are within the broader context. India is herself a

great example of this point. Despite a history which includes multiple invasions and British colonization, India never lost her core identity. Instead, India absorbed and integrated many elements of foreign cultures into her identity which has remained grounded and strong. (Additionally, India greatly influenced foreign cultures that it came into contact with as well.)

Gunās

Pranayama and hatha/ashtanga yoga offer powerful actionable strategies to break out of your maya. Our next concept, gunas, offers us another way to frame our responses and strategies when working across cultures. Gunas are the three diverse qualities, temperaments or attributes of nature called tamas (solidity, inertia), rajas (dynamism, turbulence) and sattwa (luminosity, clarity). These three qualities are also part of our own human nature, and the goal is to balance these temperaments through your yoga practice and in your body/mind/soul.

These three attributes are constantly in flux, and can cause you to lose your balance and cause instability. A guna is not absolute; it's a continuum and could have both negative and positive impacts. Intercultural competence includes understanding how to adapt and change one's approach in each situation; it helps to recognize that adapting to your environment by balancing your gunas is a choice available to you. Let's briefly discuss each attribute:

Tamas refers to a state of solidity, which could also be perceived as inertia. An expat who has recently moved to a "difficult" country may choose to enter a state of solidity and ground himself by restricting his world to his apartment and workplace. But this same solidity could morph into inertia if it prevents him from exploring the world outside after he's gotten more familiar and comfortable.

Rajas refers to a state of dynamism, which could also be seen as turbulence. An expat from New York in a senior management position in Chennai may have a lot of new energy and new ideas. She could be seen as dynamic if she implements change while respecting the order, but it could come across as turbulent if she pushes her agenda aggressively, without accounting for the cultural nuances of Chennai.

Sattwa refers to alertness and luminosity. We like to use the Buddhist term here 'beginner's mind' which is a sense of openness that this quality imbues. Beginner's mind allows one to remain humble and receptive when learning new or even known subjects. It encourages you to have the eagerness to understand even when at an advanced level; and is the ability to step outside your own ego and look at reality in uninhibited and honest ways. Rather than reacting with negative emotions, this state of being allows one to approach situations as questions for investigation, conversation and synthesis.

The interplay of these gunas forces is of crucial importance in our intercultural practice. The key is learning to identify, and to adjust and balance their proportion as required in various situations. You are like an artist with basic pigments on her palette, forever remixing and blending them in order to express the right combination.

Nataraj

Our last concept, Nataraj, is possibly one of the best known symbols of Indian philosophy. Nataraj in Sanskrit means the Lord of Dance. The dance portrays the attempt to release one from the illusion of maya and from ignorance.

The image of Nataraj is rich with symbolisms – the fiery ring around the sculpture, the snake, Shiva's flowing hair, the posturing of his hands and legs – all are loaded with unique interpretations. However, the overarching symbolism is that of dance, which is in several ways integral to Indian culture. So far, we've talked about awareness, perceptions, discipline and adapting. What Nataraj brings to the forefront is the attitude of combining all of that with the additional skill of balance and fluidity. There's also the element of a sense of lightness and joy – which are again core to any form of dance.

There are times when living in a new culture gets to be very daunting, and in spite of all our knowledge it can be difficult to accept and adapt to different styles of living without compromising on our values and ethics. Nataraj reminds us to have the skill to evolve and mould ourselves to be able to navigate life with a sense of fluidity and lightness, in essence, to appreciate the dance of life itself.

Conclusion

Interpersonal competence when interacting across cultures is critical for long-term professional and personal success. We have attempted to gain a better understanding of a few foundational concepts of pranayama, yoga, guna, nataraj and maya from traditional Indian philosophy, and to share how these concepts are aligned with and support intercultural competence. Ultimately, we are interested in how this connection can bring about positive transformation within individuals and organizations. We see immense mobility of this philosophy to cross cultures and be adapted in ways that work in various settings, and see these concepts as a way to enhance the toolbox of organizations when considering not only intercultural competence, but also personal leadership and even change management. We invite a dialogue on how this might inform your work with individuals and organizations and could be made actionable in your intercultural setting.

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