



Yoga and Activism:

Cultural Appropriation & Indigenous Australian Conversation

This month at Bhakti Rose Collective our theme loosely is Yoga and Activism, within this I have chosen to focus in on the topics of cultural appropriation and also look at the challenges for both Indigenous yoga teachers working in Australia as well as non-Indigenous teachers and the implications and responsibilities of teaching on Country. I believe it is our responsibility as non-Indigenous Australians' to educate ourselves and to lean into both the complexity and nuance of this important conversation. As part of this month's offering, I interviewed friend and fellow Jivamukti Yoga teacher Jasmine Sheppard. Jasmine is a yoga teacher, an activist and a professional dancer. She is also a Tagalka and Kurtjar woman, much of her creative work is politically engaged and reflects her experiences as a modern Indigenous woman in a multi-cultural society.

What is cultural appropriation?

Cultural exchange is 'engaging with a culture as a respectful and humble guest, by invitation only.' (Jarune Uwujaren)

Cultural appropriation is 'a process that takes a traditional practice from a marginalized group and turns it into something that benefits the dominant group – often erasing or negating its origins and meaning.' (Maisha Z. Johnson)

Here are some signs of cultural appropriation that should be avoided by yoga teachers:

1. Treating yoga like a solely physical activity with no philosophical or cultural context. If you want to teach a simple 'stretch and relax' class name it as such. Yoga is something else.
2. Including shame and ridicule or inappropriate humour (watch out for this when something you don't understand from another culture makes you feel uncomfortable).
3. Not acknowledging where the practices comes from. Or worse still not even knowing.
4. Misusing sacred objects, modes of dress or other cultural items. This includes appropriation of 'generic' practices or items such as painting 'tribal markings' on one's face or wearing a generic 'tribal headdress' etc.
5. Not being accountable when speaking sacred languages by not learning them properly or understanding what you are saying.
6. A white teacher who ignores oppression, for example in statements such as 'we are all one' or 'we are all the same' which negates the systemised attack and subsequent suffering of marginalised communities.
7. Treating yoga like a commodity in which financial gain is your primary goal.
8. Only thinking about personal gain for example making yourself look or seem authentic or legitimate through cultural appropriation of some kind.



Why Does it Matter?

Here is one example relevant to us as yogis: the British used violence, rape, and murder to take control of the South Asian sub-continent – and they approached yoga with violence, too. They forced people to convert to Christianity, and outlawed the healing and spiritual practices seen as ‘primitive’ traditions, like yoga. So how did South Asian people preserve yoga through all of that? With incredible resilience – and also by taking huge risks, with many of them losing their land and their lives. With yoga being so popular these days, it’s hard to imagine having to go through all of that just to practice it...

‘After being demonized as a ‘savage’ characteristic of the cultures of people of colour, yoga was then repackaged in some schools as something white people could enjoy for entertainment and competition’s sake. [While] South Asians... [were] mistreated [for] following their cultural traditions... white people gain profits, attention, and credit for using diluted versions of the same practices’. Maisha Z. Johnson

A similar appropriation has happened and is happening with Indigenous Australian culture. Non-indigenous people are appropriating Aboriginal sacred spiritual practices and rituals without consultation or understanding. This perpetrates the cycles of ignorance and disrespect. There is a strong call to action for a collective ‘pause’ and an invitation to reflect on how and when we incorporate Indigenous learnings and culture into our yoga or other healing modality work as teachers. For example, making sure the Acknowledgement of Country is not offered as meaningless lip-service (if offered at all) but with heartfelt connection. Being mindful of how Indigenous music and instruments are used by non-Indigenous people in ‘sound healings’ or similar work. Not speaking on behalf of instead of Indigenous peoples ... the list goes on ...

Resources:

Healing Our Spirit Worldwide – a conference based in Sydney hosting powerful and important conversations and offering a hub for useful resources and education - <http://hosw.com>

The land and our mental health are linked – this insightful and eye-opening article about climate change and Australian land care features contribution from Pat Dudgeon who is Australia’s first Aboriginal psychologist and specialised in suicide prevention because of the mental health issues in her community in the Kimberley, a region of north-west Australia. The author demonstrates how Aboriginal wisdom has much to teach us if we cultivate the intention of learning and healing -

<https://mosaicscience.com/story/aboriginal-psychologists-mental-health-farmers-drought-Australia-climate-change/>

Change the date – join the campaign to change the date of Australia Day - <http://changethedate.org>

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live [insert name of local Traditional Owners here if known and if not known find out!], and recognise their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.