

Holistic Well-Being: An International Yoga-Ayurveda Event at Iitate Village (Fukushima, Japan) in Support of the People Deeply Affected by the 3.11 Earthquake and Nuclear Accident



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Abstract

Similar to sports events, yoga events are often designed to leverage for social goals. This commentary essay aims to discuss the International Day of Yoga (IDY2024) event at 'Iitate village' (Fukushima, Japan), held in combination with Ayurveda (as it is) to share with domestic (local) people a holistic approach to human health as an aid towards their recovery (well-being) from the persisting trauma (physical, mental, and socio-environmental) caused by the Great East Japan earthquake of 3.11 and the subsequent nuclear accident at the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Plant (FDNPP, located 25-45 km from Iitate village). The experiences, expectations, and reflections of the IDY2024 is presented through the lens of the authors, who participated in this event. Common and unique capacity of the Yoga-Ayurveda event is also discussed in relation to not only the well-being but also alternative food for revitalization of the agriculture and a new approach to life post-disaster for both the returnees (mostly senior citizens) and to the future.

Keywords: Nuclear Accident; Radioactive Contamination; Rural Communities; Mental Health; Medicinal Plant

Abbreviations: IDY: International Day of Yoga; FDNPP: Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant; IISORA: Iitate-Mura Society for Radiocology; CYP: Common Yoga Protocol; VCC: Vivekananda Cultural Centre; GGEC: Graduate General Education Courses; O₂: Oxygen; CO₂: Carbon Dioxide; H₂: Hydrogen.

Background to the Iitate Village, Fukushima

The Iitate Village (飯館村) in Fukushima, is located 25-45 km from the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Plant (FDNPP), and became a research field for not only the physicists/radiation/nuclear experts but also life scientists and social scientists in this highly contaminated village following the nuclear disaster accompanying the March 11, 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake

[1-5]. The Iitate village (classified since 2011 as a 'Restricted Residence Zone') had undergone 'large-scale' decontamination work on both cultivated land and residential areas as deemed fit by the authorities and on request of the citizens, and has reopened to in 2017; though some areas south of the village, opened in 2023 and the number of returnees is low [4]. As of 2024.10.01, the

number of returnees was 1,190 from the original (in 2011.10.01) of 6,544 [Ito N, personal communication, November 2nd 2024; IISORA, 2024] [6].

Other than the reconstruction and recovery process and steps towards the restoration of the 'original' state of Iitate village, i.e., the return of the villagers to their homes, one important aspect of the village has to be kept in mind - the importance of the natural resources and agriculture that was the mainstay of the village identity and economics. As the returnees are mostly senior citizens, and with decontamination a distant reality vis-à-vis the revitalization of the old style of agriculture to pre-disaster levels, sustainability will become an issue [4,6]. Recently, a project looking into agricultural education using the FPBL framework from a global perspective is being undertaken, especially taking into account the role of the younger generation [5].

Even in that study, it is acknowledged as follows - *"It is hoped that even after the area is restored to predisaster levels, it will long continue to be a site of practice and research as an area where reconstruction knowledge is passed on to future generations, and that the development and sustainability of the area will be ensured through a system of continuous involvement and collaboration of diverse groups of people in Iitate village and the Fukushima region"* [5]. In this scenario, our group has attempted to utilize the power of alternative human practices of well-being combining Yoga and Ayurveda (with a Japanese twist) to help in the revitalization process of Iitate village. Though our idea differs from that mentioned by Sugino and Mizoguchi [5], we believe integration of our idea, especially the use of 'kiku-imo' as a model case for promoting alternative agriculture along with examples that some of the farmers are already challenging (e.g., the case of Iitate Yukiko pumpkin; <https://madei-koubou.jp/>) is in principle aligned with their project. In above context, the case of both the Yoga-Ayurveda IDY2024 event and the global food 'kiku-imo' is discussed below.

The Day - June 22, 2024: International Day of Yoga (Idy) (June 21) In Iitate

Introduction to IDY, Embassy of India in Tokyo, Japan, and Common Yoga Protocol (CYP)

What is Yoga and IDY2024, and what is Yoga to the Iitate village, and why there? To quote the Press Information Bureau (Government of India) - *"On September 27, 2014, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi during his address to the United Nations General Assembly proposed to dedicate June 21st as day to celebrate Yoga across the world. Less than three months later, on 11th December 2014, 193 members of the UNGA and 173 co-sponsor countries unanimously approved the resolution of the United Nations in which the establishment of 21st June as the International Day of Yoga was passed. In its resolution, the UNGA agreed that Yoga offers a holistic approach to health and well-being, and that widespread promotion about the benefits of practising Yoga is necessary for the*

global population's health. Yoga brings about harmony in all areas of life and is known for its significant role in preventing diseases, promoting health, and treating many disorders related to lifestyle."

The day is celebrated to not only promote physical, mental and spiritual well-being, but cultivate an awareness of Yoga as a whole as part of a human's daily regimen; June 21st was chosen as it marks the summer solstice (longest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere) [7,8].

In conjunction with the IDY, Ministry of AYUSH released a standardized yoga protocol called the 'Common Yoga Protocol' (CYP), which includes all aspects of Yoga and is designed to be used by everyone (all age groups) for keeping good health [9,10]. This was what was practiced at the June 22 IDY2024 celebration with the people of the Iitate village, who had gathered to know more about Yoga and the IDY. Dr. Sanjay Kumar, of the Vivekananda Cultural Centre (VCC) [11], Indian Council for Cultural Relations of India, Embassy of India in Tokyo was the chief Yoga instructor on this day IDY [8]; the session was an hour-long session, joined by students and staffs of University of Tsukuba, and alumni.

This was followed by a second event that was related to the keyword 'holistic'. Yoga as taught (beginning in 2015) and practiced at the University of Tsukuba (Graduate General Education Courses (GGEC) program; <https://www.tsukuba.ac.jp/education/g-courses-kyoutsuukamoku/#category-34>) may be considered to have affinity and also complementarity with Ayurveda (thought and practice) for not only human well-being but sustainable lifestyle. Additionally, the social contribution aspect of the GGEC program was invoked to adapt to the IDY2024. And, this was another reason to bring the IDY2024 to Iitate village in Fukushima, as an alternative (not before thought of) way of collaboration with the people of Iitate who might benefit from the practice of Yoga (human well-being in times of disaster and during the recovery process is an essential but sometimes forgotten component) and lifestyle habits involving local plants, vegetables and foods, including health promoting and enhancing effects of the 'kiku-imo' (Jerusalem artichoke; *Helianthus tuberosus*). As is said, it takes two hands to clap, in the same way, the two aspects of Yoga and Ayurveda can create a sound and movement, even tiny, that resonates with the people of the Iitate village, and in an own unique Japanese way (Figure 1).

Kikuimo, Ayurveda and Yoga in Japan - GENBOKU TAKAHASHI

The year 2024 marks the 10th anniversary of the founding of International Day of Yoga. Yoga is no longer just Yoga in isolation. Recently in Japan, it seems that an increasing number of people who are qualified as Yoga instructors are also starting to study Ayurveda. Conversely, it seems that many of those who have studied Ayurveda are also practicing Yoga. Nowadays, the distinction between Yoga and Ayurveda may be losing its practical value. In fact, there is a homology between the essence of each. This is because both are based on a common lifestyle. Following

the GGEC Yoga Course at University of Tsukuba Graduate School, we began conducting Yoga activities with the aim of contributing to society under the name “Society for the Advancement of Yoga Education Teaching Research Culture and Practice” (TYfA/tYMC). “Yoga is the act of getting to know ourselves and adjusting our self, but it is all about developing the ability to deal flexibly with

stress and continue living powerfully”. Stress on human existence is closely related not only to human relationships but also to local communities, particularly diet, and even the global environment. Serious Yoga practice is an endeavor that addresses not only the asanas but the whole human existence. It can be said that starts with adjusting each individual’s lifestyle habits.



Figure 1: The IDY2024 at litate village, Fukushima; held on June 22nd, 2024.

Ayurveda: is a traditional medicine of India, but for each individual, the correct understanding of Ayurveda is to think that Ayurveda lies in adjusting one’s lifestyle habits. So, do we need two different lifestyles, a yoga lifestyle and Ayurvedic lifestyle? No. This is probably one of the most logical ways to develop physical and mental health and the ability to deal with stress flexibly and continue living a strong life. On the other hand, are there any basic lifestyle habits common to all human beings? Yes! It is found in Karma, which is absolutely indispensable in the process of spinning life. That Karma is to eat and breathe. Moreover, eating and breathing are one and the same and can never be separated. When we breathe in, we take oxygen (O_2) into our bodies. When we expel carbon dioxide (CO_2). The hydrogen (H^2) contained in food, fat, protein, and carbohydrates combines with the O^2 contained in the air we inhale and is combusted to produce energy currency (adenosine triphosphate). At this time, water and carbon

dioxide are discarded as waste along with exhaled air. In Yoga, breathing techniques are essential as a core part of lifestyle. On the other hand, eating habits are an essential part of the Ayurvedic lifestyle. This is the scientific reason why Yoga and Ayurveda are inseparable. On the IDY2024 in Fukushima, a Hatha Yoga exercise was conducted by a teacher from the Indian Embassy (VCC). Afterwards, we (TYfA/tYMC) gave a talk on eating habits.

Modern Society: Health problems caused by diabetes and obesity have reached a crisis point world-wide. While many people in the world suffer from hunger, the current situation is that the increase in lifestyle-related diseases caused by excessive energy intake is also weakening immune function, making it difficult to prevent infectious disease epidemics. In order to overcome this situation, it is important to establish lifestyle habits that increase vegetable intake. This is because a vegetable diet increases the number of lactic acid bacteria and bifidobacteria in the large

intestine, preventing lifestyle-related diseases and improving immune function. Today, it is common social knowledge in Japan that “it is important to start a meal with vegetables.”

‘Kiku-imo’: On June 22nd, among these vegetables, we focused on the ‘kiku-imo’. We at TYfA/tYMC have been conducting research on ‘kiku-imo’ [12]. ‘Kiku-imo’ contains an exceptionally high amount of water-soluble dietary fiber, most notably inulin, and is particularly effective at helping to increase lactic acid bacteria and bifidobacteria in the large intestine. We have continued our research through molecular biology approaches as well as cultivation experiments. At the same time, we have been conducting grassroots campaigns with groups across Japan aiming to revitalize the economy and improve the health of local communities through the cultivation, processing, and commercialization of ‘kiku-imo’. Nowadays, anyone can purchase ‘kiku-imo’ in various forms, such as raw ‘kiku-imo’, ‘kiku-imo’ chips, and powder at ‘Michino-eki’ (roadside farmer’s market) and other places all over Japan.

Restoration of the Village for the Next 300 Years & Blessings of the Earth (Vegetables, Forest) and Yoga - TOSHI OGURA

The two days spent in the area affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake (3.11) were a valuable time of exchange and observation, and experience receiving huge unexpected impacts because of the current state of local community recovery and the mind of the local residents regarding “life to live” and “life path”. Meanings and potential effects of the Yoga event: The IDY2024 was an opportunity to let the world know about the “real progress of recovery” and the “respect for the living things”. Observing the local people to practice unfamiliar yoga, it was hoped that Yoga would be beneficial for their physical health and peaceful mind. A realization was that Genboku Takahashi sensei’s (teacher, in Japanese) teachings on breathing methods are useful for people who become depressed after a long recovery. And, the story of ‘kiku-imo’ as an example of Ayurveda would be easier for the farmers to get familiar with in the disaster area.

- **Sudden Volunteer Experience as a Yoga iInterpreter:** Receiving a request to be a yoga interpreter helped to contribute with own yoga knowledge and language skills. 300 year mind on recovery - “image of Fukushima foods” vs. “beautiful landscape and delicious food”: Being the first time to visit a disaster area after watching the shocking news footage of the Great East Japan Earthquake 13-years ago, there was a recollection of the times of hesitation in buying fresh products from Fukushima at supermarkets in Tokyo, and the uncomfortable feeling about the fact that the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games became a symbol of recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake. At first, farmer fields (not many) growing local vegetables, deep green forests, and vegetable stands at the roadside station looked like any other rural Japanese landscape. The roadside station, village community center, and lodging facilities were very nice facilities, strangely so it was different from the image about a disaster area.

Soul food served during the dinner was delicious made with local ingredients carefully prepared by a local farmer chef; and, at the same time wondering how residents of Tokyo could be helped to eat Fukushima fresh foods without worrying about them.

Learning, at the dinner table that night, that it would take 300 years, many times the human lifespan, for the whole village to be to pre-disaster levels, and for the forest where mushrooms grow safely for human consumption, and where a huge amount of money would be spent on agricultural soil. Wanting to support the health and well-being of the villagers and the revitalization of the village, through Yoga there was a loss for words realizing that the fundamental problems had to be resolved first. Hoping there was more time for Dr. Kumar to interact with local people in the disaster-stricken areas and graduate students individually, and discussions with Genboku Takahashi sensei, sharing the teachings of the Bhagavat Gita, to learn the teachings of disaster recovery and life.

Back to Iitate Village - SUMEI HUANG

Coming to Fukushima for the fourth time, one can immediately realize the beauty of the village (one of the most beautiful 100 villages in Japan) and the food is delicious. On the other side, there are a few people and a distinct lack of liveliness can be felt. Though there a few returnees, especially elderly people, there was one time, when we held the SPORTS DAY activity with the ‘Senior Citizens Association of Iitate’ members coordinated by a graduate student (sport for development) and Prof. Randeep Rakwal. It was remarkable to see such energy amongst the senior citizens and their strong will to have such regular sports interactions with the university students (International and Japanese).

With Yoga on the IDY2024 it was thought that such a low intensity exercise would be more suitable for their body and positively affect the body and mind, and realize the space and time to communicate with each other. In China, there is a successful case of bringing yoga to village (Yugouliang), having less than 100 people with serious health issues. However, yoga changed the destiny of this village where most of the villagers are practicing yoga leading to good health and no longer feeling lonely. Though it is tough to motivate senior citizens start Yoga, such an event might impact their lives by sharing the light of yoga step by step one by one slowly increasing the interest and willingness to continue and communicate.

Connection with Yoga - YOSHITAKA KOMATSU

Connection with yoga? Experience? Trying to remember when it all started, it must have been in primary school when I joined a class my mother was taking. However, it did not last forever and must have been a one-off experience. Writing this, and remembering the many twists and turns in life, led me to reconnect with Yoga [daigakuin-kyoutsuukamoku (common postgraduate subjects, GGEC program; <https://www.tsukuba.ac.jp/en/academics/g-courses-kyoutsuukamoku/>)] through Prof. Randeep Rakwal and Genboku Takahashi sensei when I

was a graduate student at University of Tsukuba. Coming to Iitate village was another unique experience listening to the speech by Dr. Kumar on IDY2024 and practicing Yoga (breathing techniques, asanas, postures, their impact of various ailments) together with young and old with guidance under the CYP. Staying over at the Iitate village camping site at the end of the event brought another aspect of the beautiful village through its local food and ingredients to the forefront.

This food communication was another opportunity to directly interact with the residents of the Iitate village listening to their history, the disaster and current concerns. One point that stood out was that although they could not pick (harvest) and eat any of the natural produce (in the forest), they could only eat what they had grown. On the next day, during the field trip, the dangers of high-levels of radiation were apparent on the border between the villages of Iitate and Namie; ironically, an indescribable impression remained in mind, on the presence of newly built facilities (e.g., community centers and parks) while the decontaminated soil was still piled up in flexible container bags and buried underground.

Valuable Experience as a Young Person - MUTSUMI SUZUKI

Having never been to the disaster zone, in Fukushima, this was an eye-opening moment from different perspectives, especially talking to the residents, including one of the authors (Nobuyoshi Ito), who resides in the village pre-disaster; they were all directly affected by the nuclear accident and who communicated to all of us (visitors) despite the anger, sadness, and other emotions that one would rather not remember. As mentioned above by Dr. Komatsu, the visit was memorable not only though Yoga practice, which interested me as a university Handball player and athlete, but its connection to Ayurveda and importance of lifestyle management through 'kiku-imo'. And, the realization that all is linked, and food and agriculture are an integral part of the recovery process of the village post-3.11.

And, at the same time, feeling strongly about that "I do not know anything about Japan", and with it "That is why I have to know more about my home country, Japan, properly first". For that reason, it had been a long-standing wish to learn more about the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, which is indispensable when talking about Japan. The trigger was a chance meeting Professor Rakwal while shopping at a nearby supermarket and learning briefly about the Iitate village in Fukushima with a connection to Tokyo 2020; being a working adult and half-giving up on the idea of going to Iitate village, I responded 'Please let me go!' together, without even checking the schedule. With very less experience in the workforce for just a few months, what I have vaguely felt since entering society, combined with what I heard from Mr. Ito, has convinced me that "this society is designed for people to live in groups".

The problems in this world are so deep-rooted that they

usually cannot be solved by the efforts of one person alone, and are endless. As was the case in the Iitate village immediately after the nuclear accident, no matter how talented a person is, if there is no one to recognize their excellence, no one will take action, so the power of numbers is no match. It was a bit of a shocking realization, but it was a very important lesson for and wanting to make various changes in the future. And, with it a realization of working hard and to become someone who can gather friends and build a team. Finally, taking this opportunity to express a sincere gratitude to everyone, and with a determination to utilize this valuable experience, which a young worker was able to have through a truly fortuitous encounter, to strive every day in becoming a contributing member of society.

Concluding Remarks

At the IDY2024 event of June 21st, and in other visits to Iitate Village, students from different parts of the world studying in Japan interacted with the local residents, including those who have evacuated to various parts of Fukushima prefecture due to the still-lively effects of radiation (Figure 1). These international students are expected to return to their home countries in the future and work in their respective specialized fields. If their experiences in Iitate Village can contribute even a little to their future lives, then it can be said that holding IDY2024 in Iitate Village was meaningful. Restating the contents of the Indian PM Modi's (September 27, 2014, UN General Assembly) gives particular meaning to the joint Yoga-Ayurveda lifestyle aspect of IDY2024 at Iitate village as - "..... It embodies unity of mind and body; thought and action; restraint and fulfillment; harmony between man and nature and a holistic approach to health and well-being. Yoga is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with ourselves, the world and Nature. By changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can help us to deal with climate change.....". In light of P.M. Modi's proposal at the UN, we believe that this event was truly worthy of Yoga Day. Our activities have only just begun, about 10 years after they began. We often think about what we have not been able to do, but we would like to use the "2024 Yoga-Ayurveda event at Iitate Village" as an opportunity to move forward toward the future of our activities, the people of Iitate Village, and above all, the future of our students. This is because that is the original way Yoga should be [13].

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