

# Japanese Yoga Bridging from Past to Future: Yoga Research, Education, Health Considerations and Future Directions for Japan



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## Abstract

The idea for this perspective stems from a long practical, teaching and researching YOGA in all its dimensions (historical, cultural, and scientific) by the lead author; an early experience in India, and through the establishment of the Yoga Course as a general education (Graduate General Education Courses, GGEC) subject at University of Tsukuba, wide interactions with students, educators/researchers, and the citizens (through social innovation projects). The perspective is presented in three parts - Yoga in Japan ("Michi"), the GGEC Yoga Course, and Lifestyle, to conclude with 'What is needed in Japan Today?'

**Keywords:** Asia; Japan; Yoga; Zen; Holistic; Education

## Yoga in Japan

**Yoga and Buddhism Oneness:** Buddhism entered China in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Among them is "Ānāpānasati Sutta". The breathing method is the origin of the Tanden Kokyūho (Breathing method) that continues to modern Japan. By around the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries, Chinese translations of Indian thought and cultural literature were made through Buddhism under a Chinese national project. For, example, the Nirvana Sutra also has Ayurvedic discussions such as Carakasamhita, Sushrutasmhita, and Uttaratanttra. The route of Buddhism was the Silk Road. The Silk Road also crossed the cultures of Greece, Egypt, and Persia as far away as they went. What the monks who introduced Buddhism tried to learn and practice was the One "Way=Yoga" that leads to all cultural phenomena.

**Zen Culture: India-China-Japan** It begins in the first half of 6<sup>th</sup> century with the Bodhi Dharma. In the later years, he left the capital city Kanchipuram, sailing from the port of Mamallapuram or also known as Mahabalipuram (India). In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Zen

was conveyed to Japan by Eisai, Dogen, Myouzen, and others. The lifestyle associated with Zen was passed down from monks to the samurai and towns people. Budo (martial arts), tea ceremony, flower arrangement, calligraphy, Idoo (the art of medicine), etiquette, walking, posture, breathing, and so on were the result.

**Yoga in Modern and Contemporary Japan:** Early 20<sup>th</sup> century (until around 1950s), Vivekananda (and others such as Kaiten Nukariya) developed an understanding of Yoga (including Hatha Yoga) based on Zen and Buddhism. In America there was an understanding of yoga by Christian mysticism (Nobara Sekigichi). In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> to the end of the century Hatha Yoga, commonly practiced in India (Tsuruji Sahoda, (Hatha Yoga based on Zen understanding). This was followed by Enlightenment activities by publishers (Kasumigaseki Shobo, Hakuyosha, Hakujuusha, Hirakawa shuppan, Jiyusha, Tairikushobo, Merukumaaru sha, etc.) including the dissemination of activities by people who studied Yoga in India, 20<sup>th</sup> century to present. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Ei shuppan (Yogini), Health and beauty magazines (Tarzan, Nikkei Premiere, Nikkei Health, etc.) and other mass media activities were seen to promote Yoga. This is the reality of commercialism Yoga flourishing in modern Japan. In modern Japan, not only Yoga, but also excellent thinkers, philosophers, and researchers are not nurtured, and society does not notice.

**Japanese Understanding of Yoga:** In the history of Japan वैदिक (Vedic) or what would fit the English word Science, or Philosophy, did not develop. The योग (Yoga) thought/philosophy and lifestyle based on Zen/Buddhism insight was deepened practically (=as a Michi “道”). The हठयोग (Hathayoga) tended to be easily taken as gymnastics, but until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was understood that there was a spirituality behind it that led to the “Michi”. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (until around 1950s), Vivekananda (and others such as Kaiten Nukariya) developed an understanding of Yoga.

**What is Michi? All about Holistic Lifestyle:** Let us explain it.

- 1) Living momentarily without any purpose or hope is not a “Michi”.
- 2) When we have purpose, hope, and desire, anxiety, fear, and suffering are constant and great.
- 3) However, a person must continue to hone one’s skills and strive to master them in order to realize the goals (धर्म, dharma).
- 4) At the same time, if one is a human being, there are things one must do every day. Wake up in the morning, wash your face, work, eat, rest, and interact with others.
- 5) It can also be affected by disease.
- 6) There is a need to be able to integrate this (3., 4., and 5.) without discrepancies.
- 7) It is to learn something from each new event and apply it to the future, without being attached to the past. By doing so, we can look deeply into ourselves and make our lives meaningful.
- 8) This human activity of establishing a lifestyle and continuing to live in this way is called “Michi”.

### Graduate General Education Courses (GGEC) program and Yoga Course

**Purpose and Role of the University of Tsukuba GGEC program:** The GGEC Yoga Course [1,2] aims to realize the following objectives, since the very foundation of the GGEC philosophy can be also thought of as Yoga itself (<https://www.tsukuba.ac.jp/education/g-courses-kyoutsuukamoku/index.html>). To quote, “Graduates of the University of Tsukuba will take many courses in order to nurture rich human qualities by appreciating profound and philosophical skills and become well-balanced researchers and highly specialized professionals” (GGEC, 2023).

**Basic Philosophy of the GGEC Yoga Course:** A place to refine and study knowledge and wisdom of one’s own volitation. Student

autonomy ⇔ Classes. A keynote lecture by Professor Yosuke Sakairi (University of Tsukuba) explains as follows:

- a) Eastern Paradigm in the New Era: A paradigm shift from Western top-down to Eastern bottom-up is taking place in applied science methodology, medical care, education, sports, and other methods of practice.
- b) The Essence of the Oriental Approach: Conditioning of Body, Breathing, Mind = from the body to the mind & Autonomous adjustment: Gently watching over one’s state of mind and body = mindfulness.
- c) Continuation: Experience and Acceptance, and Reflection and Action.
- d) Yoga: Nurture the ability to adjust “body and mind” and the ability to watch over them.
- e) Message to students: We hope that you will learn the ability to adjust your “body and mind” and to look after yourself and others, and that you will make use of this ability in your future life (Yoga Course, 2023).

**Operation of the GGEC Yoga Course:** In 2020, when the Yoga Course first went online due to the *COVID-19* pandemic, the instructors had to devise a way to make it possible to create a structure compatible with online streaming and interactive at the same time. First, a thorough preparation and system creation for going online was created, and students were informed about the online teaching methods. The recording of all lectures and video distribution to students was done. A system was created to allow students to repeat the self-study. Students can attend lectures and respond to questions and questionnaires even if they are absent on lecture days due to research or travel. Second, using Manaba (learning management system) and Google Forms, a system that allows students to freely respond to course materials, handouts, questions and answers, and psychological tests by POMS was created. And, the students were provided careful monitoring (=mindfulness) of the entire course process, from before the course began to after the course ended. The students were provided the 14 lecture PDFs (with an overview of each lecture and explanations of the slides were provided, along with questions; the questions are not essentially a test of knowledge. The purpose is to train the students to observe the self correctly and to become aware of internal changes. This will enable them to correctly understand Yoga) and a flexibility self-judgement chart was also used for monitoring the progress of asana, which were performed as per an established standard Yoga protocol by the lead author, called the ‘Genboku protocol’ (unpublished manuscript).

### Lifestyle

**The Origin of Human Existence in Need of Yoga / Ayurveda:** Suppose there is a human being here and now who has the name “I”. The “I” does not exist on its own. It breathes. It depends on

the dynamics of oxygen and other air constituent elements on the entire planet. Food also depends on the dynamics of the global food chain. Furthermore, “my” human relationships are created by the network of all human relationships on earth. In other words, the global environment, including human society, is the foundation of “my” life. On the other hand, the soul at the bottom of “I” has a will. Every environment determines the direction of the souls’ wills realization and the purpose of “I” life. And what “I” should do now is determined. All these things characterize “I” current behavior. The characteristics and tendencies of this behavior are the “I” lifestyle. This understanding of all phenomena of life in light of the ever-changing totality of existence can be called dynamic holism. Yoga and Ayurveda, as we understand them, are methods or techniques for guiding “I” life to wellbeing in accordance with this dynamic holism.

**Relationship between the Food and Environment:** If any of them (ingredients, environment, agriculture, distribution) were missing, we would not be able to eat, i.e., we cannot maintain our lifestyle.

**Role of Ayurveda and Yoga:** A person is an animal that has troubles - physical trouble, social trouble, self-specific trouble (worldview, value troubles, feeling lonely, not getting the meaning of life, etc.). Yoga and Ayurveda are both in the Eastern paradigm of trouble resolution. There is complementarity between Ayurveda and Yoga (they complement each other by having common and different strategies).

**Elements Supporting Lifestyle:** To consider Ayurveda practically, it is rational to divide it into parts. Medicine: In Japan, it is generally understood as medical care. And, as a member of the alternative medicine (CAM) group. Lifestyle: In Japanese terms, it is Shoku-yo-do (a way of food and nutrition). It refers to preventive medicine by adjusting one’s lifestyle and eating habits.

**Common Strategies in Yoga and Ayurveda:** What is one’s lifestyle? Wake up in the morning, brush my teeth and wash my face. Both Yoga and Ayurveda start here. Drink tea, eat, clean, etc. Education, research, work, etc. Rest, sleep, etc. All these activities are Yoga and Ayurveda. If you live by Yoga, if you live by Ayurveda.

**Different Strategies in Ayurveda and Yoga:** Let us look at these two strategies deeply. Ayurvedic Strategies: Dividing the body into three basic constitutions (Doshas). It works to eliminate Dasha imbalances and restore moderation. The solutions to problems can be as follows: food, medicine, and treatment, etc.; review the lifestyle calmly; and do not stop treatment and care even when life is approaching a desperate crisis. Yogic Strategies: To abandon meaningless desires and attachments. There are practices (breathing, meditation, asana...) for this purpose. When life is at stake, it can help people to break free from suffering by rethinking their outlook on life and the world, i.e., helping the individual in the person’s endeavors while guiding wisdom and measures through internal awaking.

### Summary

#### What is needed in Japan Today?

**Tracing the History of GGEC Yoga Course:** GGEC was established in 2008, and the Yoga Course in 2015. Now that we think about it, the basic philosophy of GGEC was a breath of Eastern paradigm, and the Yoga Course responded to it. The students who studied in the Yoga Course have added their thoughts to this and a movement called “Yoga for All” was developed as an outreach program to contribute to society. In the meantime, the environment surrounding Japanese society has continued to change. It is not only the *COVID-19* pandemic. Lifestyle-related diseases have become more serious, the international situation and the global environment have deteriorated, and social stresses have become more diverse and severe. It appears as if a shift from the current Western paradigm is required. On the other hand, the Yoga environment has added the Ayurvedic stream since 2021-22. The challenge for the authors is “Can this be connected to the creation of a Yogic Lifestyle of sincerity?”

#### What can Japanese Yoga do?

Therefore, we would like to conclude this perspective by presenting and discussing one hope. It is an initiative that makes the most of the characteristics of the University of Tsukuba GGEC program. The GGEC program is a place to develop comprehensive human skills [3]. This is open not only to graduate students but also can be availed by the public/working adults. This program is designed to nurture human resources with rich humanity, which is desperately needed by the modern Japanese society, and to send them out into the society. Japan has a myriad of problems that exist in its elderly/aging population, its shut-in population, and its local communities.

The idea we (lead and corresponding authors) propose is to create a new course/program that will nurture people who can solve these problems. It is a ‘lifestyle’ program combined with Yoga and Ayurveda. Specifically, a joint certificate course/program in Yoga, Ayurveda, with components from traditional Japanese herbal medicine (‘kampo’)/Chinese medicine and aromatherapy will be created from the standpoint of complementary alternative medicine (CAM). Recently, the Japanese Society of Ayurveda, and the Society of Aromatherapy have begun to offer courses and certificates in their respective fields. In combination with these societies, the GGEC program could realize alternative education, is the personal view of the lead and corresponding authors. The human resources that today’s society desperately needs are those who are not only ‘experts’ but also have comprehensive human skills.

For example, how about creating a center next to a hospital that seniors/grandparents can utilize, and can communicate their wisdom to the younger generation, while enjoying an alternative lifestyle communicating with self (through Yoga and Zen) and others? A rehabilitation center could also be built in or

adjacent to convenient stores/supermarkets or a place where Zen can be practiced, with licensed lifestyle certificate/degree people working as instructors in such places. We believe that Japan also needs such human resources today, not just specialists in technology and industry. This 'humanistic' innovation is the need of today, we believe. And, we summarize by saying - without hesitation - that it is the job of universities to nurture such human resources.

## Conclusion

In the late Heian period (11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>), Japanese society fell with the decline of Buddhism and the people sank into chaos. At that time, several groups gave up on the central great general university (Heizan) and started activities in the provinces. One was a movement (Jodo-kyo) that abandoned old values with suffering civilians. The other was a group that went to Eurasia and brought pure Zen from the continent. Japan today is in a very similar situation. And now we are trying to open the two ways with a new paradigm. One is the creation of lifestyle courses and certificate/degree. The other is to create opportunities and choices for students who sincerely seek it with a vision for their own and world future.

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