

# Designing a Summer Yoga Camp for Graduate Student's: The Need for Communicating Issues and Understanding Self for Navigating Academic- and Life-related Issues



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## Abstract

The demands of a university graduate school and graduate research can be overwhelming (stuck/stumped, fatigued/burnout) to many students, especially during the first/early semester/s. And, this is especially true for international students moving to a different and new socio-cultural and academic-research environment. How do the students cope with such transitions and stresses is a hot topic amongst students and staffs across universities, globally? Graduate students are speaking out more than before on how this 'mental health' issue is affecting their academic and personal lives. Under serious situations, graduate students may fall into depression (clinical) and may have to take medication. Short-term or long-term (chronic), such stresses have to be mitigated, and research has started to emerge on this topic and to address it pastoral support networks and professional counseling are prominent. Here at University of Tsukuba, with a big graduate school population, we (Rakwal and Takahashi) have been utilizing the ancient wisdom of yoga to help graduate students communicate better to self and develop a mindset to complete their goals, i.e., to graduate and connect to their future paths (career-life goals).

Notwithstanding the yoga course, a social innovation project was also created to further the discourse on yoga practice in relation the current society and its needs. Based on the continuous questions and concerns of the students to learn deeply and utilize yoga as a holistic approach, a new idea emerged. It was reasoned that a specially designed 'Yoga Camp' (YC) might provide graduate students answers for their anxieties. This structured YC environment was presented to the graduate students where their daily yoga practice (asana, breathing and meditation) was integrated with aspects of 'samu' (Zen-like life training) to allow them to slowly look within, gradually understanding their core issues and purposes in life and research. This viewpoint details the YC structure and process and concludes by analyzing the lived experience of two graduate students to answer their innermost questions for the future.

**Keywords:** Graduate Student; Summer Camp; Yoga; Emotion; Behavior; Stress; Philosophy; Experiences

## Background

### Graduate Students-Concerns

The university is a place of study, and especially for graduate students who are exploring future paths through learning and research, it is not easy. Graduate school is challenging - and, as it should be the students venture into the unknown with a

strong desire to excel, with dreams of doing great things. Even the most well-prepared graduate students will face challenges, and as appropriately titled in a Nature Editorial [1] - "The mental health of PhD researchers demands urgent attention", and by 2 young researchers [2] - "Navigating mental health challenges in graduate school", the situation is indeed serious. Other than the reason

mentioned in the above 2 articles [1,2] and many others [3-11], it can be said that there might be a lack of awareness (and exposure) of what needs to be learnt and done (purpose of graduate school), and to know what the meaning of life is.

As one of the graduate students mentioned, and I quote “after high school graduates, we seem to be expected to set our own agendas, act independently, and learn independently in college and especially graduate school. However, independent learning requires thinking about what one needs to do, what one should do, and one’s life, and I believe (including self) that most students are not able to do this or do not understand the need to do this. One of the reason is that they do not have the opportunity to get such teaching like how to find what we want to do in the future. Teaching is essential for independent learning for most students, which students cannot reach on their own, and it cannot be acquired through university classes or research alone. Students need mentoring on how to live their lives, they need guidance from teachers who are close to them, and they need deep communication with themselves. And that is not easy for students and teachers and it takes time.”

Further, there might be too many choices or influences, and no proper way to navigate the path. Talking to a diverse group of students at both undergraduate and graduate level, some answers can be realized, and some tough questions can be asked at first to the students themselves: first, ‘Are the students prepared for graduate school?’, second, “What is level of awareness of the students on local and global issues, i.e., their reasons to join graduate school and to what goal and what do they wish to contribute (to society through research)?”; and, then to the university itself: on ‘What is the role of the university including the graduate school to provide an education to this end and along with a mentoring to the students to help them overcome their transition (from undergraduate to graduate) and negative experiences?’. Being in the university, Genboku and Randeep also ask this question: “What is the role of the university and teaching, other than just a degree!” Sumei and the other students’ mention: “Self-learning is always an option”. Life teaches in mysterious ways and many learn that way, but it is easier said than done, and it also requires equally a passion, determination and a learning mind-set, says Sumei. Further, how could the yoga-camp help students who are close-minded or have become close-minded due to any reason and/or due to the environment they are in? Yoga says, focus on self, but the students might not be able to get around the fact that the environment they are in is over-powering and they are unable to resist it or come out of it.

### YOGA - The Theory

#### Yoga as a Tool to Understand and Communicate with Self

Who need Yoga? As we have clearly answered before: ‘Yoga

is needed by people who are stressed or undergo stressful conditions” [12]. The same applies to students studying at a university, especially graduate students, who may choose yoga for either relieving their stress or to be better human beings ready for the world outside. Previously, Rakwal and collaborators had examined the role of Yoga in higher education in Japan [13] including the GGEC yoga course [14] for graduate students. Graduate students are facing not only academic pressures in this highly competitive world, but also financial issues, relationship difficulties and insomnia. Several studies have revealed the high levels of stress in graduate students.

For example, Martins and co-workers showed that 18% of their graduate student samples have suicidal tendencies [3]. Similarly, another study showed that 75.4% of their graduate student samples reported being stressed [4]. Mousavi and co-workers found, and we quote, “that more than 40% of the graduate students responded that they didn’t seek for any help even when they felt that they were affected by the level of stress in their lives (Mousavi et al., 2018). These data are indeed alarming, and it can be said that when the mind is possessed by something, it is often impossible to regain the freedom of the mind on your own. Why is it so and why do graduate students have anxieties to such an extent? And, what can be or should be done is the question we ask? Can yoga provide answers and what kind of yoga is required to be done; and, we propose a YOGA CAMP, an intensive practice-study-work outside campus to find oneself and to come back to the university with a ‘better’ understanding of self and graduate school. To note, it is not that a (any) university does not have a mental support or counselling center, there is usually one everywhere, and it is students who can only tell how and whether it works and helps them when they are under stress and need support.

#### Yoga Camp Objectives and Plans

True yoga is the act of “deepening and growing oneself throughout one’s life”. Since 2015, conducting both yoga course (GGEC) and the social innovation project (seminars, workshops and extension program) it was realized that a camp can be created based on all the learnings gained through numerous interactions, questions & answers with students across disciplines [13,15] and would be somewhat helpful to at least look into this issue of ‘graduate student’s anxiety’. This led to a field visit to the village where Genboku (Yoga master) had his ‘ashram’ and to confirm the environment (stay and practice) conducive for the exact purpose in mind and a basic structure: yoga (asana, pranayama, meditation, discussion) - lunch (choosing oneself, and where discussion took place naturally) - research, lecture and discussion (yoga is not just practice, also selecting & reading materials related to yoga, and by doing so students will be able to confirm their academic and research objectives) - and ‘samu’ (zen-like life training, weeding, cleaning, etc.). This was the hope behind the preparation, but

the actual camp will tell us, and as we will describe below, it did (Figure 1). Further, immersing themselves in such a structure, the YC may help students navigate through their academic and personal life. Therefore, a 10-day summer camp was created

recruiting 2 graduate students (one of those is the lead author of this study) who were looking for answers to their own challenges (anxieties, real or imagined) in graduate school.



Figure 1: Summer YOGA CAMP (YC) 2023 in all its manifestations.

## Raison d'être for this Yoga Camp

In student life, not only research (professional) but also daily life (personal well-being) runs parallel to each other. This YC is what makes it possible to integrate the two and make it meaningful and satisfying; it is our aim. We first ask: What are the young people? - are they impatient? or appear and/or communicate to be. 1) There are too many choices (or influences...). = Saying that we have a choice 'to decide' - 'to or not to be' influenced...and, to have a choice is what is-one purpose of practicing this ancient wisdom. 2) They are not aware (clearly) of what they need to learn, do, and what the meaning of life is. = However, that is the role of the university and teaching (not just a degree!), otherwise what is the point of a university and for students to be there; moreover, a convincing image for this is lacking today (families, school education, & society as a whole). 3) Morals are beginning to collapse all over the world. = Even in Yoga education, the most important Yama and Niyama of the Yoga Sutra are neglected. This is related to global environmental issues (COVID19, war, energy and food issues, etc.). In today's Japan, there is no place for belief and passion (related to 2)). = For this purpose, yoga education, which thoroughly teaches the Bhagavad Gita, is extremely

effective. My life (soul) living here now knows what I should do and what a wonderful life awaits me (even in graduate school). It is hoped that a YC will encourage awareness of that. How? - through a daily practice as a habit in - as 'normal'. Sometimes we assume that what is seen is the normal not knowing the normal is here in our daily doings (<it is not to be sought after elsewhere and running after what 'others'/'all' are doing >). We believe the mission of this YC is to overcome above-mentioned impatience (gap in communication - which is never easy as we all know) and complete 'research and life' (path or mind-set) throughout the entire graduate school life.

## What Kind of 'Up-Rise' is This Yoga Camp Aiming For

The Yogic idea of "looking at the true self and creating a satisfying life according to the true Self's intentions" at first glance raises the concern that "we must force ourselves to change what we are doing". But Yoga is not like that. It is about sorting out the chaos that is going on in our head, making it clear what we should do our duty (Dharma) in present moment, and being confident about doing it (in due time; i.e., patience). Therefore, as graduate students, they will become aware of the meaning of what they

should do now and be able to carry it out with confidence. This is the purpose for such a YC.

## YOGA - The Practical

### Starting the Yoga Camp

Genboku started the day with Yoga session (Asana, Pranayama, Meditation, and discussion) by sharing his training history, asana tips and notes instruction. And, importantly the relationship between posture and movement in breathing was re-emphasized. All trained in 'just sitting' (Zazen) in meditation (see below).

### Morning Session

8:30-12:00 AM: What is the meaning of 'Daily' Asana? Asana/Pranayama/Meditation is 'routine' work for a student of Yoga. First of all, it is important to carry out this obvious thing as a matter of course. Genboku observed whether movement and breathing were in mesh with each other. When movement and breathing did not mesh, it would be conveyed to us clearly. Students were encouraged to do a self-confirmation of shoulder and elbow relaxation. During meditation, each one can 'Self-Monitor' our state of mind for the day. It must be possible not only at the YC, but naturally, anywhere-everywhere. During discussion time, students discussed what each of us felt and thought during the practical skill session. If there is a problem, look for a solution. This worked well throughout the YC. Later, one of the students raised an issue: "There are many types of meditation, not just Yoga/Zen. How to choose which one is the best for each. After our discussion about this question, Genboku thought that 'Just Sitting' would be the most appropriate at this moment, so we did 'Just Sitting' from the third day to the end.

### Lunch Session

12:00 PM: We all have different tastes and constitutions. Also, both students are already well versed in the basics of healthy food. So Genboku decided to leave it up to us to choose where and what to eat. Being a village in the countryside, students did not have the freedom to choose restaurants and supermarkets like in the city, but finding them was one of their pleasures. Often, students prepared and ate lunch boxes they made themselves, and, which added to the fun and bonding of food communications. A discussion that followed lunch always took place naturally. For example, there were many contents related to food, health and the environment. Genboku was also relaxed rather than teaching, so students also relaxed and it was easier to have a free-talk time. In this way, the problems and difficulties that each of the students had were highlighted. This allowed students to see what they had to learn and to do, and made the afternoon study time meaningful; navigating through language barriers. After leaving the restaurants/lunch boxes, students were usually considering what to do and Genboku left it to their wishes. Sometimes both the students went for a walk, visited temples and shrines at the distant lake Suwa, and drove down the village by car. In Suwa,

students were able to witness the characteristics of Japanese culture, observing the influence of India-Chinese culture and the differences in Japan's unique culture. Also, students were able to experience a variety of unexpected things, such as shopping.

### Research Session

14:30-16:30 PM: At Genboku's 'ashram', students learnt how to select and read materials for research which are related to yoga (see Figure). This was followed by a lecture by Genboku given on the idea that "Yoga is not just asana, pranayama, or meditation. True yoga is the act of deepening and growing oneself throughout one's life." By doing so, it was reasoned that the students will be able to confirm their academic and research objectives. Genboku 'ashram' has nearly 1,000 books in various genres, such as Eastern body-mind techniques such as Yoga and Buddhism, philosophy, cultural theory, various therapies health methods, biology, brain science, physical education and psychiatry, and environmental theory. It is an accumulation from the time when there was no internet. In addition, since around the year 2000, Genboku has collected the materials he searched on the internet and used for research on the computer, and some of the important resources were printed out for the students to 'leaf through' them at any time.

The main purpose of this time for the graduate students was the ability to learn how to select, read and study materials while looking at these materials; and interestingly this is the same process as of 'research' project planning. There were many cases where the materials Genboku showed were suitable for each purpose, and there were many cases where students passed to each other, and this led to a fairly deep discussion. The genre of yoga is a cultural phenomenon that encompasses the whole life, Asana, Pranayama, Meditation, and other techniques are important but only a small part of Yoga as a whole. It was difficult for students to understand this completely while in the YC. Genboku pointed out that one of the reasons was a bit of 'impatience' due to youth (see 'Raison d'être for this YC'). Genboku understands the students desire to learn real-world skills.

However, what Genboku also wants students to learn at this YC is the path to gain depth and intensity as human beings. By doing so, the actual 'competition/combat' technique will demonstrate its original power. The YC ended when students got a glimpse of clues to overcome this contradiction. The baton was passed to Randeep for the finishing touches (back in graduate school). This paved the way for the next step, the actual combat (=research). During this time, one of the students seems to have been able to retrace her own path internally, sort out her problems and worries, and move on.

### Training Session

16:30-17:30 PM: Samu (zen-like life training) was performed almost daily, and included weeding, cleaning, etc. Practice doing

what we should do now (duty, 'dharma') calmly and without rushing was the idea. Experience that this practice is true yoga training. Generally speaking, an Ashram means a place where many people (practitioners) gather to live together and refine their lives. However, the individual's body and mind are the place where anyone does 'refine one's life'. Moreover, this body-mind-protecting dwelling can be called an Ashram. At the practice of zen is "the action that all of our daily life refines life". Genboku asked us to clean/weed/limb/etc., to experience this. Genboku told us to do those things but without saying anything but just observing how the students would do.

Naturally, the students did not understand the meaning of this purpose. So, for example, Genboku told us not to think about weeding a large area as quickly as possible, but to target a small area and remove only the weeds there. With such a direction, students immediately understood the meaning and acted on it.

This is the same as what is written in the Bhagavad Gita, so no further explanation from Genboku was necessary. Even if the students return to their own dormitories/homes after this YC, daily life such as preparing meals and cleaning awaits us. There is no doubt that it is a way to refine one's life, including doing Karaoke, taking walks, climbing mountains, and spending time freely.

### After Thought

#### Changing 'Emotion'

The YC was, as the students said - "helpful in discovering the meaning of life, overcoming difficulties, and self-growth". The YC can be summarized in a graph; it is not the solution but only what actually happened during the YC, start to end, and objectively presented by Genboku and Randeep (Figure 2); (GS: graduate student).

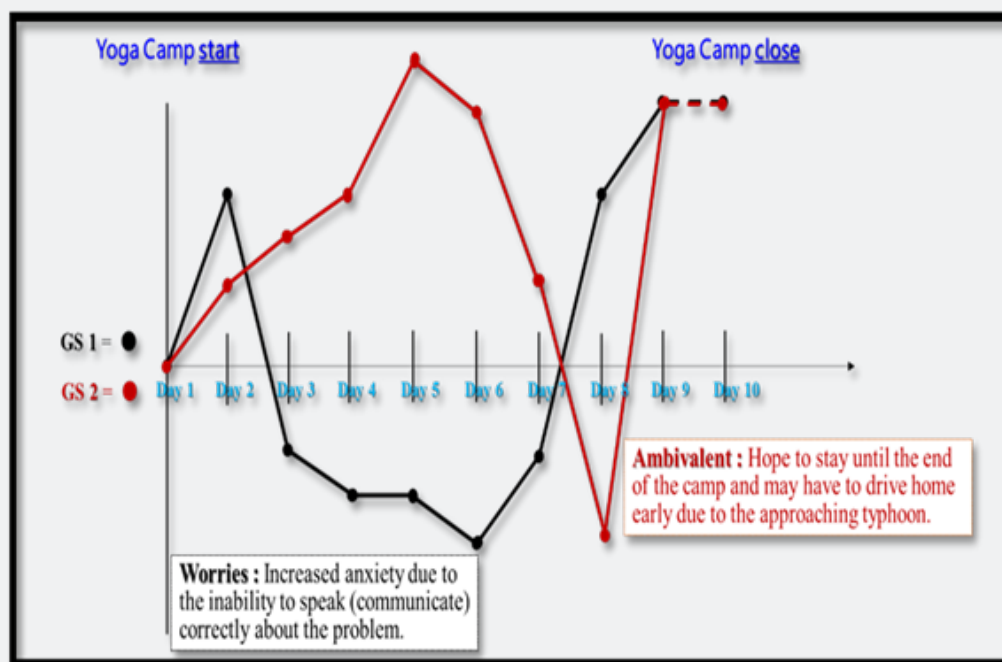


Figure 2: Changing Emotion.

Each graduate student had own ups and downs (worries) over the course of the YC, but each passing day and communicating with self under the unbiased direction of Genboku appeared to move the anxiety to an understanding (ambivalent). Emotions change day by day, not only for future life and research life (an integral part of graduate school and research studentship), but also for various reasons such as troubles in daily life and health conditions. Through these changes, the purpose and existence of the camp is to acquire the wisdom to learn and deepen life. Two

points arose from the YC and concept, and we discuss them briefly below.

The first comment from a (GS) was - How could a YC help people who are close minded? and, how to deal with the environment around us? Yoga says that focus on ourselves, but I (GS) feel that "the power of the environment is so strong". Another point of discussion was - "the fullness of the mind or an overwhelmed mind, and that the body does not keep pace to the desires and hopes of the mind". The GS further mentions - "their

brain is occupied by too many things, they need a place to breathe, to empty themselves and regain the energies, physically and mentally". As a Tennis player and athlete, the question of injury and body pain was also raised. The (GS) felt that "rejuvenating their body by yoga therapy or practice involving body awareness could improve it".

The second comment from another (GS) was - The need of the YC for understanding self as a graduate student in graduate school life! The (GS) mentions, "students are in an environment where it is difficult to maintain a stable mindset, between the process of becoming a working adult and being a student, with anxiety about research, the future, a less supportive environment, money issues, communication with academic advisors, and the process of becoming a member of society." The same worry about money, research, and future was expressed by a GS upon their enrollment into the university. Moreover, "students want to learn, gain skills, and live a satisfying life, but they need instruction on how to do so. The answer is that they need to know themselves, how they want to live, and what they can and want to do." Therefore, the (GS) feels "such a YC, which aims to create a satisfying life by looking at self, focusing on self, is exactly what (GS) need and is very beneficial in teaching students what they want to learn about themselves and how they want to live their lives. The (GS) suggested that through such an (Yoga) experience, "being away from one's normal routine, facing one's own mind through yoga, and trying to communicate with others, can have a positive impact on a student's life." The reason behind such an assertion by the (GS) was that, "I also experienced yoga for the first time when I entered graduate school, and through yoga I was able to objectify my usual life, stabilize my mind, and create a mindset that allows me to face my problems calmly." And, "there is also the aspect of communication with friends who share my life through yoga, and yoga is now a part of my life.". In summary, the message by the (GS) was, "I want more students like me, and more students with many problems, to understand the strong connection between yoga and themselves, and between yoga and life. I hope that through yoga, they will be able to improve their lives."

Based on the conduct of the YC and the impact on its participants, and the comments raised by the GS, it can be stated that yoga is about knowing self, and through such a YC (which is holistic in nature, and not just a practice of the asana) it is our belief that it would help people who are close-minded. And, that (effort) has to also come from within the people themselves, which is understanding self. One cannot clap with one hand; a pair of hands is needed. And, to get to open oneself, one has to communicate and open the doors to their mind; is there any other way? And, yes, the influences are great, and will always be, it is not that previously (previous generation, ages, ancient time) there was no influence, the influences of the environment were, are, and will always be. We have to understand (through observation) our environment, and that understanding can come through various

ways, be it experiences, be it through a teacher at the school and university, be it reading the news. It is what we do with it; we either choose to accept it or hide (reject). Saying that, we have another choice to get up and do something about it; and that is where a YC (in the way we are proposing from our own experiences and learnings; and there may be multiple ways...) may help provide answers. One has to try, there is nothing else...one or someone can do; only - teach, listen, and communicate = which is equal to support.

Finally, we would like to add that it takes many years for a close-minded person to achieve satisfactory results and for those around them to see a change in their personality. After properly documenting the results obtained from the first and second and third YC (e.g., in a research paper), it may be necessary to document them again after many years of camping or other life experiences (environmental influences). If we can try it, I believe it will be a valuable asset for both the person and society [16-20].

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