

YOGA SERVICE COMMUNITY RESOURCE PAPER

What is Yoga Service? A Working Definition

Traci Childress

Mindful Reflection Project | tracichildress.com

Jennifer Cohen Harper

Little Flower Yoga | littlefloweryoga.com

While yoga and service have long been practiced together, yoga service as a unified field is new and growing. As the field develops, it's essential to establish a shared understanding of what we mean by the term yoga service. We propose that yoga service is not defined by who is served, but rather by the manner in which the practices are offered.

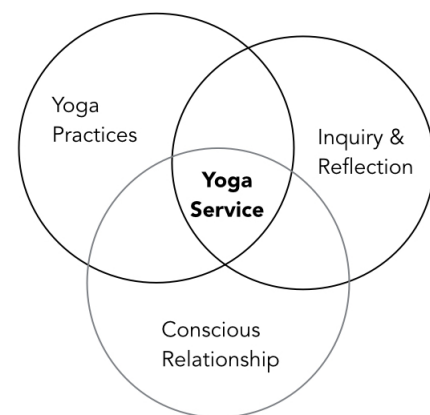
While the yoga service community often discusses its work in terms of addressing specific populations, we recognize that all people experience vulnerability and trauma at different points in life, and that circumstances of being human are such that we all, at times, are in need of the compassionate service of others. We also recognize that there are social forces at play that impact individuals and communities differently, and that issues of power, privilege, and justice must remain at the forefront of any critical discussion of service.

Yoga Service: A Working Definition

The intentional sharing of yoga practices that support healing and build resilience for all, regardless of circumstances, taught within a context of conscious relationship rooted in self-reflection and self-inquiry.

What We Mean By “Conscious Relationship”

Sharing yoga always takes place within the context of a relationship. A relationship involves many nuances of the human experience. Conscious relationship acknowledges these nuances and asks people to educate themselves about social justice issues (e.g., privilege, race, violence, gender, poverty) as well as to listen openly and with curiosity to each other's perspectives. To exist in a conscious relationship is to compassionately hold these truths about each other and about the world in our interactions. Conscious relationship is an active attempt to see each person fully, honor their strengths, and acknowledge anything that is impeding either person's ability to relate in full authenticity to the relationship. A regular practice of self-inquiry and self-reflection supports this process.



Self Reflection and Self Inquiry

To support ourselves in the practice of yoga service, we need a regular practice of self-reflection and self-inquiry. Educator Parker Palmer writes that “to teach is to create a space” and that when we teach we always teach what we know. As practitioners who share yoga with others, we create space for others to learn. We naturally offer the practices (and create our programs) through our own lens -- from the perspective of our history, privilege, bias, and wisdom. We offer yoga mixed with all the other things we know and have experienced in our lives. A commitment to reflection and self-inquiry allows yoga service providers to engage skillfully, honestly, and authentically with students, regardless of whether teacher and students come from similar life circumstances. It helps us look closely at what we know and don't know about ourselves, those we serve and teach, and the communities we engage with. It is training to better understand our own perspective and the perspectives of our students. To the greatest extent possible, these individual processes should be supported by larger organizational structures and professional networks that provide regular feedback, mentoring, and accountability.

What We Mean When We Say “Yoga”

In this definition, we are referring to the practices that are widely included in different styles of yoga and are most often assessed in research studies: physical postures, breathwork, meditation, and deep relaxation. Other aspects of yoga, including ethical and philosophical practices and study, may also be important components of yoga service work.

The Importance of the Word Intentional

We strongly support the idea that a core component of yoga service is the intention with which it is offered. While the intention of each teacher or program might be a bit different, the unifying factor is that yoga service is offered in the spirit of supporting the empowerment and well-being of the individual or community engaged in the practice. The World Health Organization defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.” This seems like a good place to start when considering intention in the provision of yoga service. The specific goals may vary, but yoga service addresses the real-life needs of the

student; it's founded on the principle that yoga is a vehicle, but the student is always more important than the yoga.

Is All Yoga “Yoga Service”?

Not all yoga is yoga service. When yoga is shared without integrating ongoing practices of self-inquiry and self-reflection, and without a commitment to conscious relationship and empowerment, it is not yoga service. The regular practice of yoga inevitably brings up questions related to relationship, community, and self. But it does not automatically lead to a knowledge of how to share yoga in a way that is socially just, compassionate, and aware of experiences other than our own. We propose that yoga service requires the integration of practices that cultivate this knowledge in a way that yoga alone does not. We hope to engage our community in refining and developing this working definition; we feel it will empower us all to share yoga in a way that is safe and respectful of those to whom we offer the practice.

This paper is part of a series of papers published by the Yoga Service Council, dedicated to maximizing the effectiveness, sustainability, and impact of individuals and organizations working to make yoga and mindfulness practices equally accessible to all. It was published in interview form on the Huffington Post in 2015. yogaservicecouncil.org

Traci Childress, a long-time yoga teacher, is the creator of The Mindful Reflection Project, which incorporates reflective work, group listening, breath awareness practices, and principles and techniques from the field of yoga. She is one of the founders of the YSC, and serves as a YSC advisor.

Jennifer Cohen Harper is the founder of Little Flower Yoga, which directly serves over 3000 children and teens a week in NYC schools. She provides yoga and mindfulness based continuing education courses to health, education and social service professionals. She was one of the founders of the YSC, and is the current Vice President.

