

West meets East: A Travelogue on Traditional Healing and Rethinking Mental Health

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Abstract

This travelogue explores the intersection of Western psychology and Indian traditional healing practices through a Fulbright scholar's personal journey. Initially motivated by a growing disillusionment with the clinical, materialistic focus of psychological training in the United States, the author traveled to India to seek a more integrated approach to mental health that includes the body and spirit. Her entry point through yoga led to a profound immersion in Vedanta philosophy and Hindu spiritual expression, particularly during a transformative stay at an ashram in Coimbatore. The narrative highlights significant contrasts in conceptualizing mental health: while Western models rely on clinical diagnoses and brain-centric pathology, Indian systems offer subjective, holistic frameworks like the gunas and Panchakosha theory to describe energetic states and layered existence. The author also addresses complex issues of cultural appropriation, stigma, and the need to respect indigeneity while offering modern day solutions. Ultimately, the article argues for bridging these two worlds to create holistic epistemologies: leveraging the empirical strengths of Western evidence-based therapies alongside the ancient, subtle wisdom of Indian psychology to address individual and collective wellness. By integrating these diverse perspectives, the author envisions a more holistic methodology for mental health that honors the multifaceted nature of human suffering and the universal quest for truth and healing.

Keywords: Integrated Care, Vedanta philosophy, Yoga, Cultural Sensitivity, Indigeneity

Introduction

The Fulbright scholar's interest in coming to India came from a growing disillusionment she felt with the way psychology was taught to her in the US. Although her education was deeply enriching: highly empirical, evidence-based, and rooted in a biopsychosocial model of health, she felt something was missing.

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Her education lacked the fundamental acknowledgement of somatic (bodily) and spiritual dimensions of wellbeing. Starting with the somatic, she'd mainly been offered cognitive tools to relate to her own anxiety and trauma. She could narrate her pain well– a hyperactive amygdala, a strained maternal bond, triggers in her attachment style– the “why” and “how” were clear, but she never got a grasp on the “what.” What was happening in her body? What was moving through her as arousal oscillated? What could she do to find relief beyond shifting her thinking?

In class, she rarely spoke of the body and too often discussed mental illness as if it were only a result of misaligned cognition. Her coursework ignored how emotions encode in the body's tissues; how the nervous systems holds a multitude of realities; how breath and movement are integral to expression. Aside from the basic understanding that physical health is important, the body was essentially marginalized in her education. Similarly, the spirit was never touched on at all. Religion and spirituality were to be left outside of the classroom; and though she respects the impulse to remain objective-looking back it is shocking that the depths of the inner self and the fundamental spiritual essence that runs through human experience were rarely discussed.

The Fulbright scholar personally felt this gap when she hit a wall in talk therapy for her anxiety and grief. The cognitive-behavioral tools were useful, but they didn't address the hole in her heart, the gaping sense of lost meaning, the weight in her chest; they couldn't reach the depths of her soul or the weight that her body was carrying. It wasn't until complemented therapy with things like dance, music, group singing, and especially yoga that the Fulbright scholar found true relief. Yoga in particular, was so transformational for her, and it led her to wonder: “How does a yogic framework transform what mental health care can look like?”

This question eventually took her all across India, immersing herself in yoga, Ayurveda, Vedanta, and more.

First Encounters with Indian Indigenous Healing

The Fulbright scholar had limited knowledge of India or Indian healing systems before she arrived. She knew India was the birthplace of yoga and a land of extraordinary diversity but she couldn't distinguish between the languages, the cultures, and truth be told she could barely point to Bangalore on a map. When it comes to indigenous healing, The Fulbright scholar also had no prior acculturation towards such practices but she felt a strong magnetism for all things natural. Growing up in Cameroon– in a land that had yet to be grazed by Western ideals of industrialization– the Fulbright scholar was very connected to the land and natural world. She ate local-homegrown food; she played in the blazing hot sun; she ran around barefoot, mud in between her toes as she raced snails and built toy cars out

of sardine cans. Her childhood was very holistic and even as a kid, she knew that indigenous practices, natural living, connection to the land, and the wisdom of our ancestors were invaluable truths.

So, it makes sense that the Fulbright scholar ended up in a place like India, a country that has maintained its spiritual and indigenous roots despite years of conquest, colonization, and colloquial change. Even in a city like Bangalore: a fast paced, rapidly urbanizing, tech startup bubble, she saw a notable ever-present air of spirituality oozing from every corner. The temples, the roadside shrines, the sarees; the land comes alive with spirituality, and for those close enough to the land to hear it, the whispers of indigeneity are undeniable.

Immersion in Yoga

Naturally, with it being her entrapoint into India, the Fulbright scholar explored Indian indigeneity through yogic philosophy first. Just a few weeks after landing, she traveled to the yoga capital of India, Rishikesh, to feel the presence of Mother Ganga, attend the Ganga Arti, take yoga classes at local ashrams, and climb hundreds of steps at five in the morning to view the sunrise from Kunjapuri temple. (Now that's a view she will never forget).

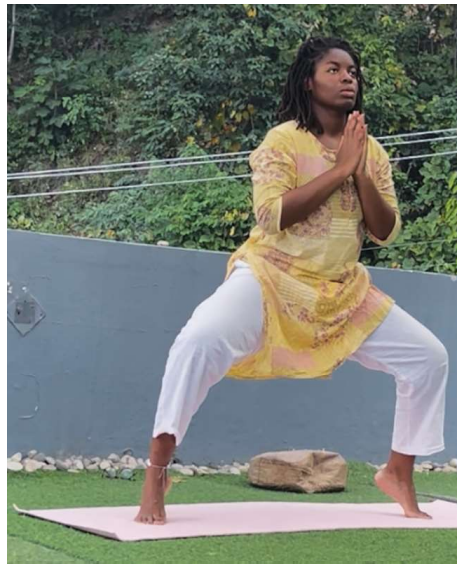


Figure 1: Kali Asana Variation (Goddess Pose)



Figure 2: Parshvatasana (Side Angle Pose)

Upon her return to Bangalore, the Fulbright scholar began a one-month 200-hour Yoga teacher training intensive at a private yoga shala. Here, the edges of her clinical interpretations began to melt. For one, she developed a deeper relationship to her body and the subtle worlds within it. While holding challenging asanas for minutes at a time, she was forced to confront the chaos of her mind. Thoughts like “Stop, this is uncomfortable,” “Get out of here,” “I hate this,” would frequently cross her mind; the scholar saw first-hand how often the mind will limit before the body is ready to give up. She had always been told that mastering one’s mind will help in mastering the body – mind over matter – but through yoga, she also experienced that mastering the body’s relationship to discomfort reveals truths about the nature of the mind – matter over mind.

The Fulbright scholar pushed her bodies (both physical and psychological) to new places and she felt sensations she had never felt before; sensations that felt like emotional knots were unfolding rather than physical ones. Poses triggered sensations which triggered memories which triggered emotional releases; a deep hip opener would leave her crying unexpectedly, as if the hip itself contained emotions tucked within her tight fascia. Oftentimes, the release would precede the conscious memory and the Fulbright scholar would find herself crying at seemingly nothing but feeling pounds lighter afterwards. The subtle somatic releases, the way her body reached into her emotional world (conscious or unconscious) to move the energy around; it showed her that the body is not only the vessel that the mind inhabits, it is a highly intelligent terrain of psychological expression with its own memories, patterns, and potential for healing. The mind remembers and analyzes, but the body **experiences**. The fascia holds memory, the nerves,

muscles, nervous system, gut, and breath are each terrains through which emotion travels. To ignore the body is to not only marginalize a key part of the self, it is a form of psychological amputation.

Learning a New Language for the Self

Her training eventually went beyond thought and sensation; mind and body; as she explored Patanjali's sutras, yamas and nyamas, yoga nidra, and philosophy. She dissected the breath in pranayama, explored consciousness through Samkhya, and peeled back layers of identification to ask the basic question: who am I?

You see, within Western psychology, the self is more or less seen as the personality within the body: a product of your genetics, life experiences, memories, and brain-based processes. The individual is treated as a distinct person, embedded within social systems but essentially separate from them, and the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and awareness of that individual all emerge from psychological faculties (Mosig, 2006). In yoga, the self is layered and grounded in an ever-present consciousness. At the deepest level of the self lies Purusha: pure awareness that witnesses experience without being altered by it (Chauhan & Yadav, 2025). **Awareness, in its purest form, is the fundamental self;** it is the foundation from which all other projected selves—the mind, the body, and the personality—emerge.

Samkhya philosophy further suggests that the projected selves, though distinct from the true self, are deeply enmeshed and connected to this pure awareness. They exist across interwoven layers, ranging from subtle and invisible to dense and material. The Panchakosha theory outlines these layers: within a human being exist the Annamaya (the physical body), Pranamaya (the energy body), Manamaya (the mental-emotional body), Vijnanamaya (the wisdom body), and Anandamaya (the bliss body) koshas— a series of nested, interpenetrating layers, each with its own intelligence, its own needs, and its own relationship to health and suffering (B & Sathiyaseelan, 2016). From this perspective, treating depression by addressing only the Manamaya Kosha (the cognitive-emotional layer) while ignoring the Pranamaya (the breath and energy), the Annamaya (the body and its physical signals), and the Vijnanamaya and Anandamaya (the deeper, existential layers of connection to wisdom and spirit) is like treating a plant by only watering one root.

The Fulbright scholar kept returning to this Panchakosha model again and again because it felt so much more dynamic than anything she'd ever been exposed to. In her own life, she would think: "which one of my layers is neglected right now?" "How can I tend to all of my selves, not just my mind and body?" The most beautiful journey for the scholar has been the one of tending to the innermost layers, the vijnamaya (wisdom layer, the layer she

s as her higher self/inner soul) and the anandamaya (bliss layer, the layer she recognizes as the connection to universal consciousness). Connecting to these subtle layers of her inner wisdom, her deeper soul, and her connected soul is what truly opened the doors of spirituality and healing.

The Gunas: A Different Vocabulary for Mental States

Another extremely useful conceptual shift the Fulbright scholar learned from her study of Samkhya and Yoga is the framework of the three Gunas: Tamas, Rajas, and Sattva. In Samkhya philosophy (the philosophical father of the sister sciences Yoga and Ayurveda) (Rhoda, 2014), everything arises from the union of consciousness (Purusha) and energy (Prakriti). Prakriti—energy in its purest form—is ever flowing and always in motion, consisting of either sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic expressions.

The mind and the body (and all forms of life and matter in fact) are each capable of expressing Prakriti through the various qualities of the gunas. Tamas is the quality of heaviness, stagnation, inertia, and contraction. In excess, Tamas is clinically recognized as depression, lethargy, low motivation, or a sense of hopelessness. Rajas is the activating energy in the universe, it brings about change, pushes things forward, and moves life from a state of stagnation to creation. In a clinical sense, an excess of rajas appears as agitation, restlessness, irritability, or anxiety. Sattva is the state of peace and harmony; it is the clarity, balance, and homeostasis between tamas and rajas. In a clinical sense, sattva represents groundedness, regulation, and inner peace (Chandra, 2024).

What the Fulbright Scholar finds powerful about applying the Gunas framework for mental health is that the gunas frame mental states as dynamic energy patterns, not fixed identities. Rather than issuing a top-down diagnosis—often based on externally perceived, sometimes pathologizing criteria—the mental state is framed as something that can shift; something that can be worked with; something rooted in the person's inner felt experience, with the possibility for that experience to change. "I am depressed" becomes "Her mind is in a chronic tamasic state". The former statement is prescriptive and identity based, while the latter is descriptive and distances your core being from the conditions of your mind.

Diagnoses are extremely valuable tools that help individuals and therapists map out psychological territories, but they can also quickly become limiting labels. "I am depressed" implies that you, at your core, are fundamentally altered by your mental state. It ties the self-concept around suffering and places depression as the defining factor of your identity. "My mind is in a chronic tamasic state," on the other hand, acknowledges the pain and suffering while specifying that you are not your mind. The transient nature of the word *state* preserves the possibility for transformation

and protects the identity as something unique from pain and suffering. It may seem semantic but that subtle shift from identity to condition, returns the agency back onto the individual and acknowledges the reality that you are not the sum of your parts. You are not depression. You are the soul witnessing depression in your mind and body. You are not the condition. You are the witnessing consciousness underneath it all.



Figure 3: March 2026: Certificate Ceremony. Alexandra (center) with her Yoga Training Mentors.

The Universal Self - A Vedantic Reframe

Yoga and Samkhya exposed her to the notion of witnessing consciousness as her true identity, but the Indian philosophy that really made it real for her was Vedanta. If there is a single month that marked a major transformation for the Fulbright scholar's perspectives on the self, and on the treatment of the self, that month is January 2026.

In January, the Fulbright scholar spent thirty days at an Ashram in Coimbatore, studying the basics of Vedanta philosophy and the Kathopanishad. The Kathopanishad is a text about the nature of death and the nature of the self, specifically, what is it in the human being that does not die? (Prashant, 2021). The teaching it offers, through the story of a conversation between young Nachiketas and the god of death Yama, reveals the central Vedantic philosophy: the innermost self (the soul, the *Atman*) is pure witnessing consciousness and this individual consciousness is not separate from the universal, collective, undivided consciousness that underlies all of existence (Brahman). The *Atman* is the Brahman. The individual and the collective are One.

Unlike Samkhya, which is a dual philosophy that presents energy and consciousness as separate fundamental forces, Vedanta is non-dual philosophy that recognizes the presence of one infinite underlying essence (Everett, 1899). Brahman (or as the scholar likes to call it, Source) is not separate from the world, it is the world. It is not separate from energy and matter, it is the ground from which energy and matter arise and into which they return. It is alive and expressing itself, ever flowing through the trees, the ants, the lands, and the bodies we mistakenly deem as separate. The separation we feel between ourselves and others is real at the material level of understanding, but at the most subtle, deepest level, the separation dissolves: your consciousness and the consciousness of the tree and the consciousness of the universe all exist within the same universal consciousness.

Over time, the Vedantic philosophy evolved from a teaching into an embedded truth. As the Fulbright scholar meditated deeply on this philosophy, she began to feel connected to everything around her: the air, the goats, the mountains, the trees-- all of it, all at once. The trees went from being trees to feeling more like distant family, like a reflection of herself in different forms. The barrier between herself and the other completely melted away. All she felt was One.



Figure 4: Meditating on Radical Unity

This feeling extended into the Fulbright scholar's perspective on mental health work. She now sees the value and meaningful implications of a Vedantic framework to healing. This Vedantic framework means acknowledging that on our deepest layer we are interconnected. It would mean that the global tragedies that seem far away-- the war, the famine, the discrimination, the rising hatred and separation-- are not distant casualties affecting only those impacted directly, they are ripples of pain experienced in our collective subtle body. Just as a ripple in the sea travels to the edges of the ocean, the pain of others reaches the edges of our individual and collective soul. All suffering is in some sense communal, and therefore healing must also be communal.

This reality is not easy to accept. It leaves us with a sense of responsibility that can feel heavy, yes, but the beauty in this reality is that the adverse is just as true: to heal oneself, to live joyfully, giving and receiving love freely, not only fills the heart of the individual-it sends a ripple through the collective heart. To heal oneself is to heal the community, and to heal the community is to heal oneself.



Figure 5: Communal singing as therapeutic process

Moving Beyond the Material

With this newfound framework, the Fulbright scholar is committed to honoring the subtle world in her own life, her family's life, and her future clients' lives. She urges other practitioners and mental health professionals to do the same. She believes we must move beyond the material and become deeply acquainted with the subtle. Life is not only about what we can see on the outside. Healing is not only the measurable external change- it is deeply inner felt, deeply grounded in experience, deeply subtle.

On an individual level, connecting to the subtle world can look like training yourself to listen to the subtle energies that flow within you. Start paying attention to your hunger cues, for example- not just the thought of hunger, but the texture of the feeling itself: its density, the thought that emerges before and after it, the way it changes depending on what kind of hunger you are experiencing. Become curious about your energy and take that curiosity to its fullest, innermost extent.

On a broader institutional level, this orientation toward the subtle must be woven into the very way mental health professionals are trained. The following sections offer specific strategies from the Fulbright scholar for how this integration can be brought into clinical practice, academic scholarship, and institutional culture.

An Existential Reorientation: The Meaning of Suffering

Firstly, we must address the question of how we understand suffering itself. This is where Indian Knowledge Systems make perhaps their most significant and underutilized contribution to mental health. Western psychology largely approaches suffering as a problem to be solved- a deviation from a norm of functioning that can be diagnosed, treated, and ideally eliminated. This framework is necessary as it is important to address the immediate pain individuals feel, but it leaves unaddressed the existential dimensions of suffering that do not fit neatly into a diagnostic category. The suffering that arises from not knowing who you are, from feeling disconnected from meaning or purpose, from sensing that the life you are living does not correspond to your deepest nature.

To address this suffering, the Indian philosophy, and Vedanta in particular, asks us to overcome the core of suffering: **avidya**-ignorance of one's true nature (Verma, 2025). Avidya a forgetting of the self's fundamental wholeness and its inseparability from the living whole of which it is a part. Overcoming avidya (and suffering overall), is not only curing illness so that the individual functions better, but it is also helping the individual recognize their inner self and their connection to the world around them. Integrating these existential and philosophical dimensions into mental health work can be as simple as asking bigger questions: not just "what symptoms is this person experiencing?" but "what is this person searching for? what have they lost contact with? what in their life is asking to be transformed?"

Grounding practice in philosophy, not just technique

Furthermore, integration must include a philosophical reorientation, not a list of new tools. For mental health professionals seeking to expand beyond cognitive-dominant models, the scholar recommends beginning with serious engagement with Vedantic and Indian philosophical frameworks. These frameworks offer new theoretical foundations and epistemologies that can be complemented with Western ones to expand our conceptions of healing.

Pairing Indian philosophy with third-wave cognitive behavioral therapies

A practical starting for expanding mental health care towards a holistic model can be pairing the philosophy of yoga with traditional third-wave cognitive behavioral therapies (DBT, ACT, MBSR). Third wave CBTs already teach mindfulness as a clinical skill but they can go even further to see mindfulness not just as a tool but as a state of true connection with one's core essence. For example, one can take the principle of cognitive diffusion- a technique where clients learn to put distance between themselves and their thoughts- and extend it into recognizing that your true nature is not

even the mind at all. Teach individuals that their true nature is the witness of experience, the unchanging awareness that observes thoughts, not the thoughts themselves, and diffusion goes from being a short term coping skill to being a lived perspective. This is the Vedantic teaching of the witness (the Sakshi) made clinically applicable (Verma, 2025).

Additionally the yoga sutras of Patanjali and the eight fold path offer a clear guidebook for ethical living, right action, and accountability towards the self and others. Teaching these components would take interventions from being solely about the individual to emphasizing the relational role of healing/ the importance of healing in a society. Panchakosha theory is another great place to start as a fundamental theoretical backing- if not the full theory, at least the recognition that the self is layered and each of those layers has its own needs deserving attention and care. Additional tools the Fulbright scholar recommends weaving into therapy are:

- The chakra system: the recognition that specific regions of the body hold energetic patterns interwoven through the physical, emotional, subconscious, and spiritual layers, offering clinicians a map for somatic and emotional work that is more nuanced than anatomical frameworks alone (Nanglu et al., 2026).
- Mantras: cognitive rewiring through positive auditory and verbal stimulation, frequently practiced in community, which offers both neurological and relational benefit (Alvarez-Perez et al., 2022).
- Karma yoga: behavioral activation through non-attached service, grounded in the recognition that helping others is not separate from helping oneself, because at the deepest layer we share the same essential nature (Aithal et al., 2025).
- Ritual and communal ceremony: pujas, grief ceremonies, celebrations, rites of passage. These need not to be labeled spiritual if that creates barriers. What we can do is at the very least create dedicated spaces for people to materialize the transitions often kept reserved for the individual inner world (Zylstra et al., 2014)

Centering somatic practice as essential, not supplementary.

In addition to philosophical and behavioral re-orientations, mental health care training must include somatic approaches. The body is not a vessel that houses the mind. It is a layered, intelligent terrain of psychological memory, encoding experiences, traumas, and emotional patterns that cognitive work alone cannot consistently reach. Somatic training is thus essential to therapy, not secondary to it and it can be incorporated in therapeutic training via breathwork, somatic experiencing, yoga-informed therapy, and more.

Cultural Sensitivity as an Integrative Practice

As we do this work of integration, we must also respect the heritage and roots of the practices being blended. Cultural sensitivity is thus foundational. There is a growing global interest in yoga, Vedanta, and other Indian traditions, which is great, but this interest has simultaneously produced extractive spiritual tourism, misrepresentation of indigenous practices at best, and complete misappropriation or erasure of traditional healers at worst. To honor the heritage of indigenous Indian perspective, the Fulbright scholar emphasizes that teachers and scholars of Indian Knowledge Systems must remain- first and foremost- humble students. She says we must not let the passion override the gratitude for the lineage of teachers who have allowed us to learn these practices. We must remain committed to giving credit where credit is due, explicitly platforming Indian teachers and scholars so that our students, peers, and audiences are exposed to not only asana, but the cultural and historical depth of yoga.

The Fulbright scholar also pledges to continuously engage directly with lineage holders: making an effort to learn from and uplift Indian teachers as she explores the histories, cultures, and language contributing to various Indian Knowledge Systems. She urges yoga studios and companies to compensate Indian teachers fairly, and for international yoga teachers to consider redistributing the wealth to the communities from whom this knowledge emerged (via grassroots or non-profit donations in India). The scholar also urges yoga teachers and second-hand practitioners of other Indian healing systems to be transparent about what is adapted versus what is traditional, and in general to be reciprocal, respectful, and rooted in relationship.

Decolonizing the Academy: Recommendations for Scholarly Practice

In an academic setting, the Fulbright scholar recommends intentional, thoughtful collaboration between Indian and Western scholars. She urges conferences and journals to feature more international scholars and fund research from the Global South, so that academia is not only representing one epistemological tradition on healing and mental health. International paper collaborations, international conferences, and cross-national community based participatory research are great avenues for academic cultural exchange. Most importantly, the scholar urges Western scientists, academics, and practitioners to seriously engage with Indian perspectives on health, not as marginal or fringe science, but as deep wells of wisdom refined through centuries of practice.

Conclusion: Two Lenses, One Sky

Overall, Western and Indian perspectives are two lenses: two telescopes looking at the same night sky of healing. It is not about pitting one lens against the other but rather about using the strengths of each lens to create a broader view that can deepen healing for more individuals. As Patanjali states in the yoga sutras, there are many paths to truth (Part 4, Sutra 15), just as there are many paths to healing. It is time to explore new paths—paths that center the body as a whole, intelligent, alive terrain of psychological memory; paths that reach into the subtle, the vitality, the subconscious, the invisible energies fueling our material layer; paths that consider the existential; paths that emphasize the interconnected. If the goal is to heal, to help individuals reach their highest potentials and connect more deeply to their inner world, then we must take both lenses, place them one in front of the other, and welcome a full spectrum view of the night sky.

Next Steps for the Scholar

As for the scholar- after a total of 9 months in India, 9 months spent reading the yoga sutras, perfecting her surya namaskara, meditating on nonduality, and exploring healing at the subtlest levels, the Fulbright scholar is returning to her ancestral land, Cameroon, and the United States shortly after. She will take the knowledge and wisdom she's accumulated in India and put it into practice- standing on her foundations in evidence based behavioral therapies and building a new forward that incorporates her newfound body-centered, spiritually aligned therapeutic frameworks. She will teach yoga, continue training in Thai massage and energy healing, and pursue a PsyD in psychodynamic therapy to continue exploring the impact of subtle, subconscious (and collective unconscious) dimensions on behavior and collective healing. The Fulbright scholar leaves us with her most important message: Love your neighbor as you would yourself, Love your body as you would the trees, for You, The Trees, Your Body, and Your Neighbor, are all part of the same beautiful whole.

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