Identification-of-self through a yoga-travel-spirit nexus

Patrick J. Holladay  Ph.D. is Assistant Professor at Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism Management, University of St. Francis, 500 Wilcox St., Joliet, IL 60435

Lauren M. Ponder  Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism Management, Clemson University, Clemson, SC, USA.

Abstract
This article examines a heuristic paradigm of a yoga-spirit-travel nexus and its agency on the identification-of-self. In the ancient Sanskrit yoga means union or yoke. Yoga practice may act as a yoking or linking element between self-identity and spiritual development such that yoga travel may lead to the enhancement of self-identity for the yogi traveler. Conceptually, the practice of yoga acts as a catalyst for travel to partake in foreign yoga experiences. Both during travel and in the travel destination, the engaged spiritual capital via yoga may act as an uplifting transformative agent for identity formation. We conclude that by linking self-identification to a yoga-travel-spirit nexus a foundation of self-enlightenment may emerge.

Spiritual motivation has been noted as a reason for adopting a yoga practice and for yoga travel (Lehto et al. 2006). There seems to be a therapeutic ability of a yoga-place connection (as through a travel destination) to foster spiritual purity (Hoyez, 2007), disrupt the mundane and allow in the ‘new’ (Lea, 2008). Yoga, and its intimate partner meditation, may allow individuals to achieve self-realization, purification and intrinsic feelings of love (Aggarwal et al. 2008). Yoga landscapes such as Rishikesh, India, Yogaville, USA (the creation of yoga guru Swami Satchidananda), and La Mercy,
South Africa are recognized by some as spiritual places (Hoyez, 2007). Engagement in meaningful travel leading to experiential intrinsic transformative processes could have positive implications for the development-of-self through a tourism product (Gelter, 2010), which in this example is yoga. A yoga journey may possibly integrate the mind, the body and the spirit (Kelly & Smith, 2009; Smith, 2003) leading to a causatum of values-laden transformation in self (Pritchard et al., 2011).

This article examines the archetype of a yoga-spirit-travel nexus and its agency on the identification-of-self. Consideration is given to whether melding identification-of-self to the evolvement of spirituality through yoga tourism might influence personal dynamics through positively reinforcing reciprocal feedbacks of spirit. This heuristic focuses on the multi-faceted nature of this phenomenon as yogi travelers are transformed by overcoming boundaries of self versus non-self by linking self-identification to spiritual capital through yoga practice and travel.

The descriptions laid out in this article should not be confused with totality or a notion of an ‘Absolute’ such as outlined in some forms of religion like Buddhism or Hinduism (e.g. Brodd, 2003). Rather, the thoughts here are based on a philosophy of principles expounded upon in Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, an ancient treatise on Raja Yoga (e.g. Satchidnanada, 1990). We suggest that by marrying self-identification to a yoga-travel-spirit nexus a foundation of self-enlightenment may emerge.

Yoga

Yoga, from the Sanskrit, means union or yoke (Joshi, 1965). Yoga is an ancient form of spiritual self-discipline that promotes enlightenment and ultimately samhadi, the end-point of the yoga journey where the consciousness is stilled and energies are fully directed towards an object of attention (Lee, 2004). This induced stillness and direction of energy is about achieving higher awareness, a new state of mind or “mindfulness” (Freidberg, 2009; Langer 1989). This mindfulness may facilitate stronger connections between individuals and place (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000).

Yoga is guided by eight principles. In Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, the eightfold path is described as ashtanga (Chatterjee & Datta, 1939) or “eight limbs” (ashta = eight, anga = limb). This path was developed
to infuse balance between the polarities of strength and compassion within an individual (Chopra & Simon, 2004). In support of the eight limbs are the six branches of yoga (Raja, Karma, Bhakti, Jnana, Tantra, and Hatha). While the yogin is encouraged to explore all six branches of yoga, Raja Yoga and its goal of samadhi is connected most closely to spirituality (Mehta & Mehta, 1990).

The development of samadhi is supported by meditative practices within yoga that may help to build the understanding of self (Kabat-Zinn, 2006). Meditation opens clearer understanding of individuals and the world allowing action to be more effective (Combs, 2002). Virtually all forms of meditation lead to a more calm and objective mental, emotional and spiritual poise (e.g. Arambula et al., 2001; Butler et al., 2008; Ditto et al., 2006; Kanojia, 2010; Waelde et al. 2008). Thus, it would seem that the practice of yoga, including meditation, leads in the direction of integral consciousness of identification-of-self (Bose, 2011).

**Spirituality and travel**

Modern life generates uncertainty such that people seek authentic experiences as a means of revitalizing fragmented personal identity or existential authenticity (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). It has been suggested that contemporary Western society has come to be defined by a ‘spiritual revolution’ (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). There has been a shift in the sacred landscape and a search for spiritual nourishment through the pursuit of a variety of beliefs and practices, such as holism, fen shui, yoga, or New Age (Drury, 2004).

Spirituality often describes what individuals feel to be missing in their lives rather than explicitly defining what is hoped for (Brown 1998). Sharpley & Jepsen (2010, p. 55) stated, “spirituality may be thought of simply as a connection between the self and the ‘this world’, implying that a spiritual or emotional relationship exists or is sought between people, ‘this world’ and specific places, such as the countryside, within it.” Spiritual travel experiences may promote a healthy state of wellness, oneness and humility (Aggarwal et al. 2008; Smith & Kelly, 2006a; Wilson, 2010). In a case study of Machu Picchu, Peru pilgrims were able to consociate with their creative energies, reconnect with nature and with the sustaining power of the ancient Inca civilization (Raj & Morpeth, 2007). More than simply seeking to gaze at an authentic culture, people or landscape, the
‘post-tourist’ wants to live an experience (Urry, 1990). These newly developing tourist quests are centered towards self transformation and constitute new ground for spiritual travel experiences.

Since the late 1700s, the Lake District in the United Kingdom has been an area steepled in fascination and seemingly able to deliver physical, mental and spiritual benefits to visitors. A case study of the area found that those who visited were motivated by or achieved spiritual meaning or fulfillment through their visits (Sharpley & Jepsen, 2010). The landscape offered travelers an emotional connection to a greater power and held a sacred meaning that compensated for the increasing spiritual void in urban society.

Prominent in the discussion of the Lake District was the idea of examining one’s life in relation to the world around and how spirituality was related directly to nature and the earth (Sharpley & Jepsen, 2010). Either during or as a result of their visit, spirituality was reflected in the interpretation of the feelings they experienced: a sense of oneness and connection to the world, feelings of being part of something bigger and infinite, a sense of a greater power and the appreciation of creation, a sense of timelessness and of scale, euphoria, a feeling of being blessed and a sense of renewal. The Lake District led to a temporary fellowship with other tourists, a sense of ‘communitas’ bound by common interests and shared experiences, where social status and normal boundaries were disregarded (Digance, 2006).

The idea of tourism as a spiritual journey has been excogitated by a number of authors (e.g. Olsen, 2006; Sharpley & Jepsen, 2009) sometimes with the spiritual concept under the guise of holistic or wellness tourism (Smith & Kelly, 2006b). Various studies reveal a correlation between the natural environment and a deep sense of belonging, a sense of place, a profound connection with the world and harmonious feelings (e.g. Pritchard, et al., 2011; Ratz et al., 2008; Voigt, et al., 2011). Solitude, silence, time and space are all important factors in spiritual well-being and have been described as life-giving and rejuvenating leading to an increase in human development and spirituality (Heintzman, 2002; 2009).

Self-yoga-spirit-travel
The dualism and wholeness of physical and spiritual space, united in a holistic manner of being in and understanding the world,
seems to have been lost (Lightman, 2005). As Pritchard et al. (2011, p. 18) posited, “Our age is one which denounces love, hope and the transcendental. It is governed by the mundane; it is a time of lovelessness, of ‘us’ and ‘them’, of profit and loss, when we cut ourselves off from what makes us human, from our essence. It is a world which nullifies mutually sustaining, nurturing relationships and shuns beauty. Yet, our world does not merely ignore such relationships, it rails against them and so to even talk about them makes us vulnerable.”

The practice of yoga is an awakening of the self, to include weaknesses, fears, and limitations as well as strength, courage and beauty (Cope, 1999). Yoga is about experiencing life, while working towards something greater than one’s self (Chopra & Simon, 2004; Easwaran, 1985). The journey for the identification-of-self is a complex one as an individual travels from a personal level to that of a transpersonal one by overcoming imagined boundaries to self-identity, thus unifying the mind and spirit with the universe around them (Wilber, 1979). As Wilber (1979, p. 160) stated, “Real spiritual practice is not something we do for twenty minutes a day, for two hours a day, or for six hours a day. It is not something we do once a day in the morning or once a week on Sunday. Spiritual practice is not one activity among other human activities; it is the ground of all human activities, their source and their validation. It is a prior commitment to transcendent truth lived, breathed, intuited, and practiced twenty-four hours a day. To intuit your self is to commit your entire being to the actualization of that self in all beings.”

One path for this transformation is self-identification influenced by the interactions of the practice of yoga, the development of spiritual capital or ethical and moral beliefs (Guest, 2007), and the sojourn of travel. As previously mentioned, yoga, from the Sanskrit, means union or yoke (Joshi, 1965). Accordingly, the yoga-spirit-travel model in this article posits that the identification-of-self is connected to the development of spirit, which in turn may be strengthened by travel. This comingling of yoga practice and yoga travel may lead to a unification-of-self for the yogi traveler (Cf. Aggarwal, et al., 2008; Lehto, et al, 2006). The yogi traveler is pushed and pulled (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977) by a desire for spiritual development and hope (Pritchard et al., 2011), which begets positive identity-of-self and personal transformation. Yoga tourism signifies a journey of
knowledge and enlightenment merging the physical and spiritual (Kelly & Smith, 2009; Smith, 2003). Through yoga tourism the outer world of experiences may be woven together to create ‘narratives’ that metaphorically connect desires with understanding and the inner world of the spirit (Graburn, 2002).

Conclusion
This article acted as a heuristic for considering a yoga-spirit-travel nexus in the identification-of-self. Travel is seen as a means of spiritual fulfilment (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). The harmonious consumption of a travel landscape may generate positive feedbacks of spirit to a traveller’s well-being (Ratz et al., 2008). The ontological notion of travel and tourism as merely hedonistic could be laid to rest (Wilson, 2008). All humans may be seen as spiritual beings and if one views tourism and spirituality as a necessary condition of self then tourism and spirituality appear to be deeply linked (Wilson, 2008).

Wilson (2010) presented an argument that spirituality was the essence of being human and that travel experiences were both life-defining and imbued with one’s spirituality. Further, the author argued that all travel was spiritual, which supported work by Cohen (1979), and expanded perspectives on meanings and purpose for life, connectedness, and transcendence. The work of these authors and others on spirituality in tourism (e.g. Mansfeld & McIntosh, 2009), are the beginnings of a conversation about connections within and without the individual and a travel dynamic (Konu & Laukkanen, 2010; Voigt et al. 2011). Yoga practice and the enhancement of spiritual capital may be deeply yoked to the travel experience (Cohen, 1979; Hall, 2003) and the authors of this article support the idea that these concepts be considered as one avenue for the development of self-identity.

References


