



The Yoga of Economics

* Sohail Inayatullah

As with economics, this means that there are natural cycles in the life of a person or organization. Pauses need not be considered negative growth but as chances to evaluate what part of the business or organization are worth maintaining, what parts need to be jettisoned and what aspects transformed. This is true at the personal level as well.

Yoga, defined alternatively, to unite with the infinite or as series of poses to regulate the body's glandular system is usually not linked to the economy. However, there is much we can learn from the practice of Yoga in creating more effective business strategy and a more balanced world economy.

As a physical exercise or commonly known as "innercise," Yoga is linked to enhanced wellbeing. In a study using Magnetic resonance spectroscopic imaging, regular Yoga practitioners exhibited higher levels of the amino acid, GABA, which is linked to a reduction in anxiety. GABA helps fight of depression and is essential for a healthy and relaxed mind. Yoga has also become a big business in the

West valued at 42 billion dollars (courses, clothes, mats, for example). Indeed, business strategist and futurist Sudhir Desai of Boston, Massachusetts humorously comments that perhaps it is time to outsource Yoga to India.

However, what I wish to explore is how the principles of Yoga can be used to transform our current world economy as well as to strategically help organizations manoeuvre and create alternative futures.

1 Flexibility

First, Yoga is about flexibility. Enhanced flexibility is gained through holding postures. Done daily and slowly, harmonized with breathing, Yoga over time increases flexibility. Those who don't practice

Yoga find themselves becoming rigid. Metaphorically, they are unable to adapt to changing conditions. They cannot bend to the changing wind. Thus, when there are changes in the world economy or in one's personal economy, they remain rigid. The Yogic principle of flexibility suggests that we always need to be able to bend and bow. This does not mean, however, letting the wind carry us wherever, as Yoga postures are held with inner strength.

One strategy to negotiate dramatic changes is to develop scenarios so as to reduce risk. A deeper approach is individual and organizational flexibility, so irrespective of which scenario occurs, the person/organization does not break. Flexibility in organizations is about enhancing capacity and to some extent can be operationalized as policies that ensure that employees do not experience conflict between work and family. This leads to cost savings and higher productivity as family life is not sacrificed for work.

Other measures could include how employees respond to stressful situations.

2 Breathe in, Breath out

Second, Yoga is about breath, prana. Breathe in, breathe out. Yoga is about slowing the heart rate down, slowing the mind down. Yoga is about being present. As economic or social crises result, the lesson from Yoga is to breathe, to slow down, to reflect and not be carried away by the challenge at hand. By being present, relaxed, often an answer to the problem can emerge from the intuitive part of the mind, from another self. By slowing down, we can see the problem anew as panic and fear either disappear or are decreased. The "fight or flight" reaction does not dominate.

3 Pause

Third, yoga is based on pauses fits and starts. It is not a continuous linear pattern of endless growth. Rather, like the breath, there are pauses. The stopping allows for reflection, for gathering energy, before the next speeding up. Mystic Shrii P.R.Sarkar suggests that life is

like a series of rolling hills. There are pauses between climbs what he calls systaltic pauses. We rest, regain focus, and then move forward. Even if one believes life is like climbing a ladder or a race, it is important to rest between rungs or after a race, to gather energy and momentum.

As with economics, this means that that there are natural cycles in the life of a person or organization. Pauses need not be considered negative growth but as chances to evaluate what part of the business or organization are worth maintaining, what parts need to be jettisoned and what aspects transformed. This is true at the personal level as well. One can ask: what aspects of my life behaviours, attitudes and assumptions - need to be pruned and what aspects need to grow and what parts need to transform?

4 Concentration and Meditation

While yoga may begin with external exercises it tends to conclude with innercises- the most powerful is concentration and meditation. The benefits are overwhelming. Meditation can increase the thickness of regions that control attention and process sensory signals from the outside world. In a program that neuroscientist Amishi Jha of the University of Miami calls mindfulness-based mind-fitness training, participants build concentration by focusing on one object, such as a particular body sensation. The training, she says, has shown success in enhancing mental agility and attention "by changing brain structure and function so that brain processes are more efficient," the quality associated with higher intelligence.

Meditation, as well, can switch genes on and off. In a recent study on the impact of meditation on the body, researchers concluded: "...meditators showed a range of genetic and molecular differences, including altered levels of gene-regulating machinery and reduced levels of pro-inflammatory genes,



which in turn correlated with faster physical recovery from a stressful situation”.

Specifically: “The results show a down-regulation of genes that have been implicated in inflammation. The affected genes include the pro-inflammatory genes RIPK2 and COX2 as well as several histone deacetylase (HDAC) genes, which regulate the activity of other genes epigenetically by removing a type of chemical tag. What's more, the extent to which some of those genes were down-regulated was associated with faster cortisol recovery to a social stress test involving an impromptu speech and tasks requiring mental calculations performed in front of an audience and video camera”.

This is important as there is a direct correlation, argue the authors, between chronic low-grade inflammation and the most common problems of the modern world including cardiovascular and metabolic disease, cancer and neuropsychiatric disorders. Meditation can make the person and the nation healthier. By reducing national health care costs, debt can be reduced and capital reinvested in prevention. And by increasing well-being and purpose, meditation can enhance productivity, increasing the quality of life.

5 Tandava, creative destruction

Fifth, associated with Yoga is a dance called tandava. This is the dance of Shiva, wherein Shiva dances between life and death, the infinite and finite, the eternal and the temporal. The narrative is Shiva is not just the creator and the maintainer but also the destroyer. Without overdoing the link to Joseph Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction as one of the hallmarks of capitalism's strengths, it is important to note that Yoga is not just about stretching and feeling good. Yoga also highlights the needs for destruction of behaviours, attitudes and assumptions about self, economy and planet. Certainly the



Occupation wall street movement has made it clear that the inequity built into capitalism needs to end. The delinking of the financial system from the real economy needs to end. Others, more radically, assert that Shiva needs to engage in the dance of tandava on capitalism itself. Five hundred years of one system is more than enough. Time for a change? Time for Shiva's tandava?

6 The Ethical context

Sixth, whether exercise or spiritual unification, Yoga also has a critical ethical context. This context is called Yama and Niyama. Yama, writes, Yogi Dada Vedaprajnananda, means that which controls and the practice of Yama means to control actions related to the external world. Niyama, in contrast, is focused on self-regulation. Both are crucial for creating a context for the expansion of goods, services, ideas and purpose. In this section, I explore five aspects of Yama and Niyama, in specific, the implications of ahimsa, aparigraha, tapah, asteya, and

santosh on economics.

The first Yama is **ahimsa** or least violence, even non-violence. For the Yoga practitioner, the simple question is: Am I partaking in aspects of the economy that lead directly to violence (person to person, person to nature, person to animal) or indirectly through structural violence, where the system creates violence, as in the Indian caste system. Applied to the economy, this would mean moving away from Big M or the Big meat industry. In the USA, estimates vary but generally a conservative number is 10 billion land animals are slaughtered annually. Globally the number is 58 billion.

In a switch to a vegetarian economy, certainly there would be many losers and winners. And it is only fair that Big Meat gets a decade or so to start to switch over to vegetarian options. Structurally, this means the end of subsidies for the meat industry and the support of education and policies that moves toward a vegetarian society.



Overtime the goal would be an economy rooted in ahimsa.

Big Tobacco would also be directly impacted. The World Health Organization estimated that one billion people will die this century from tobacco related illnesses and over 165,000 children die annually from complications of second hand smoke.

An ahimsa-based economy would also support anti-bullying legislation in workplaces and create legislation where there was none. Programs that reduce bullying such as meditation programs would as well be encouraged. Essentially, instead of a focus on social Darwinism, ahimsa would create, as Riane Eisler argues, a caring economics. The question asked by regulatory authorities would be: does this economic activity create violence or peace. Where there are conflicts, is there harm reduction policies? That we spend globally 1.62 trillion dollars on military expenditures tells us that our world economy does not follow ahimsa.

As relevant as ahimsa is

aparigraha which is essentially about voluntary simplicity. It is the ecological principle of asking before accumulation of a physical object, as well as a mental object, do I need this in my life? Am I purchasing it because I can use it or because I wish to demonstrate to my neighbours and others that I am important? What am I truly purchasing is the yogic question. Am I purchasing the object or is at issue the lack of inferiority I feel?

While the implication of aparigraha is to some extent an economics of austerity, this does not mean a reduction in standard of living. There are billions of objects, the basic needs of education, health, clothes, housing, food, communication and connectivity that need purchasing. Aparigraha is about intent. It is also about full information. Who made the product, how much did the worker make, how much did the middle man, the trader? Was anyone or nature harmed its production? Aparigraha leads to a questioning of consumption. Aparigraha is also

contextual. Each epoch and each region has different levels of appropriate technologies and consumption. And one can reduce material items but still collect unnecessary thoughts or reduce material items but secretly desire them. Aparigraha is an economics of wise consumption not repressed asceticism. Yoga teacher, Dada Vedaprajnanda writes that aparigraha means to “not hoard wealth which is superfluous to our actual needs,” what Shrii Sarkar has called, “keep the money rolling.”

Applied to the world economy, aparigraha suggests that if one person or nation hoards wealth, it may lead to others having less. It certainly slows down the movement of goods and services. Fluidity and flexibility disappear as trust and legitimacy decrease in the overall system. The results of hoarding are obvious throughout the global economy. At the external level, hoarding decreases when there are regulations that create a maximum income. At the inner level, hoarding decreases when individuals trust

their own capacity to earn wealth, and they trust the rules of the game when there is transparency, a fair judiciary and accountability. And when the maximum and minimum are linked to each other, as the maximum goes up so does the minimum, then wealth and equity can increase.

Tapah, a yogic principle, suggests that one must undergo some physical hardship to attain the goal, counters much of New Age thinking, which often asserts that hard work is not necessary. In Yoga, there is great value to persistence and perspiration. Every successful individual, organization or nation knows this. Short term desires are sacrificed for the long term. Children who say no to the doughnut in front of them for two doughnuts later do much better in life. Delayed gratification, putting in the hours, and “no short cuts” are all crucial for success (within our contemporary worldview). And the hard work may be simply thinking different examining one's narratives and seeing if they are sabotaging one's

goal orientation, sacrificing neural pathways that are not productive.

Asteya, as a well, the yogic principle of not stealing or renouncing the desire to acquire or retain the wealth of others is crucial if we wish to ensure the economy has legitimacy and trust. If there is theft at the top senior government ministers, corporate CEOs or civil social society leaders then the system loses legitimacy. Those closer to the bottom feel that if the elite can get away with it, why can't they take short cuts or engage in micro-corruption. Good governance is essentially about ensuring that the political-economy is transparent, that at every level of society, there is no theft. Laws thus must be fair and there must be equality before the law. With *asteya* as an operating principle, trust increases, legitimacy expands and wealth can grow and circulate. It is not siphoned off at every step of the way, rather, it moves and moves, allowing all to benefit. Thus: higher ethics leads to stronger economies.

While there are other important

ethical guidelines in Yoga, I conclude with **santosh** or contentment for things received. This is principle of acceptance, of “enoughness.” In spiritual traditions, this is similar to allowing, of appreciation of what is. While seemingly in contradiction with other principles of expansion of the mind, in Yoga there is a both-and approach, of being present to the dialectics of the present, of both *tandava* (destroying or deconstructing what-is) and *santosh* (accepting and appreciating what-is). Behind this is the notion that happiness is a virus. The happier I am, the happier others will be, as contentment radiates from person to person. Like money, which needs to keep rolling, happiness needs to keep moving, from person to person, economic system to ecosystem, and flower to planet.

In conclusion, Yoga leads to **prama** or dynamic equilibrium, appreciating what-is and creating more wealth and equity for all - local and global, self and planet, inner and outer.

