

Features

Yoga Futures: Your Futures

By Kristine Kaoverii Weber and Brett Sculthorp

“We do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future.”

—Sri Aurobindo, *Bhagavad Gita and Its Message*

What Does the Future Hold?

Do you ever kick back, put your feet up, stare out at the sky, and think about the future of yoga and yoga therapy? Most of us take time now and then to envision our own future, but what about the future of our profession? And, if we expand beyond the yoga profession, what could yoga and yoga philosophy offer to the future of the world?

Over the past 2 years it's been hard, to say the least, to drop in, get centered, and think about what's next because we've largely been in survival mode. Even early in the pandemic, the United Nations Development Program noted that, “The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time and the greatest challenge we have faced since World War Two.”

We are in the midst of what some futurists call the “global megacrisis” (the chaotic, interevolving conglomeration of worldwide ecological, military, financial, health, and social crises), and this is causing a great shift around priorities, plans, and moving forward. This article discusses the future of yoga and yoga therapy and lays out the role that yoga could have in creating a sustainable future for all. The practices of yoga have been used for centuries to develop the interior self. We suggest that it this inner development that is foundational for addressing the global megacrisis.

The pandemic has created a classic “future shock” as defined by the creators of this phrase, Alvin Tofler and Adelaide Farrell, in their 1970 book of the same name: “too much change in too short a period of time.” It has threatened national security and democracy, food security, and climate goals, and undermined trust in what is regarded as information or knowledge. Not only has the global supply chain of “stuff” been disrupted but also the personal supply chains of social engagement, comfort, and security about the future. For some people who have the opportunity to even think about the future, images have become more dystopic. And yet the task of creating a healthier future is essential if we care about the generations to come.

Spiritual growth could be considered the most important measure of health, of human thriving and flourishing.

What if we stepped back and thought big and broad about yoga and yoga therapy? How has your yoga practice changed the way you think about yourself, about life, about the world? How could this deepening of awareness ripple out, not only to other individuals in your network but through linked networks and organizations, to

create a collaborative global web that systemically shifts the crisis forces and brings about a sustainable, equitable future?

Futures Studies

Futures studies is a meta-disciplinary field that can help frame how to think about the future of yoga and yoga's role in engaging with the global megacrisis.

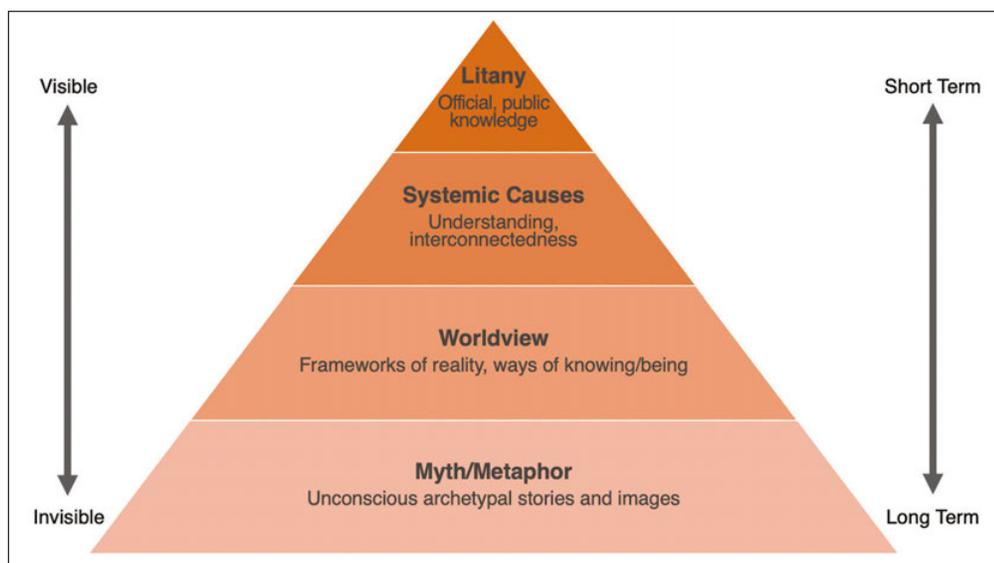
The word “futures” is often associated with Wall Street trading, sci-fi, Walt Disney, or increasing longevity. But here we'll be talking about futures and futures studies with the goal of using this deep, broad field to re-think options for the future rather than focusing on simplistic, linear projections into “the future.” As defined by Sohail Inayatullah in his 2013 paper “Future Studies: Theories and Methods,” future studies is “the systematic study of possible, probable, and preferable futures including the worldviews and myths that underlie each future” and includes mapping and “shaping desired futures, both at external collective levels and inner individuals levels.”

A growing aspect of futures studies addresses civilizational change in response to the global megacrisis. Business-focused or organizational development-oriented futures work tends to have more of an objective, pragmatic, deterministic, short-term range and tends to further existing interests. However, the global megacrisis requires deeper reflection on the complex interactions between various kinds and levels of social systems as well as ecological systems and how they dynamically (and mutually) transform over time.

Inayatullah suggests that futures studies work requires deep, honest inquiry into whose truth and future is favored, whose interests are at stake, and what unconscious assumptions are being made about the future, as well as recognizing how our ways of knowing about the future are always biased. He developed the Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) framework as a tool to create transformative spaces so that people can envision alternative, sustainable, equitable futures. CLA can be used on the individual, organizational, or societal level.

In another 2013 paper, “From Critical to Transformative Futures,” Inayatullah stated: “To say something meaningful about the future, we first need to unpack how we mythologize the future, how stories live us. We need to lay bare the tools in which we speak of the future.”

Inayatullah's CLA is just one of the many futures tools and methodologies that we should examine in this light and that support thinking about the future from the perspective of DEI—diversity, equity, and inclusion. You could say it's a tool for doing deep *svadhyaya*, thinking more deeply about our conscious and unconscious thought patterns; the drivers of our behaviors; how we affect people and systems; and how these systems contribute either to business-as-usual, crisis-reinforcing futures or to a departure toward more global well-being. By developing more subtle awareness through our yoga practices, we are able to develop more understanding of complexity, of how intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics interact over time, and of the nature of larger systems beyond our direct engagement.

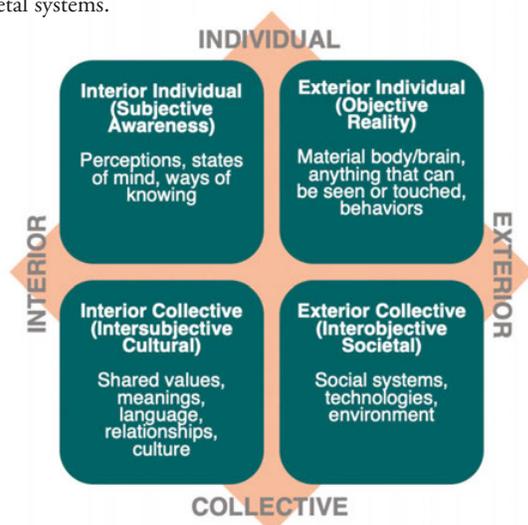


Causal layered analysis (CLA) is a framework to help with envisioning alternative, sustainable, equitable futures.

Global Integration

Another futurist, Richard Slaughter, uses Ken Wilber’s integral theory four-quadrant model¹ as a basis for an “integral futures” approach to address global challenges.² This model can help us define categories of problem-solving and break down different aspects of knowing to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each idea in terms of facilitating change and effective action.

The upper-left quadrant defines the subjective internal experience of the individual. The lower left is about the intersubjective collective experience of communities and cultures—including globally. The upper-right quadrant deals with the individual’s objective reality as created by their body-mind/behavior, and the lower right is about the interobjective reality as created by the behavior of societal systems.



Integral theory four-quadrant model for addressing global challenges.

In terms of how the global megacrisis is being addressed, Slaughter highlights that most attention is given to fixing issues in the lower-right quadrant (societal behavior). But, he argues, the often-ignored upper-left quadrant of individual intention holds the key to effective problem-solving:

Solutions to the GMC [global megacrisis] will not emerge from new technology and associated infrastructures, no matter how “green” they may be. They will begin to emerge when people look more

honestly and clearly upon their own interior selves and understand that the most potent source of innovation and “progress” is within The cultural environment . . . newly aware selves . . . operate within also dictate[s] . . . whether [their capacities] are fully developed or extinguished.³

If you are personally or professionally invested in yoga practice or philosophy, you may be thinking that yoga may provide some answers because yoga prioritizes the development of the upper-left quadrant, the interior self, and thus may be essential for addressing the global megacrisis.

We think you’re right.

Yoga philosophy and practice have the capacity to affect en masse the shift Slaughter calls for. Yoga provides the foundation for what humanity requires to begin the process of transforming our ways of knowing to develop the capacity to dig ourselves out of the global megacrisis. It provides a vision of how to be, an essential basis for hope. Sri Aurobindo described yoga as “all life” and the means to achieving human perfection.⁴ Reaching for human perfection is, of course, a future vision defined in a multiplicity of ways depending on lineage.

Perhaps the individual evolutionary thinking that arises from yoga practice in the subjective individual, or “I,” quadrant can be translated into the subjective collective, “we,” quadrant. Perhaps yoga can play a powerful role in collective cultural envisioning. Yoga is increasingly being implemented in schools, prisons, hospitals, addiction recovery centers, and other systems (the objective societal, or “its,” quadrant). However, like yoga in studios or gyms, the practice remains contextualized, largely, as one for individual growth. At the organizational level, there is a push for systems-wide change, including policies and procedures and DEI. We believe the next step for yoga is organizational collaboration to facilitate community, social, and global change. A further step could be when yoga practitioners begin to envision themselves as global citizens who act from courage and values forged in the fires of deep practice.

By developing more subtle awareness through our yoga practices, we are able to develop more understanding of complexity, of how intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics interact over time, and of the nature of larger systems beyond our direct engagement.

A key question is how can we create spaces that enable us to examine the images we hold unconsciously of the future and transform them into images of the futures we consciously want? How might we build yoga-oriented foresight into the fabric of society? How might we expand diversity among those engaging in shaping yoga-oriented futures?

The Yoga of Futures Thinking

If we go back to more integrated descriptions of yoga—ethics, asana, and pranayama in service of meditation—we find an actionable system of knowing and doing that cultivates the realization of the essential nature of being human. Yoga is integral. Perhaps it is the original “integral consciousness.” With regard to ethics, it provides the tools for a fundamental challenge to society regarding DEI—the integral is also about societal integration and the understanding that we are one human society. The union of consciousness manifests as a societal union.

Although this may have been a goal of a traditional path, today’s yoga practitioners may not necessarily be projecting an image of a future, more conscious human. In the contemporary world, yoga is rarely defined as the basic techne, or true work, of being human. Going back to CLA, the common idea or meaning (“litany”) of yoga and, to a lesser extent, its systems perspective, is often diluted or wedded to Western pop culture. Worldview and myth are rarely considered in popular discourse. If we are to use the wisdom of the tradition first to strengthen the upper-left “I” quadrant so that we can then use the emerging ways of knowing to address the global megacrisis (and wrapped within it the healthcare megacrisis), we first need to get clear about, analyze, and incorporate worldview and mythic understandings of yoga.

When considering the future of yoga and yoga therapy, have we considered what kinds of myths we bring to the table? What kinds of worldviews? What biases are we consciously or unconsciously carrying? What do our dreams and visions tell us? Visions of the future carry values, images, symbols, and beliefs that need to be made conscious and grounded in a theory of change.

We propose a challenge for yoga professionals: Become futurists. Oliver Markley’s 2012 paper “Imaginal Visioning for Prophetic Foresight” provides an example of how yoga practices can directly benefit futures thinking. Markley writes that “[r]ational/analytic methods for futures research, foresight and planning need to be complemented by ‘imaginal’ visioning methods that are based on higher intuition—especially in times involving systemic disruptions and transformative change [as] expected in the next decade and beyond.” It’s interesting that Markley chose the term “prophetic foresight,” because it certainly harkens back to the tradition of the

sage or *rishi* (seer) and how these extraordinary individuals have lived among us since the beginning of history, shining beacons of intuition into the future to help guide humanity forward.

However, if we consider epics from the yoga tradition, such as the Mahabharata and all it represents, we can also understand that change means embracing the struggle transformation requires. There will be opposition that will come from fear and ideological differences to any future vision. However, the yoga tradition gives us the tools to develop the self-control, intuition, and open-heartedness needed to reconcile or creatively work through our differences.

Healthcare Futures

Thinking about healthcare futures can help us conceptualize what yoga futures thinking might look like. When planning for the future, some healthcare organizations employ futures studies methodologies. In the United States, the FORESIGHT Project was launched in October 2018 by the Rippel Foundation and Blue Cross of California along with 15 philanthropic partners; the project has used future studies methodologies to equitably envision and bring about a bold, new future for health and well-being (www.foresightforhealth.org/holistic).

Initially, the FORESIGHT Project scanned the trends, challenges, and opportunities that could affect health and well-being, with feedback and input from 7,500 people across the United States. The project came to the understanding that health is a systemic, complex manifestation of five key factors:

1. economic well-being;
2. inclusive, just communities;
3. holistic, innovative, culturally rooted healthcare;
4. regenerative practices for people and planet; and
5. equitable access to basic needs and supports.

Subsequently a diverse, representative group of more than 100 individuals gathered as stewards of this vision and generated more than 60 proposals, with the goal of implementing them at the community level. Some examples of proposals include

- engaging and entrusting community members to serve as trusted healers/providers and educators in community;
- educating said community members regarding the intertwined nature of mental-physical-emotional whole-person health;
- creating awareness campaigns to change the narrative on what health means and to aim for thriving versus absence of disease;
- educating people on the importance, value, and consequences of engaging in regenerative practice and how to do so; and
- ensuring equitable representation in power/decision-making and power-sharing.

The FORESIGHT Project could be a good place for yoga professionals, advocates, and organizations to engage at the local level. At the same time, the project’s plan challenges perceived ways of

practicing yoga—which are typically oriented toward the individual, a limited systems perspective, and relatively short-term outcomes. Other processes, such as the U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion’s Healthy People 2030, the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Health in All Policies goal, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s One Health program, are opportunities for yoga practitioners to deepen their understanding of how health happens and potentially broaden their engagement, directly or indirectly. By joining with or supporting other organizational efforts to embrace futures complexity, we are empowering the vision of yoga and the systemic wellness it represents.

For some people who have the opportunity to even think about the future, images have become more dystopic. And yet the task of creating a healthier future is essential if we care about the generations to come.

IAYT Futures

The introduction to IAYT’s 2021–2024 Strategic Plan highlights the organization’s goals of continuously improving DEI and global collaboration:

We strive to be a global leader in yoga therapy and work cooperatively with other yoga therapy organizations such as the World Health Organization and the Global Consortium for Yoga Therapy and U.S. organizations such as the Academic Consortium for Integrative Medicine and Health, the Academy of Integrative Health and Medicine, and Integrative Medicine for the Underserved.

Regarding the global megacrisis, futures and complexity thinking, and the example of the FORESIGHT Project, there is potential for IAYT and all of its members to broaden and deepen their work.

It’s estimated that only 10 percent of strategic plans are ever fully implemented.⁵ “Strategic foresight” could provide an actionable integration of strategic planning and futures studies that would enable organizations like IAYT to “embrace change, challenge complexity and provide the tools to meaningfully raise . . . [the] questions that underlie the more visible litany level of an organization.”⁶ IAYT can develop leadership in yoga-integrated futures work, expanding and building effectiveness of its own planning while offering four-quadrant solutions to other organizations and collaboratives. This may require a cultural shift, perhaps, and development of what is called “anticipatory leadership”⁷ in the staff, board, and other volunteers. Five linked “anticipatory literacies”⁷ are recommended for such leadership:

1. awareness (e.g., taking a longer view);
2. authenticity (e.g., being grounded in the yoga tradition);
3. audacity (e.g., boldly revising the scope of yoga application and IAYT’s role);
4. adaptability (e.g., reflexive action learning, including with regard to wild-card events); and

5. action (e.g., resourcing a detailed theory of change as a backcast from the future).

These literacies can support the development of a dynamically useful strategic plan by helping stakeholders envision a preferred future and not just extrapolate from present knowledge and circumstances. They can help us think about how we can create spaces that enable us to examine and consciously unearth default images of the future and to then transform these into the images of the futures we actually want.

We can develop a “backcast” to the present—something like a future remembered. This backcast is often called a “theory of change” and is a roadmap for how to get from where you are now to the future you want; this map is developed by defining a desirable future and then working backward to identify everything needed to connect that future to the present. The roadmap, or plan, is a model, and all models are inherently wrong, but some are useful. The usefulness of the plan depends on it being regularly reviewed and updated through action learning as the future unfolds and the needed changes emerge. Meanwhile, the theory of change must be protected by the organization by identifying and addressing internal and external resistance—because there’s always resistance to change.

One vision may be “Yoga in All Policies,” a reframing of the WHO initiative, Health in All Policies. The vision clarification could be adapted from a 2013 guide for state and local governments promulgated by the U.S. Public Health Institute and the American Public Health Association. A yoga extrapolation could include building yoga-oriented foresight as a societal capacity and how we can achieve a wider spectrum of people engaging in shaping yoga-oriented futures.

Another initiative, Healthy People 2030, could also benefit from yogic wisdom. Perhaps IAYT could put forward a “Healthy Yoga People 2050,” which could be a stepping stone toward a societal shift of promoting dharmic lifestyles and societies. Such a vision would require the support of new kinds of jobs, such a yoga ethicist who could mediate the subtleties of the application of *yamas* and *niyamas* (yogic codes of conduct) for equity-oriented projects. IAYT could restructure and rebrand to offer additional qualifications and develop a new business model based on impact investing and a diversification of memberships beyond yoga therapy schools and individuals. It is possible that IAYT could also operate as a social entrepreneurial organization to bring about a sustained and audacious collective impact.

The idea of health needs reframing and redefining across *all* socioecological systems. As yoga professionals, we have insight into what health means that is perhaps broader and deeper. This includes the link between spirituality and health, a link that was not prioritized in the FORESIGHT reporting. Yoga psychology and cosmology centralize the spiritual, which is the essential causal force of the universe and the essential human orientation. Spiritual growth could be considered the most important measure of health, of human thriving and flourishing.

A model of the spiritual causing mind and mind causing matter fundamentally challenges Western science and therefore represents a challenge to yoga organizations looking for validation while supporting the development of nonmaterialistic scientific frameworks and research. However, there are some signs that these frameworks can evolve: Technology in general is becoming increasingly

more subtle and facilitating increased connectivity and knowledge, intra- and interpersonally. This development reflects a refinement of human consciousness and indicates new frontiers for research (e.g., the subtle body) and research methodologies.

We do see yoga as the techne of being human; it's a worldview perspective. Not all yoga practitioners see yoga as this essential knowledge and as a system for developing core human competencies. However, organizations like IAYT can play a role in informing people how to optimize their humanity physically, psychologically, and spiritually. IAYT can clarify its mission based on the deepest agreed-upon definitions of yoga. Based on this worldview, another vision may be for yoga organizations to represent a social fascia, an essential societal and community infrastructure that supports an optimal lifestyle.

Conclusion

The global megacrisis is accelerating across the socioecological terrain, including the healthcare sector. The scope of the challenge presented requires a commensurate response, from us and for us and for the sake of future generations. Although the core problem has been defined as a crisis of perception, an upper-left-quadrant issue, the solutions need to be applied across all four quadrants. Yoga professionals and organizations can broaden their scope of engagement around health and offer solutions on multiple levels. Effectiveness of engagement may be increased by a coordinated, collaborative response, and an organization like IAYT can potentially lead the way.

The yoga tradition is a powerful resource and vision for health. It is the means and ends of health futures, but it remains somewhat sidelined not only because of the more commercial, narrow definitions of yoga, but also because of how the crisis is defined (by overwhelming and reiterative spools of reductionist data), who has the power to define it (the largest of corporations and their CEOs), and the resultant focus on short-term material gains. Futures tools can help us challenge the business-as-usual trends within and without yoga organizations and networks. Futures studies offers an opportunity to bring the promises of the ancients into the present. Yoga practitioners who embrace futures thinking can be important stewards of a healthier future. **YTT**

References

1. Wilber, K. (1995). *Sex, ecology, spirituality: The spirit of evolution*. Shambhala Publications.
2. Slaughter, R. (1998). Transcending flatland: Implications of Ken Wilber's meta-narrative for futures studies. *Futures*, 30, 519–533.
3. Slaughter, R. (2011). Responding to the global megacrisis. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 16(2), 111–114.
4. Aurobindo, S. (1996). *The synthesis of yoga*. Lotus Light Publications.
5. Burke, R. (2009). From strategic foresight to conversations about alternative and desired futures using scenarios to transform the present. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 13(3), 99–104.
6. Van der Laan, L. (2008). The imperative of strategic foresight to strategic thinking. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 13(1), 21–42.
7. Ratcliffe, J., & Ratcliffe, L. (2015). Anticipatory leadership and strategic foresight: Five “linked literacies.” *Journal of Futures Studies*, 20(1), 1–18.



Kristine Kaoverii Weber, MA, E-RYT 500, C-IAYT (right), has been studying yoga and holistic healing for 30 years, teaching since 1995, and training yoga teachers since 2003. She directs the Subtle Yoga Teacher Training for Behavioral Health Professionals program and is a board member of the Integrative Health Policy Consortium.

Brett Sculthorp, LCSW, LCAS, CPS (left), is a psychotherapist in private practice in Asheville, N.C. He is developing a framework of yoga psychotherapy and contributes to associated program development. Brett also writes articles about population health applications of yoga, informed in part by his work in future studies. He has been practicing yoga for 35 years.



APPLY FOR C-IAYT STATUS TODAY

The C-IAYT credential signifies your high level of education, ethical standards, and professional commitment to yoga therapy.

C-IAYTs also enjoy benefits like reduced rates on liability insurance and access to exclusive IAYT materials to help them get the word out about their services and to educate others—clients, prospective employers, other healthcare providers—on the value of yoga therapy.

TWO ROUTES TO CERTIFICATION

Graduation from an accredited yoga therapy training program

Program graduates: Visit iayt.org. Under Certification, click Apply for C-IAYT. (Apply for certification within 6 months of completing your program to receive \$25 off the certification fee.)

Portfolio Review & Evaluation for well-experienced practitioners

Candidates with significant yoga therapy education and extensive client practice: Visit iayt.org. Under Certification, click Eligibility to review the PR&E requirements. (A discount on the certification fee is available for PR&E applicants from countries identified as low or lower-middle income by the World Bank.)

Be a leader in the international community shaping the future of yoga therapy!