Research on Yoga: Yogic Influence in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

*Avatar: The Last Airbender*, an American animated television show created by Brian Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino, has long been celebrated for its careful incorporation of Asian cultural influences, including ideas surrounding traditional philosophies and practices of yoga. The show is set in a fantasy world divided into four nations, each of which centers around one of the four classical elements: water, earth, fire, and air (which in itself ties back to the tradition of the Vedic sacrifice.) Certain individuals have the power to ‘bend’ or telekinetically manipulate one of these elements, with each bending style drawing inspiration from a variety of traditional martial arts. The Avatar is the only person with the power of all four types of bending, and thus is charged with keeping peace between the four nations. The Avatar is also the bridge to the elusive Spirit World, whose immortal inhabitants hold influence and reverence over the realm of humans. The show follows protagonist Aang, the Avatar and the last remaining of the Air Nomads, a deeply spiritual people. Numerous aspects of the show relate directly to ideas of yoga, from the functionality of the Avatar and Avatar cycle, to Aang’s own spiritual beliefs, and to practices of various benders, warriors, and spiritual practitioners throughout the series.

The premise of the Avatar cycle directly ties to ideas of *brahman* and *atman* and reincarnation, which lie at the root of traditional yogic practice. The spirit of the Avatar is part of the fundamental composition of the universe – its *brahman* – separate from any one individual, yet the Avatar spirit also manifests in the form of an *atman*, a particular human soul. The cycle of reincarnation stretches back thousands of years. Each time an Avatar dies, a new one is born into the next nation in the cycle. The reincarnation cycle of the Avatar aligns with yogic ideas of *samsara,* the practice of rebirth and accumulation of *karma* that supersedes the life of the body. Responsibilities of the Avatar to maintain peace and balance in the world are ever-present, regardless of what individual possesses the Avatar spirit at any given moment. Thus, one of the primary premises of this show and fictional universe aligns closely with one of the base worldviews of traditional yoga.

*Avatar* also portrays yogic ideas and practices in the way Aang interacts with the world around him, and with his Avatar spirit in particular. Aang is an Air Nomad, a culture rooted in spirituality and harmony with nature and the Spirit World alike. The Air Nomads often practiced meditation as a means of connecting with spirits or other elements of *brahman* – aspects of the universe outside of themselves. They also practiced meditation to detach themselves from the physical universe so that their spirits could be free, as freedom was one of the highest values of the Air Nation. This process is akin to the yogic ideal of *moksha*, freedom from attachments or burdens of the physical world (*karma*). Deep meditation can even allow individuals to cross over into the Spirit World. *Avatar* portrays a dualist separation between the physical body and the spiritual soul, providing a decisive conclusion to the problem of mind and body. The spirit is seen as entirely separate, able to journey across time and space while the physical body remains rooted, limited in its ability and mobility.

Many times throughout the series, Aang practices yogic meditation to gain access to the Spirit World, communicate and collaborate with his past lives (previous incarnations of the Avatar spirit), and even simply to clear his head and sort through his chosen course of action. For instance, in the episode *The Siege of the North Part 1*, when Aang is trying to find a way to protect the Northern Water Tribe civilization from a Fire Nation invasion fleet, he meditates in the tribe’s Spirit Oasis, sitting in a pose akin to yoga’s lotus position with his knuckles pressed together in front of his chest. His companion Katara describes: “He’s meditating, trying to cross over into the Spirit World. It takes all his concentration,” explaining to the layman viewer both the purpose behind the meditation and the difficulty of it, as many who are experienced with yoga are familiar with. Aang manages his crossover by concentrating on two koi fish (who audiences learn later are spirits themselves) circling each other in the pond before him. This focal point that allows for deep meditation and concentration is reminiscent of the use of *om* in the Vedic Sacrifice and other yogic meditational practices.

Aang also meditates to connect with his past lives and use their wisdom and experiences to inform his own decisions. For instance, in the episode *Sozin’s Comet Part 2: The Old Masters*, before his final battle with the tyrannical Fire Lord Ozai, Aang struggles when his duty to protect the world and defeat such a dictator comes into conflict with his strictly nonviolent upbringing and beliefs. Aang meditates by closing his eyes and breathing deeply from his lotus position, and one by one his past lives appear to converse with him. The pinnacle exchance is with Avatar Yangchen, the most recent Air Nomad Avatar before Aang himself. Yangchen states: “Many great and wise Air Nomads have detached themselves and achieved spiritual enlightenment. But the Avatar can never do it. Because your sole duty is to the world. Here is my wisdom for you. Selfless duty requires you to sacrifice your own spiritual needs and do whatever it takes to protect the world.” This conversation with Yangchen relates to yogic ideas in several ways. Firstly, it demonstrates the use of meditation and breathing practices to access spiritual powers simultaneously within Aang and outside of him within the universe at large. Yangchen’s quotation also relates to concepts of yoga as she references detachment from the material world in order to obtain spiritual enlightenment – the ultimate goal of yoga according to Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*. This scene also reestablishes an idea present throughout the series, of meditation and yogic practice as a tool to help prepare oneself for battle, as Yangchen advises that Aang must carry out his duty despite his own personal reservations. This scene demonstrates how yogic ideals and practices intermingle throughout *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

Yogic meditation and practice is also a part of everyday life in *Avatar*, particularly for Aang. Yoga helps Aang to unlock various supernatural powers as Patanjali suggests, such as in the episode *Bitter Work*, when Aang is shown seated in his meditative lotus position and reciting the syllable *om* after a difficult day of struggling to learn earthbending. Yoga is used as a stress-relieving practice, as in the episode *Nightmares and Daydreams*, when in the days leading up to Aang and his allies’ attempted invasion of the Fire Nation capital, he and Katara practice yoga in the extreme heat of a natural hot spring. And before significant battles and confrontations, Aang often meditates to prepare himself – just as warriors in ancient India used yogic practices to steel themselves for battle, yoking their courage to carry out their essential duties.

Even so, meditation provides abilities beyond just the mental fortitude that battle demands. Yoga and meditation allow Aang to unlock supernatural powers of an incredible scale even for this universe, as when he obtains control of the Avatar State. The Avatar State is a defense mechanism of the Avatar spirit. As Aang’s predecessor Avatar Roku describes in the episode *The Avatar State*: “The Avatar State… is designed to empower you with the skills and knowledge of all the past Avatars. The glow (of his eyes) is the combination of all your past lives focusing their energy through your body.” This again incorporates concepts of reincarnation and external power within the *brahman* focused through the individual *atman*. Aang learns to control the awesome and destructive power of the Avatar State through yogic practices and the guide of a spiritual guru.

The episode *The Guru* is critical in portraying *Avatar*’s incorporation of yogic ideas. In this episode, Aang travels to meet an elderly guru who was once a spiritual brother of his people to learn to unlock the power of the Avatar State. “You must gain balance within yourself before can bring balance to the world,” Guru Pathik tells Aang. In Sanskrit, the word *pathik* means ‘traveler’ or ‘guide,’ both of which fittingly describe the character. Guru Pathik appears visually similar to a traditional Indian yogic guru, with brown skin, loose, simple clothes, and a long, untrimmed beard. Guru Pathik describes the concept of *chakras* to Aang, explaining them as swirling pools of energy within the body, each of which has a specific purpose, and can get clogged by specific types of emotional muck. The concept of *chakras* and opening *chakras* is distinctly connected to yogic and tantric history and tradition. By opening the paths between the *chakras*, Aang can find internal balance and thus mastery of the Avatar State.

Guru Pathik walks Aang through the process of opening the *chakras* one by one, describing where each is located in the body, what purpose it serves, and what it is blocked by: for instance, the first that Aang takes on is the earth *chakra*, located at the base of the spine, which deals with survival and is blocked by fear. The two sit in various natural locations reminiscent of each *chakra*, such as a wide earthen cave for the earth *chakra*, or behind a waterfall for the water *chakra*, showing how connections with the external world can directly impact yogic or meditative practices, and also demonstrating how retreat from society is a part of many yogic spiritual journeys. Both take on lotus positions as Guru Pathik guides Aang through a meditation on each *chakra* in turn as he experiences visions of each of their purposes and blockages and works through them. Guru Pathik serves Aang as a guru would in most yogic traditions: a spiritual guide to aid in a difficult process of awakening and understanding.

Aang’s final step on his journey to mastering the Avatar State is opening the thought *chakra* at the crown of the head. It deals with pure cosmic energy, and is blocked by earthly attachment. Opening this *chakra* appears quite similar to the yogic process of achieving *moksha*. Aang must meditate on what attaches him to the world, then release himself from all of these attachments to allow the pure cosmic energy to flow in from the universe. In this way, the final stage to mastering the Avatar State is reminiscent of the process of achieving enlightenment. Once an individual reaches a state of *moksha*, they gain an awareness and control over the world around them, just as Aang gains access to the powers of the Avatar State. Ultimately, meditation becomes Aang’s most powerful weapon against his enemies. Thus, tantric and yogic practices become skills of empowerment and ascension as spirituality is made practical and tangible.

Yogic practices are present throughout *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. The very foundations of the world, from its concentration on the four classical elements to the functionality of the Avatar cycle of reincarnation parallel concepts fundamental to the yogic tradition. Characters also employ yogic practices such as a focus on spirituality and meditation to many of the same effects as traditional yoga, such as to connect with spirits or other supernatural forces, to steel themselves to perform their duty in battle, and to access abilities beyond those which are typical of humankind. Additionally, *Avatar* explicitly discusses concepts traditional to yoga, such as the spiritual detachment from the body, or ideas of gurus and *chakras*. *Avatar* integrates yogic ideas throughout its complex worldbuilding to portray a fantasy realm grounded in the cultures of Asia and specifically India.