

**Existential liminality and ethical reconstruction in probationary suicidality:
A philosophical reading through Mircea Eliade and Aṣṭāṅga Yoga****Carmen-Valeria Baias¹ & Lukáš Arthur Švihura²****Abstract**

Suicide among individuals under probation supervision constitutes a significant concern within public health and criminal justice systems, owing to rates that consistently exceed those observed in the general population. Conventional approaches to suicide prevention primarily emphasise clinical interventions, psychological risk assessments, and multi-agency collaboration. In contrast, an emerging body of literature in philosophical and contemplative traditions, particularly that concerning Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, offers complementary methodologies grounded in ethical self-cultivation, embodied awareness, and transformative introspection. The present article is a theoretical and philosophical inquiry. It does not aim to provide empirical validation but to develop a conceptual framework that reinterprets suicidality in probation contexts through a cross-cultural philosophical lens. The analysis further draws on established psychological models of suicide, including Shneidman's *Psychache model*, Joiner's *Interpersonal Theory*, Williams' *Cry of Pain model*, and O'Connor's *Integrated Motivational-Volitional model*, to examine how the existential, ethical, and symbolic dimensions of suicidality may enrich and extend clinical understandings of suicide risk. The paper investigates the potential contributions of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga philosophy and ethics to suicide prevention in probation contexts, arguing that its integration of moral reflection and somatic mindfulness may promote psychological resilience, autonomy, and sustainable reintegration into the fabric of society. In doing so, the discussion draws upon Mircea Eliade's philosophy of religion to frame probation not simply as a legal condition, but as a modern instance of *existential liminality*, in which symbolic reintegration becomes essential to survival. The paper also approaches Aṣṭāṅga Yoga through the perspective of pragmatist philosophy, with particular emphasis on practical somaesthetics as developed by Richard Shusterman.

Keywords: existential liminality, Mircea Eliade, Ashtanga Yoga, Yoga Ethics, suicide prevention, Richard Shusterman, somaesthetics

Introduction

In recent years, the imperative to develop effective suicide prevention strategies within probation systems has intensified. Individuals undergoing probation face distinct psychosocial stressors as they attempt to reintegrate into society following penal supervision. Empirical data indicate a markedly increased risk of suicide among probationers, particularly during pivotal transitional periods such as the initiation of supervision, the conclusion of a sentence, and intervals awaiting judicial decisions (Baias, 2023). While prevailing models of suicide prevention within probation systems tend to prioritise psychological diagnostics and therapeutic intervention, they frequently remain insufficiently attentive to the more intricate existential, ethical, and identity-related disruptions experienced by individuals under supervision. The present article adopts a theoretical and philosophical orientation, and does not seek to offer empirical validation; rather, it develops a conceptual framework through which suicidality in probationary contexts may be reinterpreted from a cross-cultural philosophical perspective. Within this framework, probation is understood as a liminal and inherently destabilising condition, one that engenders heightened emotional vulnerability, social marginalisation, and a perceived erosion of autonomy, factors that are closely implicated in the emergence of suicidal ideation and behaviour. This transitional state may be fruitfully interpreted through Eliade's theory of initiation, which he defines as a symbolic death followed by rebirth into a renewed existential order (Eliade, 1958, pp. 5–6). Without meaningful rites of passage, modern individuals remain in a suspended state, trapped in history and unable to locate a 'centre' from which renewal might proceed (Eliade, 1954, pp. 153–156). In the context of probation, the absence of such symbolic mediations can intensify the psychological rupture. As Eliade

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observes, modern man's tragedy is that he no longer knows how to suffer; he no longer knows the meaning of initiation (Eliade, 1959, pp. 211–212). The symbol no longer heals, transforms, or connects. It merely floats in psychological space, detached from action or existential insight. It is precisely this unprocessed trial that Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, as a ritualized structure of transformation, seeks to contain and reframe. Viewed through this interpretive lens, the crises encountered by individuals on probation may be conceptualised not merely as psychological disturbances, but as ontological and philosophical ruptures, manifestations of disrupted meaning, fractured identity, and moral disorientation. Consequently, these conditions warrant responses that are not solely clinical but philosophically grounded in nature. Nowadays, there are many possibilities for the practical application of philosophical knowledge, including philosophical counselling. However, we need to consider that prevalent Western philosophical approaches to practical issues prioritise intellectual strategies. To properly address such complex issues experienced by probationers, a more holistic approach is needed. Such an approach should incorporate not only intellectual and psychological, but also somatic aspects of philosophical and ethical practice. Shusterman has persistently emphasised that Westerners are heirs of the philosophical and intellectual tradition in which “given the pervasive physical/spiritual opposition, the body is essentially omitted in our conception of humanistic studies” (Shusterman, 2012, p. 26). As he writes, “part of the reason for this is its gross neglect by modern Western philosophy with its logocentrism and linguocentrism” (Shusterman, 2000, p. 152). Therefore, we need to seek a more holistic philosophical approach beyond Western philosophy. One such approach that appears effective in supporting probationers through existential crises is found in the system of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga.

Recent European research underscores the limitations of prevailing therapeutic paradigms when they fail to address deep-seated existential anguish, a perceived absence of meaning, and diminished self-worth (Baías, 2023). In contrast, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, understood not as a mere sequence of physical postures but as a comprehensive philosophical and meditative system, proposes a complementary framework for psychological integration. Rooted in the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga offers a structured path of ethical observance, self-discipline, and contemplative practice oriented toward internal balance and purposeful living. Its cosmological structure can also be understood, in Eliadean terms, as a symbolic map that guides the individual from disorientation toward reintegration, an *itinerarium mentis* from the profane world of despair into a sacred order of meaning (Eliade, 1954). Accordingly, the present study investigates the philosophical and practical dimensions of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga as potential resources in justice-based suicide prevention, the potential for yoga philosophy to enhance the therapeutic milieu by fostering ethical agency, embodied self-awareness, and enduring personal growth.

The risk of suicide within probation systems

The psychological burden borne by individuals on probation differs significantly from that experienced in custodial settings. While prisons enforce structure and constant surveillance, probation imposes a more ambiguous form of social control, one that combines administrative surveillance with personal accountability in an often unstructured social environment. Probationers are frequently exposed to uncertainty, social stigma, and weakened relational networks (Aebi et al., 2023; Baías, 2023). Although originally conceived as a rehabilitative alternative to incarceration, probation may inadvertently exacerbate psychological vulnerability due to its structural inconsistencies and social ambiguities. These pressures are not merely logistical but strike at the heart of personal identity, moral self-perception, and one's perceived capacity for reintegration.

Baías (2023) identifies three periods of heightened suicide risk among probation clients: the initiation of supervision, the interstice preceding sentencing, and the period following the formal conclusion of probation. Each of these intervals corresponds to a rupture in perceived

structure and agency. Initial engagement with probation is often marked by shame, social withdrawal, and a collapse of self-efficacy. Conversely, the end of a probation term, typically anticipated as a moment of liberation, can produce acute anxiety due to the loss of external support and routine. These psychological states align with elements identified by Joiner (2005) in his Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, particularly the constructs of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. Likewise, O'Connor's (2011) Integrated Motivational-Volitional (IMV) model underscores the impact of perceived entrapment, helplessness, and attenuated agency. Both frameworks converge in suggesting that suicide risk among probationers is deeply rooted in social alienation and internalised worthlessness, psychological conditions that clinical assessments alone may inadequately address. Yet these are not merely clinical states; they may be interpreted as symptoms of what Eliade calls profane disorientation, the loss of one's *axis mundi*, or symbolic centre (Eliade, 1959, pp. 20–21). In traditional societies, periods of rupture were ritually contained through myths, symbols, and ascetic trials that reoriented individuals toward the sacred meaning. The failure to ritualise psychological suffering in modern contexts leads to a crisis in which pain becomes arbitrary and meaningless. In this context, suicide appears not as a moral failure, but as a desperate attempt to exit a world stripped of coherence.

While these models offer robust clinical insight, they also raise important philosophical questions: How does one endure profound social uncertainty, existential disorientation, and systemic exclusion? It is in this space of moral and ontological distress that Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, understood through its ethical and contemplative dimensions, becomes particularly salient. Yoga does not deny the reality of pain; rather, it seeks to transmute suffering through disciplined engagement with thought, action, and awareness. Patañjali's foundational dictum, "*Yoga is the cessation of movements in the consciousness*" (Iyengar, 2002, p. 50) (*yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ*), speaks directly to the affective and cognitive instability that characterises the probation experience. As such, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga provides not only techniques but a structured worldview through which psychological fragmentation may be reinterpreted as the ground for transformation. In Eliade's terms, it facilitates *reactualization*, a ritual re-entry into meaningful time and symbolic participation in an order greater than the fractured self (Eliade, 1954, p. 72). The practice of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga does not offer an externalised system of intellectual meaning, as found in metaphysics or religion; rather, this system is generated internally and experienced directly from the centre of the practitioners themselves. The *axis mundi* of the ordered world can gradually be discovered through the practice of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, in the place where it always resides, hidden beneath the existential burden, within the practitioner himself.

Aṣṭāṅga Yoga as a philosophical framework for existential rehabilitation

The philosophical underpinnings of yoga extend well beyond its popularized image as a system of postural exercise. Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, articulated in the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali, comprises eight interconnected limbs (*aṣṭāṅga mārga*), each designed to cultivate ethical clarity, embodied presence, cognitive stillness, and spiritual orientation. As Švihura (2023) argues, this system may be understood as a classical form of *ars vivendi*, or "art of living," that aims at inner transformation through structured discipline. Foucault, building on the research of Hadot (1999), reminded academic philosophers that philosophy should be understood as an art of living, as it was in its early stages in antiquity. As he writes, "the art of life or art of existence which we know, from Plato, and especially in the post-Platonic movements, becomes the fundamental definition of philosophy" (Foucault, 2005, p. 86). Shusterman, however, emphasised the importance of viewing "the ancient idea of philosophy as an embodied way of life rather than a mere discursive field of abstract theory" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 3). The system of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga can be considered a tool of embodied philosophy, not merely a way of thinking, but a comprehensive way of life. Although not concerned with suicidality per se,

Švihura's (2023) contribution highlights how Aṣṭāṅga Yoga provides a philosophical scaffold for existential reconstruction, particularly relevant for individuals facing disruption of one's morals and of oneself.

The first two limbs, yama (ethical restraints) and niyama (personal observances), offer a framework for moral realignment and self-governance. Values such as ahimsā (non-violence), satya (truthfulness), santoṣa (contentment), and tapaḥ (discipline) are more than virtues; they are habituated practices that structure emotional regulation and interpersonal integrity. In suicide prevention, these ethical foundations resemble protective mechanisms such as improved impulse control, enhanced moral reasoning, and a reconfiguration of self-concept. They may also be interpreted, in Eliade's terms, as symbolic acts of *ritual purification*, removing the residues of chaos and moral disintegration to prepare the subject for re-entry into a sacred or meaningful order (Eliade, 1958, p. 52).

One might assume that the first two limbs of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga are merely rules of conduct, analogous to the ethical principles found in any other philosophies or religions. However, this view would be overly reductive. Yamas and niyamas are not analogous to either Kantian imperatives or Christian Commandments. Yogic ethical principles are neither grounded in pure practical Reason nor in religious belief, meaning they are not externally imposed on the practitioner. As part of the integral system of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, where each limb is deeply interconnected, we must view them as expressions of embodied ethics, naturally (and often unconsciously) incorporated into the practitioner through systematic yogic practice. As such, they can ethically reintegrate probationers not through intellectual or religious persuasion, but through first-hand bodily experience and continual somatic habituation. Shusterman emphasises that our moral attitudes are generally shaped by training and constant somatic habituation within specific environments. This recognition allows us to see that they can be improved or changed through the same means i.e., training and habituation, in which the body plays a crucial role, although "modern philosophical ethics and political theory have not given it enough attention" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 130). Somatic habituation of ethics may be especially practical in contexts where individuals tend to resist ethical principles (Boccio, 2004, pp. 45–46), a tendency that may also apply to probationers. Conversely, when these ethical principles are somatically inscribed, they should meaningfully influence how individuals engage ethically not only with themselves but also with the external world, since "the body is the essential medium or tool through which they are transmitted, inscribed, and preserved in society. Ethical codes are mere abstractions until they are given life through incorporation into bodily dispositions and action" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 31). This ethical foundation also helps us better understand the philosophical significance of the other limbs in the Aṣṭāṅga system.

The subsequent limbs, i.e., āsana (posture) and prāṇāyāma (breath control), address the body not as a passive vessel but as an instrument of existential grounding. Āsana fosters stability and resilience through postural endurance, while prāṇāyāma offers neurophysiological regulation through breath control. These practices recalibrate the autonomic nervous system, thereby mitigating anxiety and impulsivity, recognised correlates of suicide risk in forensic and community mental health contexts. Beyond their physiological effects, they may be understood as contributing to the ritualisation of crisis: the reorientation of chaotic suffering into patterned, embodied forms through which the self learns not simply to endure but to *restructure* throughout "awakening" (Eliade, 1958, p. 29).

Of particular relevance to probationers are the interior limbs, pratyāhāra (withdrawal of the senses), dhāraṇā (concentration), and dhyāna (meditation). These practices foster detachment from cognitive reactivity and enable a more spacious, observing relation to one's thoughts and emotions. In clinical terms, they facilitate metacognitive awareness; in philosophical terms, they initiate a process of deconstruction and reassembly of the self. This is crucial for individuals who experience their histories as sources of shame or narrative incoherence.

Through svādhyāya (self-study), practitioners are invited to reconstruct their autobiographical identities not as fixed records of failure, but as dynamic sites of inquiry, reflection, and ethical renewal. The concept of self-study is inherent in every major philosophical tradition. It has a long history in European philosophy, beginning with Socrates’s application of the famous Delphic imperative Gnōthi Seauton (“Know Thyself”). However, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga approaches it differently, recognising that svādhyāya can also be practised somatically, unlike the European tradition, which emphasises a more intellectualistic approach. Iyengar interprets one of Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* on svādhyāya as follows: “Though consciousness exists in the body, it needs to be tapped through the practice of āsana and prāṇāyāma, in which the intelligence acts as a bridge to connect awareness of the body with the core and vice versa. This connecting intelligence alone brings harmony of body, mind and soul, and intimacy with the Supreme Soul (*Iṣṭadevatā*)” (Iyengar, 2002, p. 156).

Although the above conclusion may appear metaphysical or even mystical, it can be interpreted in a more secular manner. What is crucial in this context is that the yoga practitioner begins to uncover—experientially, through the practice of āsanas and prāṇāyāma—deeper aspects of their identity not immediately shaped by narratives imposed or adopted through prior life experiences. The experiential dimension of svādhyāya is essential here, as it contrasts with discursive self-interpretation, which is often mistakenly regarded as definitive self-knowledge, and may contribute to the profound suffering experienced by probationers. Vivekananda (2024b, p. 201) also highlights the value of yogic svādhyāya, noting that through continuous practice, it “will take away all our misery”. Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, therefore, can serve as a valuable philosophical tool for probationers seeking to overcome harmful self-narratives. Somatic self-study, or self-knowingness, thus, “work toward improved awareness of our feelings, thus providing greater insight into both our passing moods and lasting attitudes” (Shusterman, 2000, p. 139).

This process finds theoretical resonance in the concept of *mythic return*. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954) and in *The Sacred and The Profane* (1959), Eliade argues that traditional societies used myth and ritual to annul profane time and “return” to an archetypal moment of beginning. To become real, he says, one must imitate the gods, in an attempt above all to annul or transcend the human condition (Eliade, 1954, p. 35; 1959, p. 202). Aṣṭāṅga Yoga performs a similar function: each ethical decision, breath, and meditative gesture recapitulates the archetype of self-mastery and liberation. The practitioner does not merely live in psychological time; they live in *ritual time*, which restores meaning and direction to fractured experience. For individuals navigating the moral voids of probation and the psychological burden of suicide risk, this shift from fragmented chronology to sacred rhythm offers a renewed orientation in being.

Finally, samādhi, the culminating limb, represents not an endpoint but a horizon of integration. It refers to the state of meditative absorption in which the dualities of self and world are transcended. While rare and aspirational, the movement toward samādhi provides an ontological reorientation in which the fragmented self is gradually reconstituted through conscious practice. For probationers confronting despair and dispossession, this offers not escapism, but a structured mode of reinhabiting existence, which Eliade calls “cosmicization” namely the *reintegration into the totality of being* (Eliade, 1958, pp. 96–97). The self that was once ruptured by moral injury and societal rejection now re-emerges as a participant in a cosmic, ethical, and embodied order.

The fact that samādhi is considered the final “stage” of the Aṣṭāṅga Yoga system, despite the difficulty of treating the limbs as distinct “stages,” given their deep interrelation and overlapping characteristics, along with often mystical descriptions, leads to the assumption that it is something mysterious and nearly unattainable. It is said to be rare, primarily because the

human mind and body are not sufficiently trained to attain this state of dissolution of dualities. However, we should not assume that one must become a monk to attain samādhi.

Since the experience of samādhi can support experiential reintegration into the realm of Being, it is important to note that the most basic and ever-present tool available to probationers, i.e., their body, can be used to approach it. Yogic somatic “practices aim at the holistic transformation of the subject, in which the dimensions of aesthetic, moral, and spiritual improvement are so intimately intertwined that they cannot effectively be separated” (Shusterman, 2008, p. 44). What follows may surprise some: one of the greatest yogic mystics of the late 19th century, Vivekananda (2024b, p. 273), writes that “Samadhi is the property of every human being – nay, every animal”. Yogic bodily practice plays a crucial role in achieving this goal and can therefore be applied in the context of suicide prevention among probationers, as it is both experiential and habitual. Iyengar (2002, pp. 178–179) notes that even most yoga practitioners mistakenly regard āsanas (yogic postures) as primarily physical activity. However, according to him, they contain profound spiritual practice that can lead to samādhi through samyama – the interconnection of the last three limbs of yoga – dhāraṇā, dhyāna, and samādhi. “In *āsana*, our initial commitment or passion lifts itself, through concentration, to the level of total absorption” (Iyengar, 2002, p. 179) – which is samādhi.

Using Eliade’s terminology, i.e., the cosmicization of the practitioner, his reintegration in the totality of Being could be achievable even through his most basic *organon*: the body. This state is often referred to as *cosmic consciousness*, as Bucke (1905, p. 2) defines it as “a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of life and the order of the universe”. What may initially seem distant and mystical here actually intersects with a profound layer of our philosophical anthropology. *Cosmic consciousness*, experienced as reintegration in the order of the Being, World, Cosmos, or any other transcendental reality, is not a radically external expansion of consciousness, but rather something that already lies deep within each of us. The seemingly lost order and meaning associated with it is, therefore, much closer to probationers than they might ever imagine. Moreover, it is accessible through practice with their own body.

Having established the philosophical structure and existential aims of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, particularly its relevance to psychological stabilisation and ethical rehabilitation, the next stage of this inquiry examines how these yogic principles may concretely interact with dominant theoretical models of suicide in probation. Each model, whether it emphasises emotional pain, social disconnection, perceived entrapment, or cognitive defeat, maps a specific terrain of psychological vulnerability. Yet these vulnerabilities, when interpreted through the lens of Eliade’s religious thought, appear not as isolated psychological mechanisms but as ruptures in symbolic order. In this respect, both Eliade and the *Yoga Sūtras* converge in viewing human suffering as a threshold phenomenon, i.e., a passage through disorientation that can either culminate in collapse or be transformed into a site of renewal through ritual structure and meaning-making. What follows, then, is a model-by-model synthesis, in which the components of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga are mobilised not as abstract ideals, but as applied philosophical interventions, each corresponding to the distinct patterns of distress identified within contemporary suicidology. Through this lens, yoga is not merely a complementary tool for clinical prevention, but a symbolic and ethical path through psychic dissolution, reconstituting the individual within a sacred topology of resilience.

Yoga and the sacred in the psychology of suicide – A model-based analysis

Rather than approaching psychological models and philosophical traditions as distinct or competing explanatory registers, the present analysis considers them as complementary modes of interpreting a deeper crisis of human existence. Shneidman’s Psychache model, Joiner’s Interpersonal Theory, Williams’ Cry of Pain model, and O’Connor’s Integrated Motivational-Volitional model identify specific psychological pathways through which suicidal ideation may

emerge, including unbearable emotional pain, thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, defeat, entrapment, and the transition from ideation to action. Interpreted through an Eliadean lens, these states may also be understood as expressions of symbolic dislocation, existential liminality, and the loss of meaningful orientation. In this context, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga is approached not merely as a set of contemplative or somatic practices, but as a structured ethical and ritual framework through which psychological fragmentation may be reinterpreted, contained, and potentially transformed.

Shneidman's Psychache model, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, and the loss of sacred structure in Eliade's thought

Edwin Shneidman's psychological theory of suicide, grounded in the concept of *psychache*, reorients the discourse on suicidality away from categorical psychiatric diagnoses and toward the subjective experience of intolerable emotional pain. According to Shneidman, suicide is not primarily the product of mental illness but the culmination of unresolved psychological suffering, generated by the chronic frustration of deeply human needs such as love, dignity, control, understanding, and existential meaning (Shneidman, 1993). These unmet needs create a condition in which the self becomes fragmented, relationally disconnected, and affectively overwhelmed. Suicide, in this model, emerges not from pathology alone but from a perceived collapse of inner coherence and symbolic integration, an experience of being unable to continue *as one is*.

This depiction closely echoes Mircea Eliade's view of modern existential suffering. In *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), Eliade argues that contemporary individuals live in a desacralized world, one in which symbolic structures for integrating suffering have vanished. Without access to sacred time, archetypes, or ritualised renewal, suffering becomes chaotic and meaningless. For Eliade, this condition results in a subject who is no longer able to transform pain into passage, nor disorder into meaning (Eliade, 1959, pp. 210–212). What Shneidman calls *psychache*, may be interpreted, through Eliade, as the existential distress of the desacralized self: suffering no longer contained within symbolic frameworks, no longer redeemed by myth, ritual, or sacred narrative. From this combined perspective, suicide becomes not merely a mental health crisis but a ritual failure, the absence of any structure capable of metabolising pain into transformation. The individual is trapped in profane time, alienated from symbolic coordinates, and unable to pass through suffering into renewal. In this sense, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga offers more than somatic tools or stress relief; it offers a sacred grammar of reintegration that responds directly to the fragmented condition described by both Shneidman and Eliade.

The ethical and philosophical structure of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga offers a direct and integrative response to the internal conditions that constitute psychache. The first two limbs, yama (social ethics) and niyama (personal observances), are not mere behavioural codes but philosophical practices of existential alignment, designed to restore coherence between the individual, others, and the cosmos. Practising ahimsā (nonviolence) and satya (truthfulness) cultivates self-compassion and authenticity, countering the internal hostility and guilt often central to suicidal despair. Similarly, santoṣa (contentment) and svādhyāya (self-study) reframe the self not as broken or unworthy, but as a being in process, capable of reflection, growth, and integration. In Eliadean terms, these observances constitute a re-entry into sacred order, anchoring the self in ritualised, archetypal patterns that give moral shape to suffering. Beyond ethical reorientation, the aesthetic and somatic dimensions of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, realized through āsana (physical postures) and prāṇāyāma (breath regulation), provide embodied techniques for interrupting the downward spiral of emotional collapse. Āsana draws awareness back into the body, dissolving excessive cognitive identification and reestablishing presence. It becomes, in Eliade's terms, a reenactment of *cosmic stillness*, – a transformation of human temporality into archetypal presence, i.e., the sacred stability of archetypal forms (Eliade, 1958, pp. 4–6, 12).

The practice of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga thus appears useful in the process of defragmenting the Self, offering tools for revealing inner coherence and symbolic reintegration into a world where the internal world of the practitioner and the external world of “the Others” are inseparable, though initially perceived as opposites. The above example of yogic ethics illustrates how the practitioner “should” behave toward others and the Self. What is distinctive about Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, however, is that even the yamas, understood as social ethics, are incorporated through first-hand experience. Consider yamas like ahimsā or satya. We might tell someone not to behave violently or lie to others, expecting them to intellectually grasp the commandment and its necessity. However, the reasoning faculty is highly flexible and often responsible for the emergence of ethical dilemmas. Unless one inhabits a purely Kantian intelligible world, one may still find reasons to justify violence or deception in certain situations. *Somaticizing* or *bodily incorporating* ethical principles into practice is something altogether different. A yoga practitioner, through the practice of āsanās, learns to cultivate awareness and avoid reinforcing pain or suffering by applying ahimsā within the body. Satya is a closely related principle, as the practitioner must be aware of sensations that may cause pain or suffering. It is a subtle mechanism for learning to be truthful about one’s situation, through mindfulness, recognition of suffering, and the application of techniques that prevent its intensification. This somatic practice, realised through the limbs of āsanās and prāṇāyāma, integrates yogic ethics into the practitioner’s life in a subtle yet effective manner. By somaticizing and habituating principles such as ahimsā or satya, the practitioner holistically—not merely through reason or intellect—understands, and more importantly, experiences why non-violence and truthfulness are essential, and how violating them can lead to suffering. The practitioner also becomes accustomed to responding to these principles appropriately.

What a practitioner incorporates can also be reflected in how they conduct themselves toward the external world and others, ultimately fostering a sense of connection and belonging to the whole. This may be considered a meaningful aim of yoga practice for probationers. It is also why renowned yoga teachers emphasize the importance of orienting yoga practice from the body toward what we may call the soul – from grosser forms of existence to subtler realms: “In this way, asanas help to transform an individual by bringing him or her away from the awareness of the body toward the consciousness of the soul” (Iyengar, 2008, p. 48). The process of ethical reintegration and overcoming self-fragmentation – beginning with bodily practices – reverses the approach found in the Western intellectual tradition (whether philosophical or psychological), where the preferred movement is from the soul to the body, which is to be mastered by the soul. While this conclusion may be valid, it remains *a conclusion*, and thus, the process of transformation should not begin from the end. Vivekananda highlighted the limitations of this intellectualistic approach in his text on pratyāhāra (withdrawal from the senses): “There is hardly a child, born in any country in the world, who has not been told, “Do not steal”, “Do not tell a lie”, but nobody tells the child how he can help doing them. Talking will not help him. Why should he not become a thief? We do not teach him how not to steal; we simply tell him, “Do not steal”. Only when we teach him to control his mind do we really help him” (Vivekananda, 2004b, pp. 252–253). Moreover, this can most fundamentally be achieved at the bodily level. The practitioner should begin to control the mind through bodily practice, not the other way around.

This may be understood as a process of yogic reintegration with the external world through the internal world, and simultaneously, as a means of defragmenting the Self. “The union results in a pure and perfect state of consciousness in which the feeling of ‘I’ simply does not exist. Prior to this union is the union of the body with the mind, and the mind with the self” (Iyengar, 2008, p. 46). Re-establishing connection with others and the world can be achieved by attaining a state of consciousness free from the sense of “I”, which refers to the experience of being fully

present in the moment – temporarily setting aside the ego – which can lead to a sense of belonging to the whole.

Aṣṭāṅga Yoga practices are tools for achieving this goal of union (yoga), which can also arise spontaneously, particularly in moments of deep immersion, such as reading an engaging book, gardening, or any other personally absorbing activity. However, the practice of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga is valuable in that it cultivates this behaviour in a nuanced way, making the sense of unity with the whole and the Self a habitual experience. This is precisely what is needed in the case of probationers who contemplate suicide due to *psychache*. Aṣṭāṅga Yoga can be therefore considered a “higher somaesthetic form”, which, according to Shusterman (2008, p. 44), “make pleasure the essential by-product of an ascetic, yet aesthetic, quest for something better than one’s current self, [...] so that one can attain still greater powers and joys potentially within us – a higher self, perhaps even a divine spirit or Oversoul”. This is precisely what is needed: The pleasure of a *non-discursive experience* in which the individual feels as an integral part of the Being, belonging to it and relating to everything and everyone. That the individual is whole within the Whole.

This process can be helpful in overcoming pain through liberation. “To ‘free oneself’ is equivalent to forcing oneself onto another plane of existence, to appropriating another mode of being transcending the human condition. [...] liberation cannot occur if one is not first “detached” from the world, if one has not begun by withdrawing from the cosmic circuit” (Eliade, 1958, pp. 4–6).

Yet this universal suffering does not lead to a philosophy of pessimism. No traditional Indian philosophy³ or gnosis falls into despair. On the contrary, the revelation of “pain” as the law of existence can be regarded as the condition *sine qua non* for emancipation. Intrinsically, then, this universal suffering has a positive, stimulating value. It perpetually reminds the sage and the ascetic that but one way remains for him to attain freedom and bliss – withdrawal from the world, detachment from possessions and ambitions, radical isolation. Man, moreover, is not alone in suffering; pain is a cosmic necessity, an ontological modality to which every ‘form’ that manifests itself as such is condemned. Whether one be a god or a tiny insect, the mere fact of existing in time, of having duration, implies pain. Unlike the gods and other living beings, man possesses the capability of passing beyond his condition and thus abolishing suffering, the certainty that there is a way to end suffering—a certainty shared by all Indian philosophies and mysticisms – can lead neither to “despair” nor to “pessimism.” To be sure, suffering is universal; but if man knows how to set about emancipating himself from it, it is not final. For, if the human condition is condemned to pain for all eternity – since, like every condition, it is determined by karma, each individual who shares in it can pass beyond it, since each can annul the karmic forces by which it is governed (Eliade, 1958, p. 12).

Prāṇāyāma, through breath regulation, engages the autonomic nervous system, restoring physiological balance and inviting a ritual rhythm that mirrors the sacred pulse of existence. This breath-centred discipline functions as a contemporary rite of purification, giving the practitioner control over the boundary between distress and calm, between chaos and order. These practices are not merely coping strategies; they represent a symbolic restoration of sacred structure in a profane world. They create a time apart, a space for re-sacralization, in which the body becomes a site of presence, the breath a vehicle of order, and the ethical life a mode of reintegration. In this way, the first four limbs of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga function not only as therapeutic

³ Of course, there are more recent philosophical tendencies that are less connected to their spiritual roots. “During the 20th century, apart from mystical-intuitive philosophical-religious concepts, relatively strong tendencies appeared that led to the separation of philosophy (including the philosophy of morality) from religion and turned them into two autonomous phenomena. This meant a general approximation of philosophy to science. It was in the background of this process that the formation of modern ethical and social theories under Indian conditions developed and is continuing to develop” (Hajko & Török, 2018, p. 123).

interventions but as a re-ritualization of existential life, directly addressing the fragmentation that Shneidman identifies and that Eliade sees as the core of modern despair. It reorients the practitioner toward a cosmology of coherence, one in which pain is not meaningless but meaningful, precisely because it can be worked through, lived through, and integrated within a structured path of return. In this light, the experience of psychache becomes a gateway to spiritual labour, and suicide, once perceived as an end, is reframed as a call for initiation, a desperate cry for the very structure that Aṣṭāṅga Yoga ritually provides.

Joiner's Interpersonal Theory, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, and the reconstitution of belonging through Eliade's sacred anthropology

Thomas Joiner's *Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide* asserts that the desire for suicide emerges when two psychological states converge: thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. The progression to suicidal action requires a third factor: the acquired capability for lethal self-harm, developed through habituation to pain and fear (Joiner, 2005). In this model, suicide occurs when an individual becomes convinced that they are not only unwanted by others but actively harmful to them, and when they have overcome their natural aversion to death.

While empirically grounded, Joiner's model points to something deeper: a symbolic collapse of value and integration, not unlike what Mircea Eliade identified as a central crisis of modernity. In *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), Eliade describes the loss of sacred structures as leading to existential isolation since "man conceives of himself as a microcosm. He forms part of the gods' creation; in other words, he finds in himself the same sanctity that he recognizes in the cosmos. It follows that his life is homologized to cosmic life; as a divine work, the cosmos becomes the paradigmatic image of human existence" (Eliade, 1959, p. 165). Modern man has desacralized his world and assumed a tragic solitude. Joiner's *thwarted belongingness* becomes, in Eliadean terms, the experience of being cut off from sacred space and sacred community: To live in a sacred space is to participate in a reality; to participate in being, to become real, since "[T]he sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from 'natural' realities" (Eliade, 1959, p. 10). Similarly, *perceived burdensomeness* reflects not merely interpersonal failure but a collapse of ontological value. The person no longer perceives their life as bearing meaning in any greater context. In Eliade's framework, a life that no longer participates in the sacred becomes a life reduced to a series of accidents, a life that is no longer worth living. Profane man is the result of a desacralization of human existence. Although he is unaware of it, he continues to be haunted by the behaviour patterns of religious man, emptied now of their spiritual content (Eliade, 1959, p. 204). He forms himself by a series of denials and refusals, but he continues to be haunted by the realities that he has refused and denied. In such a state, suicide is the tragic endpoint of symbolic disintegration: the individual no longer inhabits a world of significance, nor sees themselves as capable of re-entry.

In this condition, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga offers ritualised reintegration into a moral and symbolic cosmos. The yamas (ethical restraints) such as ahimsā (nonviolence) and satya (truthfulness) restore interpersonal coherence through disciplined compassion, reducing the inner aggression and shame that fuel suicidal ideation. Asteya (non-stealing) and aparigraha (non-possessiveness) help cultivate healthy boundaries and a non-competitive orientation toward others. These are not abstract values, they are acts of participation in a reconstituted ethical field, making the practitioner once again a moral actor. The niyamas, especially tapaḥ (austerity) and svādhyāya (self-study), facilitate the internalisation of responsibility without the weight of shame. In practising īśvarapraṇidhāna (surrender to a higher principle), the individual locates their worth not in utility or productivity, but in alignment with a sacred process of becoming. This echoes Eliade's insight that the initiation is equivalent to a revelation of the

sacred. Through it, the world is re-sanctified, and the neophyte is reborn into a meaningful cosmos (Eliade, 1954, p. 18). Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, then, functions as a secular initiation ritual, restoring symbolic belonging, moral orientation, and a renewed identity. Beyond ethics, āsana and prāṇāyāma provide somatic grounding. Through postures and controlled breathing, the practitioner re-inhabits their body as a site of sacred discipline, not fragmentation. Eliade wrote that yogic posture reproduces the immobility of sacred archetypes, stabilising the practitioner in a timeless form of being (Eliade, 1958, pp. 66–68). In this way, the body ceases to be a burden and becomes a vessel for presence, a temple of order amidst emotional chaos. Prāṇāyāma, through breath, aligns the individual with what Eliade calls “*absolute interiorization*”, a movement away from historical suffering toward primordial awareness (Eliade, 1958, p. 67).

If we consider Aṣṭāṅga Yoga practice a secular ritual, ritual is thus a time-space in which we behave ‘as-if’ we inhabit a different world order: “The perfectly ordered world inside the ritual could never replace the flawed world of real-life relationships. It works because each participant plays a role other than the one inhabits normally”. (Puett & Gross-Loh, 2016, p. 34). This is the lens through which we should understand Aṣṭāṅga Yoga practice. Even the simple act of repeatedly rolling out the yoga mat creates symbolic meaning, establishing a sacred space and time for disengagement from daily activities. It establishes a new world distinct from the one found outside the time-space of the yoga ritual. Incorporating specific limbs of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga within that ritual time-space does not necessarily mean they will be immediately incorporated into everyday life, at least not with the same intensity as during ritual practice. This is why the world within the ritual can never fully replace the world outside it. However, the repetition is the fundamental feature of this kind of ritual. It is this repetition that fosters habituation and gradually integrates the ritual’s content into everyday life. This is why the ritualistic nature of practice holds profound significance: “These ordinary as-if rituals are the means by which we imagine new realities and over time construct new worlds” (Puett & Gross-Loh, 2016, p. 53).

In Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, the practitioner’s body holds particular importance in the ritualistic practice, as it performs the ‘ritualistic’ work and is central to the practice, especially in its initial stages. Through practice within the ritualistic time-space, body and mind are reintegrated, enabling the practitioner to overcome the fragmentation of the Self. From a broader perspective, however, the Self becomes connected to something that transcends it. This means the practitioner becomes so immersed in the practice of yoga that the Self is temporarily dissolved, becoming part of the ritual time-space in which they are engaged. Through bodily practice, the practitioner establishes a connection with that which transcends them and to which they inherently belong. Iyengar (2002, p. 176) views the body as a temple when interpreting one of Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* on the first of the niyamas, śauca (cleanness): “As a temple or a church is kept clean each day, the inner body, the temple of the soul, should be bathed with a copious supply of blood through āsanās and prāṇāyāma”.

The body serves as a valuable tool for re-establishing spiritual grounding, helping probationers overcome psychological burden. When someone feels that they do not belong to the world, it is often due to a mental distinction between the Self and what is perceived as not Self – as if the Self could not be a part of it. Yoga teaches that what we constantly seek as something to belong to is already within us – and that we must re-establish our lost connection to it through regular practice. We come to realise that we have always belonged to what transcends us, because what transcends us is already within us. We are a microcosm that mirrors the macrocosm. The connection already exists; we simply need to discover and realise it. Then we will be home – then we will belong. We must understand that transcendence is more a state of personal being than an external circumstance. Vivekananda beautifully expressed this idea:

After long searches here and there, in temples and in churches, in earths and in heavens, at last you come back, completing the circle from where you started, to your own soul and find that He for whom you have been seeking all over the world, for whom you have been weeping and praying in churches and temples, on whom you were looking as the mystery of all mysteries shrouded in the clouds, is nearest of the near, is your own Self, the reality of your life, body, and soul. That is your own nature (Vivekananda, 2024a, p. 313).

We can take a closer look at this abstract topic through the practical lenses of *prāṇāyāma*, which is another key bodily practice in *Aṣṭāṅga Yoga*—particularly significant for its role in the symbolic reintegration of the Self into the world. There are many known benefits of breathing techniques, though *prāṇāyāma* is often reductively viewed as merely one of them. Consider the well-known observation: “Conscious breathing has a calming effect on the mind”, and that “The regular practice of pranayama over a period of time reinforces cortical control of the breath, a process called telencephalization, where one shifts from unconscious to conscious breathing with profound effects on one’s wellbeing” (Saraswati, 2016, p. 111).

Prāṇāyāma is also important from the standpoint of *svādhyāya*. While the Western approach to self-knowledge relies primarily on intellectual self-reflection and on analytical methods, *svādhyāya* is realised somatically through *prāṇāyāma*. Even simple breath awareness can support the goal of *svādhyāya*, as “its rhythm and depth provide rapid, reliable evidence of our emotional state” (Shusterman, 2000, p. 139). The simplest breath awareness techniques can offer initial steps toward reintegration, as the breath serves as an indicator of how closely we are connected to the world. The way we breathe is, in fact, evidence of our interconnectedness with the world, it reminds us that we belong to it, right up to our final breath. Of course, breath awareness may lead the yoga practitioner to the uncomfortable realization that their connection to the world is often experienced negatively, reflected in breath patterns shaped by stress, anxiety, or fear. However, this is a necessary part of *svādhyāya* – the first step toward transforming these pervasive relationships with the world. This is where *prāṇāyāma* acquires its profound symbolic significance.

“The word *prāṇāyāma* consists of two components, *prāṇā* and *āyāma*. *Prāṇā* is energy, when the self-energizing force embraces the body. *Āyāma* means stretch, extension, expansion, length, breadth, regulation, prolongation, restraint and control” (Iyengar, 2002, p. 162). Therefore, the word *prāṇāyāma* refers to the control of the energy called *prāṇa*. *Prāṇa* is sometimes equated with breath, but this is a significant oversimplification. Breathing – like any other vital function or movement in the universe—is a material manifestation of the primal cosmic energy known as *prāṇa*. From the perspective of yogic philosophy, particularly its cosmology, as presented by Vivekananda (2024b, p. 223) —“the whole universe is composed of two materials”: *akasha* and *prāṇa*. “Just as *Akasha* is the infinite, omnipresent material of this universe, so is this *Prana* the infinite, omnipresent manifesting power of this universe” (Vivekananda, 2024b, p. 24). *Prāṇāyāma* involves controlling the gross form of this primordial cosmic power or energy as it manifests in the body – for example, through the movement of the lungs.

The philosophical significance of *prāṇāyāma* is important because, through it, we establish a connection with an omnipresent power, and thus, with everything it permeates, including other living beings—via conscious control within our body. We can approach this symbolically and reflect with Berndtson (2023, p. 2) on “breathing as an experience of the perpetual relation of exchange between ourselves and that which is not ourselves, that which is outside ourselves, but which is inhaled into us”. Breathing is thus a symbolic gateway – where the “I” meets the world, is continuously permeated by it, and where the world, in turn, receives the presence of the “I”. This experiential perspective offers a symbolic tool for reintegrating the self into the world.

We can go further and suggest that the breath, through the practice of prāṇāyāma, can serve as a tool for establishing order in the world. If we accept – at least metaphorically or symbolically—that prāṇa, as a primordial force, is omnipresent, it becomes clear that if we do not control the prāṇa within our own body, the prāṇa around us will control us. In practical terms, we become recipients of external energies, manifesting as thoughts, emotions, other's narratives, or simply the presence of other beings and the external world. In such cases, we may feel disconnected from the external world – as if governed by invisible powers—because no internal order has been established. However, by controlling our own prāṇa, we establish a new form of connection with the world, i.e., one in which we feel more comfortable and integrated. It is we who give order to the world. Through the practice of prāṇāyāma, the Self can be defragmented, reintegrated into the world and endowed with order and meaning from within itself. The *axis mundi* can now be found where it has always been – within the self.

Joiner's third condition, *acquired capability for suicide*, is addressed through the higher limbs of yoga. Pratyāhāra (withdrawal of the senses) allows for emotional regulation and distancing from impulsive drives. Dhāraṇā (concentration) and dhyāna (meditation) cultivate attention and equanimity, disrupting the compulsive loops of despair. These are practices of mastery and reorientation, akin to Eliade's description of initiatory discipline: not the erasure of suffering, but its transformation into insight and autonomy. Finally, samādhi, the state of meditative absorption, completes this arc by dissolving the illusion of separateness that fuels suicidal logic. The self, no longer defined by alienation or guilt, enters a state of unity that Eliade describes as the abolition of profane time and a return to the unconditioned Self (Eliade, 1958, pp. 93–94). Even if rarely attained in full, the path toward samādhi offers a ritual horizon of hope, one that affirms: existence is not only bearable, it is sacred. Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, viewed through Eliade's sacred anthropology, emerges as a ritualised technique for restoring symbolic belonging and existential dignity. For those on probation, especially those in despair, it offers not just a therapeutic scaffold, but a symbolic narrative in which moral failure is not final, alienation is not absolute, and life remains recoverable through structured return.

Williams' Cry of Pain model, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, and sacred rescue through Eliade's topology of captivity and release

Mark Williams' *Cry of Pain* model conceptualises suicide as a reaction to situational defeat, perceived entrapment, and the absence of rescue. Drawing on cognitive psychology and attachment theory, Williams posits that suicidal ideation emerges when a person feels trapped in an aversive state, interprets escape as impossible, and perceives that no external source of rescue is available. Furthermore, the crisis is intensified by autobiographical memory biases, in which negative experiences and failures become dominant, thereby eroding problem-solving capacity and future orientation (Williams, 1997).

This framework, psychologically sound and clinically actionable, lends itself to a symbolic and topological analysis in the tradition of Mircea Eliade. In *Images and Symbols* (1952), Eliade writes that one of the foundational dimensions of sacred consciousness is the distinction between space that imprisons and space that liberates. He describes the mythic and ritual logic of enclosure and exit as every captivity implies the hope of deliverance; every enclosure postulates the reality of an opening (Eliade, 1952, p. 54). Man desires to live, not only in the present but in the real; he seeks, therefore, to live in the sacred. He wishes to inhabit the *Centre*, and towards his own centre where he can find integral reality – sacredness. This desire is so deeply rooted in man, i.e., to find themselves at the very heart of the real, at the Centre of the World, the place of communication with Heaven (Eliade, 1952, p. 54). Confronted with existential fragmentation and ontological dislocation, the human being is drawn by an inherent impulse toward reintegration. He seeks a return to the Centre, not merely as a spatial metaphor,

but as a sacred locus of meaning where the rupture between self and reality is mended, and where the possibility of communion with the transcendent reemerges.

The suicidal individual, according to Williams' model, finds themselves in a closed space with no door, trapped within memory, failure, and isolation. The psychological state of entrapment thus mirrors what Eliade calls the fall into labyrinthine space, in which the subject loses orientation and is no longer able to locate the symbolic 'centre' from which renewal may emerge (Eliade, 1959, p. 42). In this interpretive frame, the function of suicide becomes manifest: it is a mistaken door, a desperate act of symbolic exit in the absence of culturally available or ritually endorsed pathways of release. What is missing is not merely social support but a cosmology of rescue, i.e., the symbolic assurance that suffering is not final and that orientation can be restored. The terror of being lost, Eliade observes, is the terror of being far from the 'centre' (Eliade, 1959, pp. 106–107). To prevent suicide, then, is to reopen the axis, to reconnect the suffering person with a structure that allows forward motion, symbolic emergence, and reconnection with meaning.

Aṣṭāṅga Yoga offers just such a structure, particularly through its emphasis on discipline, memory purification, and symbolic centrality. In the context of Williams' model, the limbs of yoga operate as tools of internal orientation and resilience-building. They do not merely interrupt defeat but ritually reverse the logic of enclosure. In this framework, āsana becomes more than physical discipline; it is a practice of remaining within difficulty without collapse. Through challenging postures held in awareness, the practitioner learns to inhabit psychological discomfort without being consumed by it. This echoes Eliade's interpretation of sacred initiations, since the initiatory pain, when endured consciously, becomes the condition for renewal (Eliade, 1958, pp. 12–13). The yoga mat becomes a sacred stage where entrapment is symbolically re-enacted and gradually reworked into endurance and presence. Prāṇāyāma, through breath regulation, performs the role of rhythmic rescue. When the cognitive field is dominated by recursive thoughts and catastrophic interpretations, the breath serves as a portable *axis mundi*, a vertical thread reconnecting the subject with the centre of their being. Mirroring Eliade's thought, breath, in many archaic cultures, is the very power of the sacred, spirit, wind, and life all at once (Eliade, 1952, p. 114). Prāṇāyāma is not only physiological, it is symbolic inhalation of order and exhalation of panic, a reenactment of renewal in the midst of perceived collapse. The limb of svādhyāya, often translated as "self-study," plays a vital role in correcting the memory biases that Williams describes. By deliberately cultivating reflective insight, the practitioner rewrites their autobiographical narrative. They no longer view themselves solely through the lens of failure but begin to reconstruct a story of discipline, effort, and transcendence. By re-living myth, one escapes profane time and restores meaning to one's history (Eliade, 1954, p. 72; 1959, pp. 68–69). Thus, svādhyāya becomes the ritual technique for transforming memory, for reclaiming a story that makes survival meaningful. Finally, pratyāhāra and dhāraṇā serve as tools for disrupting the looping architecture of suicidal cognition. Pratyāhāra creates cognitive spaciousness, allowing the practitioner to step back from intrusive mental content. Dhāraṇā builds the capacity to re-anchor attention, not in imagined catastrophe but in the rhythm of the breath, the body, or a mantra. These are not acts of suppression; they are, in Eliade's terms, acts of re-consecrating the internal world, making it inhabitable again (Eliade, 1958).

All of the limbs mentioned and integrated into practice serve symbolic assurance that suffering is not final, teaching the practitioner to face pain and suffering without resorting to the ultimate decision about their life. First and foremost, they teach practitioners to become aware of pain and suffering, primarily through non-discursive experience, which, as discussed through this text, may be more effective than engaging with it on the surface level of the mind.

It is important to note that yoga can "strengthen the individual's will and resiliency. Besides the empirical evidence of long traditions of practice and testimony that bear witness to the

positive effects of these meditative disciplines, there is now further confirmation from new scientific research in experimental psychology and neurophysiology” (Shusterman, 2008, p. 174). What has been known for thousands of years through tradition, and is now supported by scientific evidence, also carries philosophical implications. These lie in understanding – or more precisely, experiencing – the nature of pain and suffering, and their impermanence.

A well-known truth in yoga – shared with other philosophical schools such as Stoicism—is that suffering is not caused by the event itself, but by how we interpret, value, or narrate it. Consider Boccio’s reflection on the relationship between pain and suffering in physical yoga practice, illustrated through the āsana called Virbhadrāsana II: “When standing in WARRIOR TWO, you may become aware of an unpleasant sensation in your shoulders. Notice your resistance and aversion to the sensation. Can you begin to see that this reactivity itself is the cause of much of your discomfort?” (Boccio, 2004, p. 141). This is why body awareness is essential in yoga practice. What we experience as suffering – or psychological discomfort – is often caused by the narrative we construct around necessary but temporary pain. This narrative may be more or less conscious; yet even when we interpret pain as negative and take it personally—despite its being value-neutral, natural, and universal—it often leads to the *seemingly* rational conclusion that we must resist it. When the body resists, it generates additional muscular tension and alters the breathing pattern – both of which affect our thinking. Resistance to pain, paradoxically, intensifies both physical and psychological suffering.

Yoga teaches us to simply acknowledge pain – necessary under certain circumstances but not enduring – as it dissolves through the transition into another pose. This transition can be metaphorically or symbolically understood as a shift in life circumstances, or the result of mindful awareness without further evaluation or judgment. Yoga teaches us to somatically accept pain as a temporary condition that can be overcome. More importantly, it transforms our understanding of ourselves—a form of svādhyāya – and can thus reshape personal narratives through somatic means. The mindfulness-based approach to temporary pain – without adding layers of suffering – shows the practitioner that they need not identify with their temporary painful state. Suffering or psychological discomfort becomes unnecessary when pain is seen as the result of specific, transitional circumstances. Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, through non-discursive and somatic habituation, prepares the practitioner to accept pain and discomfort as necessary but non-final aspects of life. It fosters resilience – not only in ways supported by science, but also philosophically – by teaching that “there is a difference between pain and suffering – the misery or torment that we add to the experience because of our reactivity, aversion, and stories. An old Buddhist saying is that ‘pain is inevitable; suffering is optional’” (Boccio, 2004, p. 192).

Through this lens, the *Cry of Pain* is not simply an emotional or neurological signal; it is a spiritual utterance, a symptom of symbolic suffocation. The suicidal state, in Williams’ model, is one of enclosure with no exit. In Eliade’s ontology, all enclosures have a mythic counterpoint: the labyrinth implies the possibility of emergence. Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, when practiced with intention, becomes not only a behavioural strategy but a mythic map of return, i.e., a sacred geometry drawn in breath, movement, attention, and silence.

O’Connor’s IMV model, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, and ritual control of thresholds in Eliade’s initiatory thought

O’Connor’s *Integrated Motivational-Volitional model* (IMV) offers a tiered understanding of suicide that reflects not only clinical dynamics but also, when viewed through a broader philosophical lens, a symbolic crisis of passage. His model distinguishes three stages: a pre-motivational phase marked by vulnerability and background stressors; a motivational phase, where feelings of defeat and entrapment evolve into suicidal ideation; and a volitional phase, where that ideation crystallises into action (O’Connor, 2011). Each phase unfolds not only

cognitively but spatially and ritually, as a movement across thresholds that are either successfully mediated or fatally breached.

The motivational phase of the IMV model, where individuals feel entrapped with no escape, closely mirrors what Eliade called the ordeal of liminality, a suspension between identities that, if not ritually navigated, becomes intolerable. In traditional societies, such psychological and existential instability was contained within ritual trials that gave meaning and structure to breakdown. In the modern desacralized world, those facing legal exclusion, moral collapse, or emotional defeat (such as probationers) must navigate these thresholds without maps. In this reading, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, offers not just psychological tools, but ritual techniques for traversing such thresholds. The ethical foundations i.e., yama and niyama, do not merely recalibrate morality but serve as preparatory rites, strengthening symbolic identity and ritual readiness. Tapas, in particular, takes on new weight in this context: it is not merely discipline, but “heat,” namely a form of internalized suffering that, in Eliade’s interpretation, burns away the old self in preparation for higher transformation (Eliade, 1958, p. 12).

The suffering that occurs in the motivational phase is thus not meaningless, but potentially initiatory, if ritualised and endured within a structured practice.

To emancipate oneself from suffering – such is the goal of all Indian philosophies and all Indian mysticisms. Whether this deliverance is obtained directly through knowledge (according to the teaching of Vedānta and Saikhya, for example) or by means of techniques (as Yoga and the majority of Buddhist schools hold), the fact remains that no knowledge has any value if it does not seek the salvation of man (Eliade, 1958, pp. 12–13).

In the volitional phase, where suicide planning and capability manifest, O’Connor emphasises actional momentum and disinhibition. It is here that Eliade’s insights into ritual control of death become pertinent. These initiatory practices offer a structured descent into psychological and spiritual depths, enabling the individual to pass through crisis and emerge renewed. In the absence of such culturally mediated rites, however, the existential weight of suffering may lead not to symbolic rebirth, but to suicidal action.

Pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā, and dhyāna, the interior limbs of Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, function as methods of symbolic containment, allowing the practitioner to confront inner annihilation without being destroyed by it. Pratyāhāra regulates sensory intrusion, dhāraṇā builds attentional precision, and dhyāna enables sustained witnessing without collapse. These are not mere meditative techniques; they are, in Eliade’s terms, ritual forms for facing the void. They ritualise confrontation with death-thoughts without disintegration. The individual does not repress fear or desire for oblivion, they practice holding it, breathing through it, transforming it. At the highest level, samādhi becomes not simply meditative absorption, but the ritual conquest of death itself, not in metaphysical terms, but in the ability to no longer identify with the self that fears or enacts self-destruction. Eliade compares such states with initiatory rebirths, where identity is stripped to its essence, purified, and then restored within a higher order of being (Eliade, 1958, pp. 31–35). The suicidal trajectory, then, is not suppressed or denied, but transfigured. The drive toward death is absorbed within a symbolic and embodied process of transformation. Samyama, a Sanskrit term that connects the last three limbs of yoga – dhāraṇā, dhyāna, samādhi—is particularly important for symbolic transformation and the experience of Self-dissolution. In the final state of samyama, which is samādhi, the subject (practitioner) and the object of meditation (dhyāna) merge. “Uninterrupted flow of attention dissolves the split between the object seen and the seer who sees it. Consciousness appears to have ceased, and to have reached a state of silence. It is devoid of ‘I’, and merges into the core of the being in a profound state of serenity” (Iyengar, 2002, p. 181). Iyengar compares the state of samādhi to the experience of an artist or scientist who momentarily drops the Self during the creation of

art or the process of scientific revelation. What distinguishes an artist from a yogi is that, for the artist, *samādhi* “is associated with the performance and realisation of a particular art form”, making it difficult to infuse “into his ordinary daily existence. For the yogi, however, whose ‘art is formless and whose goal has no physical expression [...] the fragrance of *samadhi* penetrates every aspect of his ‘normal’ behaviour, activities and state of being” (Iyengar, 2002, p. 181). The “art” of the yoga practitioner is life itself. This is why *samādhi* can be transformational – it prepares the practitioner to face the void. It is a state of being that can be habituated through practice yet is not confined to specific moments like artistic performance. We must remember that the ritualistic time-space of yoga practice creates “as-if” worlds – symbolic realities that should be carried beyond the boundaries of the practice itself. What is experienced in this sacred space can gradually evolve into a new way of being. If the experience of *samādhi* is not tied to special occasions, is cultivated even at its initial stages, and becomes part of the practitioner’s life beyond the ritualistic time-space of yoga practice, it can weaken the experience of the limiting Self or ego – the part that suffers, generates suffering, and contemplates final decisions such as suicide.

It also allows practitioners to experience temporary freedom from the narratives they hold about their identities. However, when one moment follows another, and then another, it becomes a habit. *Samādhi*, like the other limbs of yoga, should not be understood as a final state that remains omnipresent once attained. It is simply a tool, a means, like the other limbs of *Aṣṭāṅga Yoga*, since “the aim, the goal, of all this training is liberation of the soul” (Vivekananda, 2024b, p. 214). The goal of the practice is, therefore, the profound transformation of a human being – from one entrapped by conditions to one who is free—not in another world, but here and now. O’Connor’s IMV model, thus, finds unexpected but profound reinforcement in Eliade’s reading of initiation. The three phases of suicidal risk, vulnerability, entrapment, and action, parallel the stages of departure, liminal trial, and reintegration found in traditional rites. What is missing for many probationers today is not insight or therapy alone, but ritual architecture. *Aṣṭāṅga Yoga* supplies this, not as religion, but as structured symbolic work. It guides the practitioner through the breakdown of identity, teaches endurance within the void, and offers tools for return, not only to life, but to meaning.

Conclusion: Ritual structure and ethical reintegration in the face of suicidality

The phenomenon of suicide among individuals on probation exposes a profound tension between structural vulnerability and existential fragmentation. Psychological models such as Shneidman’s theory of psychache, Joiner’s Interpersonal Theory, and O’Connor’s Integrated Motivational-Volitional (IMV) model offer valuable insights into the internal dynamics of suicidality, illuminating how feelings of isolation, entrapment, and narrative incoherence shape the emergence of suicidal ideation. Yet these models, while clinically robust, remain largely silent on the symbolic, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of human suffering.

The integration of *Aṣṭāṅga Yoga* philosophy into this context offers more than an alternative therapy; it proposes a ritualised existential framework through which individuals can gradually reconstitute meaning, coherence, and agency. Each limb of the *Aṣṭāṅga* system functions not merely as a set of practices but as a ritual architecture capable of transforming despair into disciplined self-knowledge. Its ethical precepts anchor identity; its somatic and respiratory disciplines restore autonomy over embodiment; its contemplative practices cultivate distance from psychological reactivity; and its higher meditative states offer a glimpse into a form of selfhood not defined by injury or marginalisation.

This philosophical system finds a powerful complement in Mircea Eliade’s phenomenology of religion, which interprets human crisis as a rupture in the ontological order, a descent into formlessness that, in traditional cultures, was ritually contained and transcended. Probation, viewed through this lens, can be seen as a modern instance of un-ritualised liminality: a

suspended state in which the absence of symbolic structure renders suffering unbearable. Eliade's account of initiation, mythic return, and sacred repetition reveals how ritualised practices, such as those preserved in the yoga tradition, can reintegrate the individual into a meaningful cosmology, one in which transformation is not only possible but narratively encoded.

For the probationer grappling with suicidal despair, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga does not offer immediate salvation, but it does offer a symbolic grammar of rebirth. Its value lies in its capacity to ritualise pain, to sacralise the body, and to guide the individual through a structured sequence of ethical and cognitive purification. In Eliade's terms, such a process marks the difference between historical disintegration and archetypal renewal: the difference between meaningless suffering and suffering as *passage*. It should be clear that this approach requires philosophical guidance – from a mentor and an experienced yoga teacher – who can lead the probationer through Aṣṭāṅga Yoga in a way that provides the philosophical and symbolic meaning so essential in this context.

In this way, suicide prevention must be reconceived not only as clinical risk management but as philosophical rehabilitation. It requires restoring to the individual a sense of centre, of telos, and of cosmic participation, elements that Aṣṭāṅga Yoga can offer when understood, not as physical exercise but as a *spiritual topology* of recovery. Grounded in ancient cosmology, affirmed by modern psychology, animated by Eliade's anthropology of meaning, and approached through the perspective of practical somaesthetics, Aṣṭāṅga Yoga emerges as a profound resource for navigating the darkest thresholds of the human condition, and for re-learning, step by step, how to remain alive.

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