

# Can Yoga Influence Military Leader Development?

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## Summary

In keeping with Division 19's strategic objective to develop the leadership potential of our members, the following case study examines how yoga practice supports leader development using triguna theory and transformational leadership as a framework. The participant in this study demonstrated an increase in Sattva guna following a six-session yoga protocol. Sattva guna is associated with multiple facets of transformational leadership, suggesting that yoga practice enhances leader development. This case study serves as proof-of-concept and can be used to further develop yoga leadership research.

## Background Information

Yoga—defined here as the combination of asana (the poses and movements central to yoga practice), pranayama (the breathing techniques and timing associated with movement), and dhyana (meditation and focusing techniques applied during yoga practice)—is associated with physical and mental health benefits. But it also has potential to influence essential leadership qualities. This influence is connected to traditional Vedic philosophy, and more specifically, the triguna theory of personality.

The triguna theory of personality posits that there are three gunas, or personality styles: tamas, rajas, and sattva present in all people. The gunas are conceptualized as a continuum with tamas on left, rajas on the right, and sattva in the middle (See Figure 1). Tamas is associated with inertia, lethargy, laziness, depression, and fatigue. Rajas is its opposite and is associated with overactivity, movement, passion, anger, and anxiety. Sattva represents balance, harmony, calmness, compassion, and enlightenment. Each person has some degree of each guna at any given time. But there is always a predominant guna that dictates one's overall personality style.

Sattva, or enlightenment, is the ideal predominant guna and it is associated with transformational leadership qualities such as self-management, self-awareness, sympathy, motivation, acceptance, and organizational commitment (Dhulla, 2014; Rastogi et al, 2008; Narayanan

et al., 2003; Suneetha & Srikrishna, 2009). The dominant guna is also associated with how one responds to work-related stress and when sattva dominates, leaders feel it is their duty to perform under any circumstances (Dhulla, 20104). Sattva, is therefore, the preferred guna for Military leaders. It is important to help leaders develop sattvic traits. Yoga is, "...a catalyst for enhancing sattva guna, signifying balanced personality development among managers," (Sham, Singh, & Ganpat, 2023, p. 5), which means yoga can help develop transformational leaders.

*Problem Statement:* How can yoga practice influence leader development in the Military? And what specifically would that yoga practice look like?

## Research and Analysis

To answer these questions, the author developed a two-session yoga protocol (See Figure 2). Each session focused on developing sattva through the practice of either energizing (rajasic) or calming (tamasic) yoga sequences. The protocol was repeated three times for a total of six sessions with a senior Army Non-commissioned Officer (NCO).

The participant completed the Vedic Personality Inventory (VPI; available at [vedicpersonality.org](http://vedicpersonality.org)) prior to starting the yoga protocol and again upon completion. The VPI assess all three gunas and provides output in the form of percentages. The predominant guna, therefore, will have the highest percentage. The participant was already predominantly sattvic prior to the yoga protocol. However, her post-yoga VPI showed the further develop-

| Rajasic (Energizing) Practice   | Tamasic (Calming) Practice  |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Intent: activate the tamasic (inert) mind</li><li>• Session Content:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Active practice associated with increased heart rate, physical strain</li><li>• Vigorous flow, sustained backbends and twists, open-eyed meditation</li></ul></li><li>* By engaging in a rajasic practice, it pulls the lethargic individual away from tamas and closer to sattva</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Intent: calm the rajasic (over-active) mind</li><li>• Session Content:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Slow and intentional flow</li><li>• Long holds in forward folds, extended final relaxation, closed-eye meditation</li></ul></li><li>* By engaging in a tamasic practice, it pulls the over-active individual away from rajas and closer to sattva</li></ul> |

Figure 2: Two-Session Protocol for Enhanced Military Leader Development

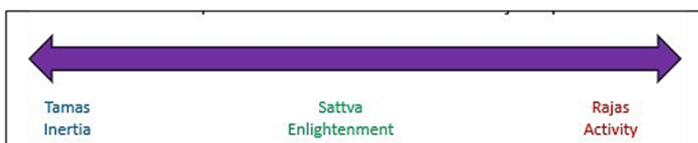


Figure 1: Triguna Continuum

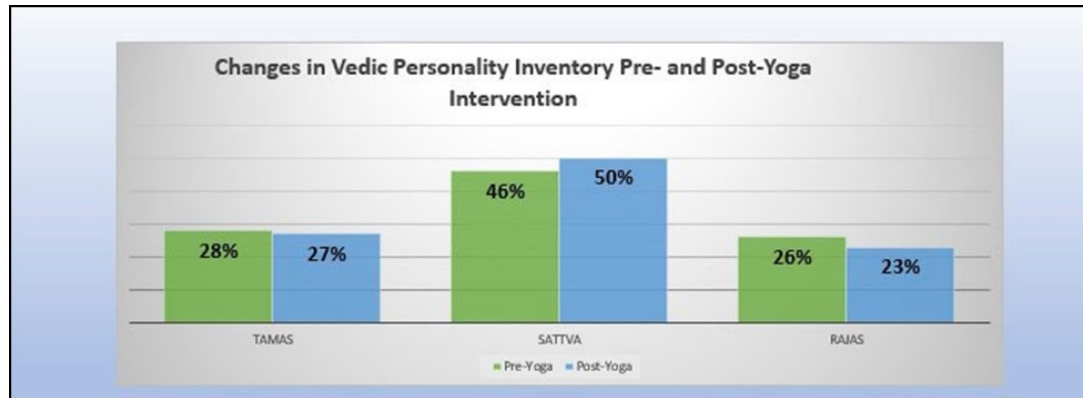


Figure 3: Pre- and Post-Yoga VPI Scores

ment of sattva, along with a reduction in both tamas and rajas (See Figure 3). During the exit interview, the participant also provided feedback that she was more patient and less reactive while participating in the yoga protocol. She noted that her spouse and several co-workers noticed these improvements, as well.

### Conclusion

This case study, built on the framework of triguna theory and transformational leadership, demonstrated proof-of-concept that yoga has an impact on leader development. The next step is to initiate a pilot program with a larger sample size to further refine the protocol, with the goal of eventual randomized trials.

### References

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