

Where There Is Courage, There Is Happiness: Bringing Yoga to the Ukrainian Front Lines

By Shanti Shanti Kaur Khalsa

In late May 2023, I had a conversation with a kundalini yoga teacher trainer in Ukraine. He described missiles dropping daily into the major cities, towns, and villages, destroying homes, hospitals, and electric and water supplies. He described how men, women, and children endure the violence and atrocities of war. He wanted the new teachers he was working with to have additional skills to help meet the challenges of acute and complex trauma.

Within 3 weeks of this conversation, the faculty of the Guru Ram Das Center's International Kundalini Yoga Therapy Professional Training formed the Resourcing and Sustaining Ukrainian Resilience Program, a 5- to 7-year initiative to bring trauma-responsive yoga therapy training and support to Ukrainian teachers.

The curriculum for the posttraumatic stress training our team has delivered since 2011 was not applicable here. We developed an entirely new 4-day training specific to a war zone and delivered it to 120 Ukrainian kundalini yoga teachers, including Major General Vitalii Butuzov (ret.). This initial group practiced seven core skills crucial for teaching yoga in environments of acute and complex trauma:

1. self-regulation to restore/maintain a teacher's calm presence,
2. co-regulation in a group class,
3. cultivation of student self-regulation,
4. use of trauma-responsive language,
5. design of trauma-responsive classes,
6. application of grounding mudras, and
7. returning an activated student to calm presence.

Soon after, yoga teacher Olesia Stoyanova, one of the Guru Ram Das Center's representatives in Ukraine, began leading a rehabilitation protocol daily for troops in a military hospital in Kyiv. This protocol focuses on stabilizing prana through the *tattvas* (elements of reality), building vitality and stability that will hopefully be maintained for months following the classes when these troops return to the front lines. Preliminary data from 2 months of daily classes (June–August 2023) confirmed these results: All participants noted improvement in well-being, mood, state of health, and life



satisfaction. Most practitioners said they were better able to fall asleep and that their emotional balance had increased.

The troops were reluctant to practice on the first day, Olesia said. Tuning in, the asanas, the movement, the breathing—it was too unfamiliar. Yet by day five, they were so engaged in the yoga they asked her to come to where they were going: 7 kilometers from the front lines. She is now a trauma-responsive yoga teacher in rotation for their unit and described the initial situation this way:

Students come to regular yoga classes knowing why they are going to yoga, and it is their choice to practice. In the military this is different. Most of the soldiers are not interested in yoga. There is a big prejudice among men against yoga and mantras. For them it is something too feminine or too philosophical. They don't see yoga as a tool that can help them recover. Also, most of the troops believe that they do not need psychoemotional support or a tool for self-healing. That's why the unit commander brought everyone who was free from direct duties at the time to the first class.

Olesia sees promising effects of the classes, especially once she had earned the students' trust. One of the ways she did this was by avoiding practices she knew they might find too esoteric—like mantra—and choosing those she thought would provide immediate practical benefit. "I started with exercises for spinal health [because] the soldiers spend a lot of time wearing body armor, which affects the condition of their backs," she explained. "I also taught pranayama to relax the nervous system and build prana. It was both challenging and fun for them at the same time."

In October we followed up with a 3-day training in acute trauma protocols designed to meet the needs of women and children in military families, troops in military rehabilitation, those recovering from traumatic brain injury (TBI), and amputees.



Natalia Chaika and Kateryna Bondarenko teach military widows, wives, and partners in a yoga therapy protocol for grief recovery. Their experiences contrast with Olesia's. According to Natalia,

From the very beginning, they joyfully chant mantras, immersing themselves in the practice. We teach them to calm their thoughts, diving into the world of meditation and grounding. And they love these grounding mudras so much! I remember how at the beginning, our students were engulfed in a gloomy cloud, but after each session, they feel that the inner world becomes quieter and calmer.

Kateryna continued from there,

Women are losing their loved ones who defend our country, and we strive to support them by providing the opportunity to immerse themselves in kundalini yoga practices. Women who join our course not only acquire skills, but also receive boundless care and support. They come to yoga to help with their sadness, they come for support, and they are open to change.

We use our trauma-responsive yoga skills to ensure that every woman feels comfortable in class. The opportunity to show them self-help methods is very important and gratifying to us as teachers because the women face thoughts of loss every day. I created a support chat. Natalia and I send mantras and descriptions of exercises done in class for those who want to practice at home.

By February 2024, the teachers were ready for additional training in acute-trauma protocols designed for special forces, veterans, military widows, women from families of active combatants, and wives of veterans. This comprehensive training includes essential skills alongside the biology of how trauma dysregulates the brain, as well as the nervous, structural, and endocrine systems, and a review of the published studies on the biomedical effects of yoga practice on trauma recovery in amputees, those with TBI, those in rehabilitation, veterans, and assault survivors.

Vitalii Butuzov is also a representative of the Guru Ram Das Center in Ukraine. He teaches the TBI protocol in a Kyiv military rehabilitation

facility along with Oleksander Lukovych. They described the realities of working in this setting:

In subsequent classes we repeat instruction as if we are teaching it to them for the first time. They need consistent support and pause between each instruction. Some participants remember only the fact that they took classes and remember at the level of sensation that it was useful. Some don't remember what they did in class, but they do remember how relaxed they felt, and how their ability to focus was improved.

There is a Ukrainian proverb: "Where there is courage, there is happiness."

We intentionally work with the teachers to build their capacity to serve in the presence of suffering and to stabilize and restore themselves from their own experience of acute and vicarious trauma.

These teachers bring their skills, knowledge, and compassion when they lead the protocols. They help those affected by the trauma and displacement of war restore stability, build endurance, and cultivate resilience.

Maj. Gen. Butuzov participates in every training and has arranged to deploy those in the protocol group to teach in military facilities in the *oblasts* (territories) of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Chernihiv, Poltava, Odessa, and Mykolaiv in the months ahead.

With the war continuing and no end in sight, there is an enormous number of people we can serve. Through 2024, the training and monthly support continue, and our outreach has expanded to an additional 160 yoga teachers.

Finding the Good

This effort is the first of its kind, and we are taking steps to conduct scientific research on the protocols—because their meaningful impact can reach far beyond military settings.

Every war brings a breakthrough in medicine. New surgical methods, the use of ambulances, antibiotics and other methods to reduce infection, aseptic techniques, better anesthesia, blood transfusions, radiography, and improved prosthetics all arose during war time.

Will the research results from Ukraine show that yoga therapy is the breakthrough in medicine that arises out of this terrible war?



Shanti Shanti Kaur Khalsa, PhD, C-IAYT, has been bridging kundalini yoga with medicine and psychotherapy for nearly 40 years. She directs the International Kundalini Yoga Therapy Professional Training and coordinates outcomes studies on the medical effects of yoga practice. Dr. Khalsa also leads

trauma-responsive trainings, preparing yoga teachers in 49 countries to bring the practices to refugee camps, military hospitals, special forces units, and families.