



Yoga In Your World

An Exploration of Yoga's Significance in
the Lives of Individuals

by Zoë Mertz




Yoga in Your World: The Interviews




Image source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikztcfvFfLg>

For this project, I virtually interviewed seven individuals with varying degrees of experience with yoga: 6 females and 1 male, all American, ranging in age from 18 to 70.

By comparing their responses to set survey questions, I gained an understanding of yoga as practiced in modern day American culture.



What experiences have you had with practicing or studying yoga? Where or in what context did you practice or study yoga?



“My mom is a yoga instructor so I went to a bunch of classes growing up.”

“I have done yoga as part of my high school cross country team.”

“The types I have tried are Hatha, Vinyasa, Ashtanga, and Yin. My current teacher incorporates a lovely mix of styles focusing on women’s and mother’s needs.”



Image source: <https://www.ekhartyoga.com/articles/practice/8-tips-on-how-to-do-yoga-at-home-practice-and-all-is-coming>

My interviewees participated in yoga in all kinds of environments: formal and informal; at home and in classes or studios.

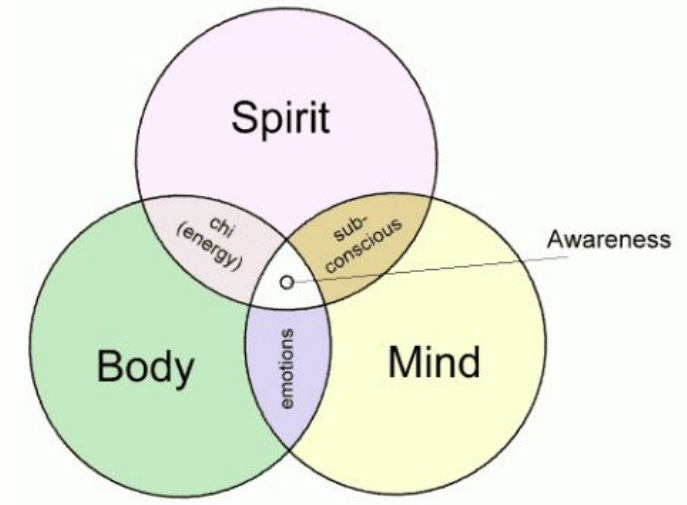
Several have found ways to integrate yoga into their daily routines while quarantined and stuck at home, as shown in the image, where a student participates in a digital yoga class.



Why did you first get involved with yoga?



Image source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/288863763595887092/>



“I was looking to do more exercise and I was interested in the concept of meditation.”

“We did it as a way to relax, cool down, and build strength.”

“Looking for a way to feel in my body working through emotions and for exercise.”


My interviewees primarily sought out yoga as a form of exercise, though several recognized and appreciated the mental and emotional benefits of the practice.

Though not always explicit, the importance of both mind and body to the practice of yoga made itself known - as outlined in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*.

I chose this graphic because I appreciated its representation of overlap between mind and body, as we’ve explored and my interviewees mentioned. I also valued the incorporation of spirit. I view the awareness it references in the center as a version of *moksha*.



Did your yoga experience focus more on the physical or mental aspects of yoga or a combination of both?



“...the routine would always be calming, so I guess it did help with my mental health.”

“The single classes I took at gyms definitely were less focused on meditation than the classes that had a longer amount of time to develop.”

“I find some classes that focus on the physicality are not always allowing for all the students to be met where they are that day in that moment or present enough accommodations, rather striving for a posture in one specific way.”




Image source: <http://neetasinghal.com/yoga-to-balance-chakras/>


As mentioned, my interviewees primarily began yoga for the physical practice. The mental component emerged later to varying degrees.

A trust relationship within a yoga class seemed to correspond with greater focus on mental aspects.

The way that mental aspects of yoga emerged via physical practices for my interviewees reminded me of the ongoing journey a yogi must undergo, as with the unlocking of chakras, represented in the image.



Was your experience with yoga ever
religiously or spiritually oriented?



“No. All were secular experiences that included meditation but not any higher power or religious talk.”

“It was never explicitly religious or spiritual.”

“While my experience was not religiously oriented, there was definitely a spiritual aspect to it... from believing in the powers and connections of the world and grounding myself amongst them.”

“I have found yoga to be spiritual... Some yoga teachers speak to your inner voice reminding you to take care of yourself, accept yourself as you are.... Music choices, chants and breathing practices can also ground the spirit.”

None of my interviewees found yoga explicitly religious or spiritual, though several found their own spiritual connections through the practice.

To me, this finding represents the distance of American yoga practices from cultural and spiritual origins in India.

This artistic representation shows what I view as the Americanization of yoga's spirituality: not connected to Hindu gods or Indian traditions, but rather an individual, internal spirituality





In your study of yoga, to what extent did you learn about yoga's history or cultural context?



“...none of the actual yoga practice classes incorporated history or cultural context.”

“I didn’t learn much about yoga’s history or cultural origins. However I did learn the names for the poses.”

“My mom studied the Bhagavad Gita and a lot of old sutras so I’ve heard about the concepts although I haven’t pursued them on my own.”

“The yoga classes gave me a taste of background which made me go to the library to learn further... I still read yoga books sometimes and would recommend it.”



My interviewees generally were taught little of yoga’s historical and cultural origins. Focus on physical postures again overtook mental aspects.

My image search for ‘traditional yoga’ yielded still primarily photographs of modern, American practices. I had to modify my search terms to ‘ancient yoga’ to find any historical images, or any based culturally in India.

The image shown is from an NPR article entitled “Those Yoga Poses May Not Be Ancient After All,” and cites how popular ‘warrior poses’ or ‘sun salutations’ (as referenced in Module 6) may not have any ancient origins, which fit with my interviewee’s experience of culturally distant yoga practice.

Image source: <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/06/01/411202468/those-yoga-poses-may-not-be-ancient-after-all-and-maybe-thats-ok>



What was the most significant or meaningful part of practicing yoga for you and why?






“The most meaningful part for me was how relaxed it made me feel. Afterwards, you would feel calm, tired, and peaceful. After a long day not only would you get a workout, but the worries of the day would be gone. That kind of feeling is great.”

“Yoga led me to find balance and be mindful... As someone who has been diagnosed with chronic anxiety, yoga has definitely helped to alleviate stressors and induced panics.”

“I love that all you need to practice yoga is you.”

Despite their experiences being distant from yoga’s traditional origins, my interviewees found many benefits from practicing yoga: in particular, intrapersonal understanding and solace. While not quite true *moksha*, these students experienced release, solace, and peace through their practice.

I chose this image of *savasana* because I’ve found personally that this pose combines the relaxation and release of yoga, not requiring demanding physicality, while equally challenging the yogi to remain present in the moment, disallowing the — ever-pervasive ‘turning of thought.’



Would you recommend yoga as a study or
practice to others?



“The strength and stretching provides a different type of conditioning than many other exercises and the meditation aspect can be helpful to anyone.”

“...it is my hope that everyone can find ways to connect with their self.”

“I firmly hold the belief that yoga should be practiced with intention.”

Image source:
<https://www.oaklandlibrary.org/events/cesar-e-chavez-branch/yoga-families-yoga-en-familia>



My interviewees unanimously recommended yoga as a practice. Their reasoning tended to center around the uniqueness of yoga both as a physical practice and with regards to mental and emotional benefits. They particularly appreciated the simultaneous self-connection and community it promoted.

I chose this image to represent how yoga in the American context has become a practice available to everyone, regardless of age, gender, class, or ability. Accessibility is one of my favorite aspects of Americanized yoga.

Concluding Sentiments



I chose this image as representative of my own yoga practice so far: in my room, on the floor, with a digital lesson for guidance, trying my best

The Americanized yoga practices of my interviewees tended to emphasize the physical, postural aspects of yoga, while generally distant from the practice's historical, cultural, religious, and spiritual origins.

As referenced in lecture, the yoga they practice seems a homonym, not a synonym, of the traditional yoga we studied early in our course

Nevertheless, my interviewees still managed to find fitness, self-awareness, and peace from their practices of yoga — and recommended it to all.