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America the Yogiful: Insights Into American Yoga Culture Today

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America the Yogiful: Insights into American Yoga Culture Today

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Studies*

by

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May 2014

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my heart with pride in belonging to this family. El tesoro mas grande que Dios me a dado es mi familia. Los amo!

Preface

Prior to visiting India and Bali and reading texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, I viewed yoga as nothing more than another exercise routine. After visiting the East I realized yoga was more than a series of postures: it is a path, a different perspective, and a way of life. Inspired to combine both my academic and practical experiences, the idea for this thesis was born the first time I visited India. The East opened my eyes to different facets of the practice and piqued my intellectual curiosity.

Originally a spiritual technology, yoga has been practiced in India and surrounding areas for thousands of years. Yet, for many worldwide, the understanding of yoga is limited to the physical realm. Taught at thousands of gyms and studios, through DVDs, video games and apps, yoga is now a globally recognized fitness routine. Today yoga is marketed as a series of *asanas* (postures) that make you fit, aid in weight loss, and even help you relax. And though all of these benefits of yoga are true, they are only a few of the tangibles and intangibles yoga has to offer. At its core, yoga is both a physical and spiritual practice. As a yoga practitioner living in America, I have often wondered if we are gaining all the benefits of yoga here in the West. Are we overlooking and even sacrificing yoga's spiritual benefits for the sake of breaking a sweat?

In this thesis, entitled *America the Yogiful: Insights into American Yoga Culture Today*, I explore the intersection of yoga and American consumption. Combining yogic research studies, yogi literature, teacher interviews and a varied mix of yoga styles, this thesis tracks the metamorphosis of yoga from the East to the West and studies the subculture of yoga in America today. Analyzing key contributors such as ashrams, gyms, studios and teachers, I explore the concepts of authenticity and superficiality of American yoga. Through my research, experiences, and interviews, the deviation from traditional yoga tenets in order to satisfy American consumption are highlighted, shedding light into

the unique aspects of yoga in America today. The business of yoga in America is lucrative, a landscape very different than that of yoga in its native East. At such an altered state from its original form, American yoga practitioners do not reap the same benefits as those of the East; however, yogis in the West still have plenty to gain. Yoga in America has made great contributions to our society since its introduction and will continue to do so for years to come.

What if our religion was each other?

If our practice was our life

If prayer, our words.

What if the temple was the Earth?

If the forests were our church

If holy water – the rivers, lakes, and ocean

What if meditation was our relationships?

If the teacher was life

If wisdom was self-knowledge

If love was the center of our being.

- Ganga White

Chapter One: My Yoga Story

“I didn’t find yoga, it found me. When I started to realize everything is interconnected I quickly learned yoga is everywhere. It’s in the way you breathe, how you treat others, how you react to everyday life...Yoga is all around us.”

-- Michelle, Yoga Studio Owner

I started flirting with yoga solely for physical reasons: I wanted the body it could offer me, simple as that. I remember going to my local gym, inexpensive yoga mat from the *Target* next door in tow, thinking I was going to make a fool of myself in this class. Accident prone and notoriously clumsy, I was nowhere close to the picture of a yogi I had in my mind. The countless yoga DVD commercials I had seen throughout my young adult life showed lean, flexible women who gracefully glided from pose to pose. At 5’3” and 170 pounds I was the furthest thing away from these women. What had I gotten myself into?

My fear of yoga was magnified the moment I walked into the small exercise room at the gym – the class was packed! Power Yoga, 60 minutes of a “rigorous practice, a great form of cardio and toning,” was on the menu, and the regular gym patrons were front and center of the class. Floating in a sea of the latest *Lululemon* yoga attire collection, I, along with my cotton leggings and tank top, stood out like a sore thumb. Making my way to the back of the class to hide, I found a spot in the corner and proceeded to struggle through *chaturangas* and downward dogs, jaw clenched, dripping sweat and letting my mind run a 1,000 miles a minute during *savasana*.¹ Despite all the

¹ Chaturanga, also known as Four-Limbed Staff Pose, is one of the positions in the sun salutation sequence. Savasana, often times referred to as Corpse Pose, is the last pose of any yoga class. Yoga postures will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Two: Yoga Defined.

awkwardness I survived my first yoga class. Two years would pass before I attempted yoga again.

During my two-year yoga hiatus, I discovered running and through it lost fifteen pounds, a feat I celebrated by running my first half marathon. After the half marathon a friend had the crazy idea to sign up for the New York City Marathon lottery. The chances of being selected are less than 2%. Embracing the concept of ‘carpe diem’ I threw my name in the hat and a couple of months later was selected as a lottery winner – marathon training and panicking began. Training for a marathon is a long, hard process that takes its toll on your body. Muscles are pounded for hours on end while logging in 40, 50, 60 plus miles in one week. It was in the midst of marathon training that a runner friend recommended I try yoga again, to stretch my aching muscles. Determined not to repeat my dreadful first yoga experience I opted to try a class at a local yoga studio instead of a gym.

My second time flirting with yoga was still solely physical. All I wanted was to relieve the tenseness and pain training brought with it, but that’s where the similarities end. They say everyone deserves a second chance and yoga sure proved that saying right. I fell in love with yoga on our second date. Though I was stiff as a board from all the running and struggled to keep up throughout the class, I found myself enjoying the environment and vibe at the yoga studio. There were absolutely no distractions: no treadmills outside of the class, no people looking in through glass walls. All of the awkwardness of the gym was replaced with soothing aspects like Diana, the yoga instructor.² Diana gave me a lot of corrections during class, leading me to believe I could do it: I could be a yoga practitioner.

² I have changed all the names of instructors to protect their identity. Through this thesis project I interviewed 10 yoga teachers from all walks of life, disciplines and perspectives. Diana, my first yoga teacher, was one of the instructors I interviewed.

After the second class came the third ...and now, two and a half years later, I practice yoga five to six times a week. Through yoga I have lost 25 pounds, have eliminated several forms of medication, and have been happier than I have ever been. My friends call me a yogi since I practice yoga, yet I initially hesitated to use the word to describe my relationship with yoga. As a Christian, I often struggled with the word yogi for fear it may imply I no longer believe in Jesus. I know that sounds silly, but many who do not know about yoga, including the Christian community, don't understand how both can coexist. My trip to India led me to yogic texts and gave me a new found appreciation for other world religions and spiritual practices.

I am no longer hesitant to call myself a yogi. On the contrary, I'm very proud to do so. Because of yoga I am more aware, mindful, and able to see beauty even in the common things in life. I hope my yoga story and this thesis impacts you in a positive way and tempts you to check out a yoga class or two. You won't regret it! Today and always, the light within me recognizes, admires and respects the light within you. Namaste.



Flipped Dog Pose

Chapter Two: Yoga Defined

“Did you know there are eight limbs of yoga? I know many people who have practiced yoga for years and still don’t know that. Most people focus on the pranayama and asanas but there is so much more to the practice of yoga.”³

-- Diana, Hatha Teacher

What is yoga? The term yoga comes from the Sanskrit root *yuj* meaning “to yoke, to bind together.” In traditional texts yoga is defined as the process of union between the individual self (*atman*) with the transcendental self (*brahman*).⁴ Simply defined, yoga is the practice of asanas (postures) and meditation in order to achieve a profound understanding and insight into the nature of existence.⁵ The desire for greater spiritual freedom and a deeper self-understanding were the driving factors behind the genesis of the yoga practice. Yoga is not new; in fact, classical yoga dates back more than 5,000 years.

Archeological records of yoga date back to the Harappan culture (2500-1800 B.C.) in present-day Pakistan.⁶ A number of soapstone and terra cotta seals were found depicting figures seated in positions similar to yoga *asanas*. One of the seals is widely accepted to be the prototype of the Hindu god Shiva,⁷ who is considered to be the original

³ Pranayama, or breath work, is the fourth limb of Ashtanga Yoga. Asanas, or postures, is the third limb. Both are fully defined starting at page 13 of this chapter.

⁴ Definition of yoga is according to Pantajali, who is accredited with compiling one of the earliest texts about yoga and the most prevalent yoga theories of his time. He wrote the foundational system for “Ashtanga Yoga”, the discipline widely known as classical yoga today. Most current adherents practice some variation of Patanjali’s system. Eliade, Mircea. *Pantajali and Yoga*. Prague: Schocken, 1975, 64.

⁵ Flood, Gavin. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge, U.k.: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁶ Feuerstein, Georg. *The Shambhala Guide to Yoga*. Boston: Shambhala: 1996, 280.

⁷ The Tantric hatha yoga text, the Gherandha Samhita, claims Lord Shiva taught as many as 840,000 asanas. Today only about eighty four are commonly practiced. Ibid, 289.

teacher of yoga *asanas*. The *Upanishads*,⁸ widely considered the earliest holy text with Hindu, Buddhist and Jain spiritual traditions, depict drawings of Lords Shiva and Krishna in meditation and yoga poses. In the *Bhagavad Gita*,⁹ the word yoga first appears when Lord Krishna advises Arjuna to begin the practice of mindfulness and being. Because Lord Krishna uses the word yoga over 100 times in the Gita, both as a noun and a verb, the *Bhagavad Gita* is held as a key yogi text. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, yoga is a voluntary practice that is fueled by love and therefore reveals and sheds light onto our life. The practice of yoga heightens awareness and helps hone the “determined force that moves us towards the mysterious secret, and connects us with the wonderfulness of existence, of being and of all life.”¹⁰ The ultimate goal of yoga is *moksha*, or liberation, which is achieved by uniting the individual with the universal. The concept of liberation or salvation is not unique to yoga; it is in fact the driving factor behind most world religions today. That said, it is important to note yoga is not a religion; rather, it’s a spiritual technology.

For the most part, religions are based upon the belief and worship of God or gods that exist outside oneself. Yoga has no set of fixed beliefs and does not worship one or many gods. Though the foundations of yoga as we know it today had great contributions from the Hindu faith, the core of Yoga’s philosophy is focused on the individual and his/her journey. “Yoga is a system of techniques that can be used for a number of goals, from simply managing stress better, learning to relax, and increasing limberness all the

⁸ The word Upanishad means “to sit at the feet of a master.” There are close to 200 Upanishads in the text, collected over thousands of years and addressing different aspects of spiritual practices. The Upanishads are regarded by Hindus for containing truth and describing the character needed to obtain freedom. Brodd, Jefferey. *World Religions*. Winona: Saint Mary’s Press, 2003, 725.

⁹ The Bhagavad Gita is a holy Hindu text; it is a 700 verse scripture that is part of the epic Mahabharata. The Gita is written as a narrative between prince Arjuna and his guide, Lord Krishna. The Bhagavad Gita devotes an entire chapter to traditional yoga practice (*asanas*, *pramayana* and meditation) as well as *karma yoga* (yoga of action), *bhakti yoga* (yoga of devotion) and *jnana yoga* (yoga of knowledge). Ibid, 736 - 739.

¹⁰ Ghosh, Catherine. “Krishna’s 10 Definitions of Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita.” *Elephant Journal*. Accessed March 2, 2014. www.elephantjournal.com/2012/02/kirshnas-10-definitions-of-yoga-in-the-bhagavad-gita/

way to becoming more self-aware and acquiring the deepest knowledge of one's own self."¹¹ Yoga does not worship an external figure or god or subscribe to one particular religion; yoga is a series of lessons and techniques that help tap into the spiritual aspects of the world. Yoga is a spiritual technology. A spiritual technology is a collection of techniques that aid spiritual growth and open the door to experiencing higher states of consciousness.¹² Spiritual technologies help the individual find balance in their life and find the essence of who they truly are. Things like prayer, devotionals, worship and meditation are spiritual technologies – they all exist with the goal to bring mankind closer to a higher understanding. Yoga, grounded in meditation, is a spiritual technology anyone, no matter their religion, can apply in everyday life. When asked about the intersection of yoga and religion, Michelle, yoga studio owner, said:

Yoga knows no creed. Though yoga began in the East and is considered to be founded by Eastern religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, yoga doesn't ask you to worship anything or anyone. I am not required to believe in Shakti or Buddah to know my body, meditate and open my mind to the world. That's the beauty of the yoga practice, it truly is for everyone.

As Michelle eloquently explains, yoga is not a religion; it is a state of action and not devotion. The practice of yoga regards the body as the temple, the source of the ultimate consciousness. Because the world is multi-faceted yoga states that ultimate consciousness has many aspects. The individual must know the following paths in order to be united with the universal: *jnana yoga* (knowledge), *bhakti yoga* (devotion), *karma yoga* (action or selfless work), *raja yoga* (meditation), *mantra yoga* (sound) and *hatha yoga* (purification of the body-mind).¹³ These six paths and pillars of yoga are known as the

¹¹ Singleton, Mark. "Yoga's Greater Truth." *Yoga Journal*. Accessed September 27, 2013. <http://yogajournal.com/wisdom/2610>.

¹² James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Middlesex, U.K.: 1984, 108.

¹³ Bodian, Stephen. Feuerstein, Georg. *Living Yoga: A Comprehensive Guide for Daily Life*. London: Greener Books, 1993, 88.

Yoga Sutras of Pantajali.¹⁴ The six paths of yoga were traditionally passed down from teacher to student through oral teaching and practical demonstration; this is the guru/disciple relationship.¹⁵

It is in Pantajali's *Yoga Sutras* that *Ashtanga* yoga, the most widespread form of yoga in America, is defined. *Ashtanga*, meaning "eight limbs" is composed of eight guidelines or steps to live a purposeful life. The limbs serve as a "prescription for moral and ethical conduct and self-discipline; they direct attention toward one's health; and they help us acknowledge the spiritual aspects of nature."¹⁶ *Yama*, the first limb, is the equivalent to the golden rule of yoga, asking the practitioner to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The *Yama* limb addresses integrity and how we should conduct ourselves with our peers. *Niyama*, the second limb, pertains to self-discipline and developing your own practice. Whether your routine involves prayer, or attending temple, *Niyama* is all about evolving spiritual observance and creating purposeful habits.¹⁷ The third limb is the most widely known by Americans, the *Asanas*, or postures. Following the yogic view, the body is the temple of the spirit and must be taken care of in order to obtain spiritual growth. Through the practice and repetition of *asanas*, the practitioner develops the habit of concentration while releasing pent up energy and tension. *Asanas* ready the body for meditation. *Pranayama*, or breath control, is the fourth limb of *Ashtanga*. *Pranayama* is the practice of gaining "mastery over the respiratory process while recognizing the connection between the breath, the mind, and the emotions."¹⁸ The fifth limb is *Pratyahara*; this limb is one of withdrawal. The practitioner must learn to

¹⁴ *Yoga Sutras of Pantajali*, also known as the ancient *Hindu doctrine of Concentration of Mind Embracing and Mnemonic Rules*, are believed to date back to 400 BCE. Brodd, *World Religions*, 725.

¹⁵ Yogananda, Paramahansa. *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1998, 93.

¹⁶ Carrico, Mara. "The Eight Limbs." *Yoga Journal*. Accessed March 10, 2014. www.yogajournal.com/basics/158

¹⁷ Eliade, Mircea. *Pantajali and Yoga*. Prague: Schocken, 1975, 78.

¹⁸ Carrico, "The Eight Limbs."

tune out the external world in order to cultivate inner focus. When focusing on *Pratyahara* it is important to look back and identify habits that are not conducive for growth and eliminate them. *Dharana* is the sixth limb, its aim is to learn how to withdraw from internal distractions. The mind is a busy place. Learning how to focus our attention on a single point is sometimes the hardest part of yoga practice.¹⁹ The seventh limb of *Ashtanga* is *Dhyana*, or meditation. In *Ashtanga*, each limb builds on the next, and by the time the practitioner addresses *Dhyana* he/she should draw on previous experiences perfecting the initial limbs. At the *Dhyana* stage the mind has been quieted, external distractions eliminated, breath controlled, and the body prepared through *asanas*. The eighth and final limb of *Ashtanga* is *Samadhi*, the state of ecstasy. At this stage the practitioner transcends the self altogether, gaining a deep understanding of interconnectedness with all living things.²⁰

“Though I aim to perfect the eight limbs I know many of my students don’t necessarily know about them. Yoga is a deep spiritual practice. Whether you choose to accept it is your choice,” said Ashley, Vinyasa Flow teacher, when asked about the eight limbs of *Ashtanga* yoga. Ashley went on to say that “most students come to yoga for *asanas* and its benefits in areas such as injury recovery, stress, or weight loss. I believe they gain all these benefits and more, even if they aren’t aware of it.” Though American yogis may not be aware of the eight limbs of *Ashtanga* yoga, most are exposed to the third and fourth limbs, *asanas* and *pranayama*, while attending yoga. Every person who attends a yoga class learns dozens of postures to move his/her body into new forms and patterns. There are hundreds of *asanas*, all of which are grouped in categories describing

¹⁹ Eliade, *Pantajali and Yoga*, 84.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 84.

the function of the posture (such as standing poses or forward bends).²¹ Within these categories there are dozens of variations which evolve each pose from beginner to intermediate and advanced. Tree pose, for example, starts with the practitioner firmly placing one flat foot on the ground while placing the other foot on the calf and eventually raising the arms as he/she works on balance. If the pose feels easy the practitioner can raise the foot from the calf to the inner thigh; if that feels too easy the practitioner can arch his/her back and extend the arms towards the back and so on.

In combination with *asanas* yogis learn how to breathe consciously while practicing. The first step in learning how to breathe in yoga is *ujjayi* breathing, or becoming aware of the breath and moving from automatic to conscious breathing.²² In *ujjayi* the breath is drawn from the back of the throat, often making an oceanic sound as the practitioner inhales and exhales. By focusing on the sound and mechanics of the breath students learn how the different poses affect their breathing, making yoga a practice of conscious breath.

Ujjayi breath helps students focus on their breathing as opposed to potential distractions in class. This is how yoga teaches us to mend the separation between the mind and body. If we bring both functions together, like we do in yoga, in everyday life we begin to realize everything is interconnected.²³

Connecting breath to poses is equally important as connecting pose to pose. The practice of *vinyasa*, or the synchronization of poses and breathing in a flowing sequence, is a technique widely used in most classes today.²⁴ *Vinyasa* classes offer students a continuous flow of postures by following the natural structure of *asanas*. This is why yoga classes begin with standing poses and end with seated poses. *Surya namaskar*, or

²¹ Christensen, Alice. *American Yoga Association Beginner's Manual*. La Jolla: Touchstone Press, 2002, 75.

²² *Ibid*, 77.

²³ Michelle, yoga studio owner.

²⁴ Christensen, *American Yoga Association Beginner's Manual*, 81.

sun salutation, is one of the most widely known examples of *vinyasa*. The *surya namaskar* sequence is composed of eight basic poses, starting with mountain pose or *tadasana*. The practitioner moves from mountain pose to upward salute (*urdhva hastasana*) while raising his/her hands and breathing. After taking a deep breath the practitioner lowers down to *uttanasana*, or standing forward bend. Bringing his/her legs back, a plank pose follows *uttanasana* before lowering down to *chaturanga dandasana*, or four-limbed staff pose. Upward dog, also known as *urdhva mukha svanasana* is next, culminated by downward facing dog or *adho mukha svanasana*.²⁵ The transition from posture to posture is started and ended with inhalations and exhalations, fluidly connecting breath and movement.

Yoga practice always ends with *savasana*, or corpse pose. *Savasana* can last anywhere from five to twenty minutes, depending on the amount of time available at the end of class. Laying on the back, arms and legs comfortably apart, students are asked to close their eyes and release tension and effort from the body in order to rest.²⁶ *Savasana* is not a cool down; it's a complete ceasing of movement which allows the central nervous system to rest without external stimulation. For this reason, *savasana* is regarded as the most important pose of yoga. Most of us live in a hyper-active society with little opportunity to be still and release pent up tension in the body. *Savasana* teaches us to do exactly the opposite of what we do every day by giving in to complete relaxation. "Savasana looks like an easy pose but it's perhaps the hardest pose to perfect. We as human beings have a hard time lying still and disconnecting. *Savasana* aims to teach us to disconnect and serve as a gateway to meditation," stated Sean, *Ashtanga* teacher, when asked about the importance of *savasana* in yoga classes. "Walking out of a yoga practice

²⁵ Ibid, 77.

²⁶ Ibid, 77.

without taking *savasana* is the most counterproductive thing any yogi can do. The entire yoga practice culminates in *savasana*, it's important to take it and enjoy it.”

What is yoga? Simply defined, yoga is the practice of *asanas* (postures) and meditation in order to unite the individual with the universal. Dating back over 5,000 years, the practice of yoga and its fundamentals are explained in Hindu religious texts such as the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* and yet yoga is not a religion. Yoga is a spiritual technology, a tool to help the practitioner become more self-aware and in turn better understand the world. Because the world is multi-faceted yoga offers six different forms to make sense of the world: knowledge, devotion, selfless work, meditation, sound and purification of the mind. These six paths and pillars of yoga are known as the *Yoga Sutras of Pantajali*, it is in this text that the eight limbs of *Ashtanga* yoga are defined. *Ashtanga*, the most widely practiced form of yoga in America, has eight limbs to guide the practitioner in the process of connecting the mind and the body: *Yama*, *Niyama*, *Asana*, *Pranayama*, *Pratyahara*, *Dharana*, *Dhyana* and *Samadhi*. The art of flowing from pose to pose, *vinyasa*, teaches yoga students to decipher the relationship between postures and breathing, preparing the practitioner to reach complete relaxation in *savanasa* pose. The last pose in the yoga practice, *savasana* prepares the body for meditation – it is the bridge between the physical practice of yoga with the spiritual. Yoga, sometimes mistaken as a passive activity, is rather active – yoga is a state of action. How did this ancient spiritual technology make its way to America and become the fitness craze it is today?

Chapter Three: Coming to America

“While I got certified to teach in Rishikesh it became clear that most Easterners practice yoga for pranayama and meditation. Westerners on the other hand come to yoga seeking fitness and stress management. If you find the right place to practice you’ll walk away with both physical and stress relieving advantages as well as a community, fellowship and supporting environment.”

-- Kathy, Vinyasa Flow Teacher

When I first started research for this thesis I visited the “Religion and Spirituality” section of *Barnes and Noble* only to find yoga texts were not in those shelves; they were in the “Sports and Fitness” section. That should not come as a surprise to someone living in the United States. With obesity and chronic illnesses like diabetes on the rise in this country, Americans have grown increasingly interested in their physical health and yoga provides a means to that end. In the previous chapter we discussed how yoga came into being, and in this chapter we’ll uncover how yoga came to America and how it has grown to permeate the fitness culture in the United States.

The earliest formal introduction of yoga to America is documented on September 1893 by Swami Vivekananda,²⁷ who spoke about yoga at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Illinois as part of the World’s Columbian Exposition. Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu monk, was invited by Harvard Professor John Henry Wright to be the representative of Hinduism to a crowd of seven thousand. In his speech Vivekananda spoke about yoga as a spiritual technology, a means to find “harmony and peace and not

²⁷ Vivekananda is credited with raising interfaith wareness in the West, not just in America but in Japan, China and Canada. He is also recognized as a major force behind the revival of Hinduism in India. Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana (Research Center). <http://www.vyasa.org/>

dissension.”²⁸ It was this speech at the Parliament of Religions that opened doors for Vivekananda to lecture all across the United States, bringing his message of yoga to the masses and establishing him as a key figure in bringing yoga to the Western world.

Thirty years later, in the 1920s, Paramahansa Yogananda, an Indian yogi and guru, founded the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) in Boston.²⁹ Yogananda began the SRF to “foster a spirit of greater understanding and goodwill among the diverse peoples and religions of our global family, and to help those of all cultures and nationalities to realize and express more fully in their lives the beauty, nobility, and divinity of the human spirit.”³⁰ Yogananda began teaching *kriya yoga* at the fellowship, a branch of yoga primarily focused on meditation techniques. After founding the SRF Yogananda lectured across the United States, spending the major portion of his life in America. In 1946 Paramahansa Yogananda published *Autobiography of a Yogi*; it became a best seller and is still read widely today.

It was also in the 1920s that doctors and psychiatrists began to examine the physiological control demonstrated by yogis. These early studies focused on “human beings’ ability to affect their autonomic nervous system by documenting the ability of yogis to slow down their heart rate.”³¹ It was these studies on the benefits of yoga postures, yogic breathing and meditation that sprouted organizations such as the *International Association of Yoga Therapists* and *Integrative Yoga Therapy*. The growth of yoga as therapy has been on a steady rise since the 1920s, with more adoption in the last 30 years than ever before. When asked how yoga therapy is used in mental health practice today, Desai, Central Florida Mental Health Counselor, said:

²⁸ Luca, Dave. *Pathways to Joy: The Master Vivekananda on the Four Yoga Paths to God*. New World Library, 2006.

²⁹ The Self-Realization Fellowship headquarters is now in Los Angeles. The organization is still thriving.

³⁰ Yogananda, Paramahansa. *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1998, 388.

³¹ Feuerstein, Georg. *The Shambhala Guide to Yoga*. Boston: Shambhala: 1996, 51.

Many of my patients never sit down and truly quiet their mind. As a practitioner of yoga myself I know one of the best ways to learn how to quiet your mind and pay attention to what's going on inside yourself is yoga. Patients suffering of anxiety, stress or hypertension are perfect candidates for yoga therapy, many of them are open to trying yoga out and find great benefits from practicing.

Gentler practices like *Yin Yoga* and *Yoga Nidra* are perfect for those seeking stress relief and relaxation. *Yin Yoga*³² is a slow-paced practice in which practitioners hold poses for longer periods of time, typically a minimum of five minutes. Targeting tendons and connective tissue, *Yin* increases circulation, improves flexibility and helps improve energy flow, releasing stress and negative emotions. *Yoga Nidra*,³³ or “yogi sleep” is done primarily from the *savasana* posture (corpse pose) and is therefore accessible to anyone, including those with physical impediments. The student follows a series of instructions while lying still, reaching a deep relaxation state that helps reduce tension and anxiety. My *yoga nidra* teacher often says one hour of *yoga nidra* is equivalent to eight hours of a good night's sleep. With practices like *yin* and *yoga nidra* more readily available at studios, counselors and psychiatrists are recommending yoga as therapy to their patients more and more. In turn, several insurance companies are covering some of the studio and class fees for policy carriers.

In the 1930s Sri Aurobindo, philosopher and yogi, founded *Integral Yoga* as “a path of integral seeking of the Divine by which all that we are is in the end liberated out of the ignorance and its undivine formations into a truth beyond the mind, a truth not only of highest spiritual status but of a dynamic spiritual self-manifestation in the universe.”³⁴ Because Aurobindo spent part of his life in England, integral yoga began to be practiced in the United Kingdom and eventually made its way to America. I visited *Sri Aurobindo*

³² Yin Yoga originated in China and brought to the United States in the late 1970s by martial arts expert Paulie Zink. Maria, Lisa. “Soothe Yourself.” *Yoga Journal*. Accessed November 1, 2013. <http://www.yogajournal.com/practice/2677>

³³ Kumar, Kamakhya. *A Handbook of Yoga Nidra*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2013.

³⁴ Sri Aurobindo. *The Synthesis of Yoga, Fifth Edition*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1999.

Ashram in New Delhi, India, a little over a year ago, and had the opportunity to become acquainted with part of his legacy.



Sri Aurobindo Ashram in New Delhi, India

Though *Integral Yoga* is no longer one of the predominant branches taught in the West, its methodology can be found interwoven in some of the styles practiced by Americans today. The concept of getting out of your head, and transcending to look at the interconnectedness of the world not just in your yoga practice but in everyday life is credited to Aurobindo, and it's one of the reasons Westerners seek yoga.³⁵

At the same time Aurobindo founded *Integral Yoga*, Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, the father of modern yoga, standardized asana sequences as they are known today.³⁶ Four

³⁵ Ibid, 88.

³⁶ Yoga sequencing is discussed in greater detail in the “Yoga Defined” chapter.

of his disciples, Pattabhi Jois, B.K.S. Iyengar, Indra Devi and Desikachar³⁷ founded most of what are now known as the traditional schools of yoga in America today: *Iyengar*, *Ashtanga Vinyasa*, *Viniyoga*, *Sivananda*, *Kundalini*, *Kripalu* and *Integral Yoga*. By far the most known and practiced branch of yoga in the United States is *Ashtanga*. *Ashtanga* yoga, also called *Ashtanga Vinyasa* yoga, was formalized by Patanjali over two thousand years ago, though it was Sri Pattabhi Jois of Mysore (Krishnamacharya's disciple) who put together the series of postures at the core of modern *Ashtanga* practice.³⁸ *Ashtanga Vinyasa* yoga links *asanas* together in a flowering sequence grounded by *ujjayi* breathing. Under the guidance of a teacher, the practitioner begins with the first series of *asanas* and gradually progresses to the more advanced postures as he/she advances in his/her practice. In addition to *Ashtanga Vinyasa* yoga both *Sivananda* and *Kundalini* yoga are popular practices in America. *Sivananda* yoga, founded by Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh and brought by Swami Vishnudevananda to America in the 1950s, is a gentler practice than *Ashtanga Vinyasa* and is centered on relaxation, chanting and meditation.³⁹ *Kundalini* yoga was established as a school of yoga in the United States by Yogi Bhajan, the leader of an American Sikh sect, and involves the use of mantra, rapid breathing known as "breath of fire," and visualization.⁴⁰

In 1968 The Beatles visited an ashram in Rishikesh, the yoga capital of the world, garnering worldwide media attention. Fifty years after The Beatles visited Rishikesh I spent the first days of 2013 in this beautiful town, at the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains, visiting *Parmath Niketan* ashram. With more ashrams than the eye can see, Rishikesh is widely known as the yoga mecca; it hosts the famous World Yoga Festival

³⁷ Desikachar was Krishnamacharya's son.

³⁸ Jois, Sri K. Pattabhi. *Yoga Mala*. New York: North Point Press, 2002, 101.

³⁹ Sivananda Yoga Vedanta. "The Five Points of Yoga." *International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres*. Accessed December 2, 2013. <http://www.sivananda.org/teachings/fivepoints.html>

⁴⁰ Larson, Gerald James. *The Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies: Yoga: India's Philosophy of Meditation*. Motilal Banarsidass, 2008, 476.

every year in March. Most of Rishikesh's visitors are seekers, or yogis who purposefully disconnect for extended periods of time to deepen their yoga practice. Though I did not stay for as long as I would have liked, I did have an authentic seeker experience while staying at *Parmath Ashram*. Every day I welcomed the day at *Satsang*,⁴¹ followed by an hour of yoga and two hours of meditation. And every day ended with *Aarti*⁴² along the holy Ganges and communal dinner with other seekers at the ashram. Though the ashram where The Beatles stayed has fallen into disrepair, most of it now reclaimed by the forest, Rishikesh remains a magical place.



Aarti along the Ganges River in Rishikesh, India

⁴¹ The Sanskrit word Satsang means “true company” and is the practice of listening to or reading scriptures every morning and meditating on the words. Though I do not speak Hindi, I loved sitting in the Satsang room and listening to the Swami sing the words to various prayers and lectures from religious Hindu texts. It was absolutely beautiful. Rosen, Steven. *Essential Hinduism*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006, 81.

⁴² Aarti is a daily ceremony celebrated every morning and night to thank the sun and gods for another day of life. The ceremony always involves songs for the deities, lamps and offerings. Ibid, 98.

The 1960s was a time of liberation, not just for The Beatles and Americans as a whole but also for immigration laws. Several laws were passed that favored a larger wave of Asian immigrants coming to the United States, many of whom flocked to the newly established yoga schools around the country. Up until this point, all of the major founders of yoga schools in America had gurus and strong ties back to India. The physical part of yoga was still directed toward preparing the body for meditation. However, as Americans began to flock to yoga classes and studios in the 1970s and 1980s, the yoga practiced in this country slowly began to lose its spiritual connections. With “exercise experts” like Richard Simmons and Jane Fonda a series of weight loss and fitness programs and fads hit the shelves and American consumption began to rise. American focus centered on losing weight and looking good, and slowly but surely yoga became unhinged from its Indian lineage, taking on new names as new styles hit the market. New forms of yoga like *Bikram*, *Power*, *Anusara*, and *Jivamukti* brands, completely stripped from spirituality and focused solely on the physical attributes of yoga, became household names.

The sensationalism The Beatles brought to yoga continued through the 1990s with celebrity endorsements from stars like Madonna, who attributed a newly svelte physique to her yoga practice. Without question, the decades from the 1970s through the 1990s catapulted yoga into the fitness craze. Knowing yoga’s history and purpose, it still surprises me that yoga became all the rage in the West. After all, yoga’s founders and most devout practitioners believed in the renunciation of extravagance. Historically, the world’s most fervent yogis live a life of simplicity. In stark contrast, Western society values a life of complexity, often times built on the tenets of buying and acquiring possessions. Varanasi’s famous *Sadhus*, lifelong yogis who chose to live a life of abandonment, renounce all their possessions in order to achieve spiritual liberation.

Money talks in the West, and yoga's foundation is far from that ideal, at least in the East. The West has learned to make a business out of yoga, a topic discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six.

When I visited Varanasi, known to all Hindus as the holiest place in India, I became fascinated with the *Sadhus* who lined the streets. Up and down the Ganges River, day and night, the *Sadhus* wandered the streets with little more than their saffron colored robes to their name. As a Colombian American, giving up all my possessions sounds anything but appealing. Growing up in Cali, Colombia, my family lived a very simple and humble life. We didn't have a car, or air conditioning units or the latest fashion, but all that changed when we moved to the United States. My parents worked hard to give my siblings and me all the comfort we couldn't have in our native land, and today, years after immigrating to the States, I've grown accustomed to living a comfortable life. My family's journey to America flashed before my eyes as I encountered the *Sadhus*, the materialistic side of me feeling sorry for the life they lead. How could they leave the comfort of a home for the uncertainty of the streets? Yet, when I spoke to some of them and looked into their eyes, I saw contentment, peace and even happiness. These yogis have outgrown the need to rely on money and the material possessions in order to be happy. One of the *Sadhus*⁴³ I met while visiting an ashram gave me a piece of advice to carry back to America with me. "At the end of your life," he said, "all that will matter is what you have in your heart. Your youth will fade, your riches will disappear, but all that won't matter if your heart is full."

⁴³ I must issue a disclaimer when it comes to *Sadhus* in Varanasi and throughout the major holy cities in India. Due to the influx of Western tourists in the last 50 years there has been an increase of fake *Sadhus* who want to make money out of Western interest. It is not uncommon for a "Sadhu" to come up to a tourist, give them an unsolicited blessing by placing a marking on the third eye and immediately ask for money. When visiting India it is wise to be careful of such phonies and not fall into that trap.



Sadhu in Varanasi, India

Much like the 1990s the history of yoga in the 2000s is one of growth. Yoga classes are a standard at most gyms and even groups who previously opposed yoga are offering alternatives. Due to its Hindu roots many Christian churches in the West have shunned yoga practice by “believers”, or Christ followers. The day I told my family I was

going to start practicing more regularly the first thing they asked was “Why? Aren’t you a Christian?” The misunderstanding of yoga as a religion rather than a spiritual technology has caused uproar in the Christian church for many years. As more Christians became exposed to yoga in the secular world more and more of them began to practice, some of them feeling conflicted. In 2001 some of the more orthodox Christian branches decided to offer a “Christian alternative to yoga” called *Praise Moves*.

Since yoga is a part of the Hindu religion (the poses in yoga are “offerings” to the 330 million Hindu gods), we do not call Praise Moves “Christian yoga.” That would be an oxymoron, or a contradiction in terms. Imagine trying to blend a religion (Hinduism) with a personal relationship centered on the Person of Jesus Christ (Christianity) – it cannot be done. That would be like someone calling herself a “Christian Buddhist” or a “Christian Hindu.” You’d think she was confused, wouldn’t you?⁴⁴

Praise Moves goes on to say it offers a series of stretching and strength building poses interlinked by scripture. While doing *Praise Moves* the practitioner meditates upon a given scripture, bringing him/her closer to God while being active. As a Christian myself I find offerings like *Praise Moves* ignorant and completely off base. Anyone who takes time to study the history of yoga knows it is not a religion. The practice of yoga is meant to bring more awareness, what you use that awareness and interconnectedness towards is entirely up to you. Christianity and yoga can and do coexist.

From guru beginnings to the creation of several branches, the practice of yoga has grown immensely since Swami Vivekananda first lectured on it in the 1800s. Today, regardless of which form of yoga you practice in America, no one can deny the practice has been secularized. Did yoga have to become mainstream in order to take off in America? The next chapter will explore the state of yoga in America today.

⁴⁴ PraiseMoves: The Christian Alternative to Yoga. “About Us”. Accessed October 14, 2013. <http://praisemoves.com/about-us/>.

Chapter Four: Yoga Today

“Typical gyms don't let you go into the inner/spiritual yoga .People that come to do yoga at a gym are looking for the physical aspects of the practice.”

-- Diana, Hatha Teacher

January is my least favorite time to go to my yoga studio because it gets very crowded. New Year resolutions front and center in everyone’s mind, my studio goes from feeling big and spacious to looking like a sardine can. My arms and legs typically stretched out and wide are now considered lethal weapons – I’m so close to the people next to me I can knock them down any minute. In January my poses begin to shrivel up, looking crooked and tight because the last thing I want is to knock someone over while we’re trying to be *zen*. It is also in January when most of my friends who never take up my invitations to come to yoga all of a sudden want to come to a class. My studio at the beginning of a new year is the perfect example of the popularity of yoga today. With the propagation of *Ashtanga Vinyasa*’s strengthening poses and challenging postures, the American perception of yoga has dramatically changed. No longer is yoga simply a relaxation mechanism, it is now a rigorous practice that yields amazing physical results. Today, thousands of Americans are hurrying to yoga class, fighting over floor space for their mats, and taking hours of yoga a week with the goal to achieve the svelte, fit physique now associated with yoga, or the “yoga body” as many of my fellow practitioners call it. In 2012 Americans spent over \$30 billion in yoga products including yoga classes, DVDs, clothes, and yoga accessories.⁴⁵ From *Sports Authority* to

⁴⁵ Yoga Journal. “Yoga in America Study 2012.” Accessed January 10, 2014. ["http://www.yogajournal.com/press/yoga_in_america"](http://www.yogajournal.com/press/yoga_in_america)

Target, the American consumer can find the latest celebrity endorsed yoga DVD in a store near them.

A few months ago while watching reruns of *Tia and Tamera* on a Sunday afternoon (yes, I watch brainless reality TV) I was surprised to discover Tia Mowry has a yoga DVD. In order to lose baby weight Tia began practicing hot and *Bikram* yoga consistently, shedding pounds in the process and falling in love with the practice. Just a few months after practicing yoga she felt compelled to put out her own yoga DVD. The only problem was that she was nowhere near ready to teach anyone a class. Lacking certification and experience but having fame on her side Tia's agent paired her up with Tara Stiles, the owner of NYC's *Strala*, one of the most popular yoga studios in the country. The description of their yoga DVD, *Tia Mowry's Core Yoga with Tara Stiles*, highlights why most Americans seek out yoga: "Tia Mowry and yoga superstar, Tara Stiles created a strengthening yoga routine that burns fat, tones abs and tightens your core. This 45-minute workout harmonizes the body through balance and core exercises, while honing in on your inner yoga technique." Long gone are the guru-disciple relationships and strong ties to spiritual practice-- in today's market place, Tia Mowry's DVD is just one of thousands of examples.

On the surface yoga shares many similarities with other forms of exercise. Most American yoga students today don't understand yoga as a spiritual technology; instead, most interpret yoga as a physical routine, a fitness or aerobics class that makes you sweat and gives you a great workout. American body image, centered on an often times exaggerated image of what men and women should look like, has overshadowed the true purpose of yoga. While yoga has many physical benefits, its appropriation as a fitness system is reinforcing a result-oriented approach to body ideal that practitioners bring with

them when seeking out yoga. The same can be said about other popular “fitness trends” like aerobics, running, and dance, to name a few. And though this view is not necessarily a bad one it only fits one aspect of yoga and neglects the rest. Yoga is meant for more than just physical activity, it’s about being present and aware of your mind, body and soul.

As part of this thesis I took different styles of yoga classes in diverse locations and compared the overall experience as a yoga student. I took classes at a gym, a studio outside of my “home studio”, the park and at an ashram. My hands on yoga observations began at a yoga class at the gym *24 Hour Fitness*. It had been years since I took a yoga class at a gym and I was curious to see if the experience is like I remembered it. The first thing I noticed when walking into the gym was the attire of the class attendees (more on that in chapter six), as well as the kind of mats practitioners brought to class (standard, off the *Target* shelf yoga mats as opposed to the brand name, heavy duty mats I had grown accustomed to practicing with at a studio). Our teacher introduced herself, asked us to start from a seated position and began to walk us through poses. The class was held in a group fitness exercise room with glass walls and as we practiced several of the people walking by stared into the room, looking at the group of us transition from pose to pose. The practice was rigorous, fast paced, and was over before I knew it. There was no talk of breathing, *drishtis*⁴⁶, practice dedications or *oms* of any kind – the practice was 100% physical, nothing else. When asked the difference between teaching yoga at a gym versus a studio Lydia, who teaches *Vinyasa Flow*, states:

When I applied to teach yoga at a local gym I was surprised to discover all you need to teach is a group fitness certification. I have a few classes at studios and they all require 200 hours of training in order to teach any class. Because of the

⁴⁶ Meaning “point of focus”, practitioners are asked to select *drishtis* during class in order to better maintain their balance. Christensen, *American Yoga Association Beginner’s Manual*, 80.

number of hours required to become certified through *Yoga Alliance* I've found most teachers also have a practice of their own which really enriches their classes. It's a huge difference.⁴⁷

Cindy, another *Vinyasa* Flow Teacher believes every teacher should start off at a gym.

“At a studio you can cut the students' focus with a knife but at a gym there are a lot of distractions and as the teacher you have to learn to reel the students in. Teaching at a gym can teach you valuable skills to bring to the studio environment once you're ready to make that transition.”

There is also a lot to be said about the difference in spaces between a gym, a studio and an ashram. Studios are built with yoga in mind, many with temperature controls to offer hot yoga variations, mirrors for students to see themselves in the postures and correct their stance as the teacher instructs. “Studios provide more of a haven, there's not a lot of clutter and minimal distractions which helps students really listen and get into the practice,” said Kathy, *Vinyasa* Flow Teacher. As a student, I agree with Kathy's stance, especially when it comes to gym rooms with glass walls. Yoga poses aren't always graceful, and some practitioners struggle transitioning from pose to pose. The studio provides a more focused environment with minimal distractions.

⁴⁷ For full details on Yoga Alliance refer to Chapter Seven.



Full Circle Yoga, Winter Park Florida

Though the majority of the teachers I spoke to favor studio spaces versus gym group exercise rooms, several of the teachers interviewed felt the space where you practice is irrelevant. “You can practice anywhere, a true yoga practice is an inner practice. Life isn’t quiet, practicing in a quiet space may not give you the opportunity to learn. Regardless of where you practice, it’s important to have little distractions and to completely disconnect,” Diana, *Hatha* and *Yin* Teacher stated. Ashley, *Vinyasa* Flow Teacher, feels the same way, “you can practice anywhere, as long as you have room to move you’re good!” Ashley is one of the founders of *Yoga at the Park*, a free communal class held every Sunday morning. Participants practice outside, on the grass, with the sun shining down on them at Lake Eola Park. The first time I attended *Yoga at the Park*

(October 2013) there were about 20 students, in February 2014 there were over 100 yogis attending the free class. Though practicing out in broad daylight felt slightly uncomfortable at first students quickly overcome the fear of public scrutiny and really enjoy practicing amidst nature. There is a reason why yoga poses have names that deal with nature (tree, downward dog, and fish) – there's something beautiful about practicing outside.



Yoga at the Park in Downtown Orlando

The last place I visited was the *Kundalini Center* in *Baba Siri Chand Ashram* in Altamonte Springs, Florida. When I was in India I practiced at two different ashrams and while visiting Bali I practiced yoga in another. Having experienced the ashrams of the East I was curious to see what my experience was like in America. I will discuss ashram

life in more detail in Chapter Five; however, I would be remiss not to mention practicing in an ashram while discussing yoga in America today. Similar to a studio, ashram yoga halls are built with the practice in mind. The space is open and clean like a studio but the environment is much richer. Most ashrams have pictures of their guru and Hindu gods or signs on the walls amongst other things. Though many American practitioners may not recognize the insignia on the walls it adds character to the experience, making yoga at an ashram a truly cultural delight.



The Kundalini Center, Altamonte Springs Florida⁴⁸

Yoga in America today is alive and thriving, yet it looks very different from the yoga of India. While Easterners grow up knowing the cornerstones of yoga not many Westerners know about yoga philosophy or understand it outside of the fitness realm.

⁴⁸ Photo credit: thekundaliniyogacenter.com

Rather than selecting a class for their spiritual needs, American students select classes by skimming brief summaries provided by gyms and studios, often times focusing on the rigor and the level of the practice (example: Power Yoga 1-2) and nothing else. The typical class description for Yoga Flow at a gym is: “This class offers postures that are linked together in a dynamic, flowing sequence that works up to a higher level of vigor with more challenging variations of postures demonstrated. Modifications are provided.”⁴⁹ There are no mentions of the spiritual aspects of the practice. Yoga is not advertised as a means to get in touch with your inner being, largely due to the American consumer. When asked about how students select yoga classes in America, Diana, *Hatha* Teacher, stated:

Some students come to class to see how much their body can perform, they like the athletic aspect of yoga. I would say that’s the majority. But there are others who seek yoga for therapy, to escape from physical ailments, tension, stress, anxiety and to seek mental escape. Regardless of what gets you in the door, what keeps them around is that yoga makes them feel better, in an array of ways. All yoga in my book is therefore good because it gets you in the door.

Diana offers a lot of her classes in the *Yin* and *Yoga Nidra* styles, part of the reason why she sees more Americans seeking yoga for emotional benefits. “I don’t care why people practice, even if you come for the physical you get some of the mental benefits of yoga,” says Cindy, *Vinyasa* Flow Teacher, who believes the student’s intentions aside, all yoga is beneficial. Though the vast majority of American yoga students seek its physical benefits there is also an appetite for the restorative aspects of yoga.

Restorative aspects and all, American yoga consumers don’t come to yoga to seek spiritual enlightenment, the sole reason why yoga exists. When asked how much teachers feel they have to deviate from traditional yoga in order to satisfy American consumption, Lydia admitted she accommodates her students by not confining herself to traditional

⁴⁹ 24 Hour Fitness. <http://www.24hourfitness.com/classes/schedules/>

yoga techniques and environments: “Most of the yoga I teach is very asana focused. I sprinkle spirituality by adding an intention to the practice. But I still move quickly and play loud music in my classes, which isn’t what you call traditional.” Ashley, *Vinyasa* Flow Teacher, offers similar classes to Lydia but does not feel she deviates much from traditional yoga, or at least its essence. “Yoga is about reminding us that we’re human, that we’re all on the same path. As long as I’m offering classes that keep my students grounded I’m keeping traditional yoga alive,” said Ashley when asked the same question. Diana, *Hatha* Teacher who holds classes at both studios and corporate environments, said she tries not to deviate from traditional yoga because her job is “to teach true yoga, not what people expect. Sure, I don’t make my corporate class students chant Om in class, but outside of that, I don’t deviate from traditional yoga teachings.” Teachers like Diana keep the principles of yoga alive by asking students to set an intention at the beginning of class. As her students go through the poses she constantly reminds them to breathe, be in tune with emotions and state of mind, and to work through issues on the mat. “Yoga teaches us lessons anyone can apply to everyday life. I remind my students as much as I can that if a pose is hard all they have to do is breathe through it, listen to their bodies and adjust, and be patient. The same principles can be applied during hardships in life,” said Diana.

The state of yoga in America today is one of growth through segmentation. The yoga practiced in the United States does not closely resemble the yoga of India. Yoga is Easterners’ life work, many dedicate their lifetimes in perfecting their practice. Aware of the difference in time and motivation, yoga in America has given birth to different styles to cater to the American masses. Vigorous yoga classes are taught at gyms, studios, and ashrams, each providing a unique space, vibe and experience to the yoga practitioner. The result is a yoga landscape that is uniquely American, catering to the society’s needs for a

more fast-paced practice in a hectic world. While some teachers admit to deviating from traditional yoga to satisfy American consumption, others believe the essence of yoga permeates in yoga classes. Both sides of the fence will be heard in *Chapter Seven: The Yoga Litmus*. The next chapter will highlight the ashram experience in the West and the East, highlight similarities and variances.

Chapter Five: Ashram Life

“I spent most of my life not knowing where to find silence...until I spent time in an ashram. It was my time there that helped me discover the beauty of stillness, peace and silence. It was one of the most meaningful experiences I’ve ever had.”

-- Ashley, Vinyasa Flow Teacher

Five years ago Elizabeth Gilbert’s book, “Eat, Pray, Love” became a best seller, sending an influx of tourists to Italy, Bali and India. Much like Gilbert in the book, Americans flocked to ashrams aiming to find peace and quiet in an exotic destination. The Sanskrit word Ashram means a spiritual hermitage and retreat.⁵⁰ Ashrams offer spiritual seekers a restful place where they can spend time concentrating on spiritual pursuits rather than worldly ones. From stillness to quiet time and meditation, “ashrams offer a safe place for anyone who wants to reflect on big questions like ‘what is my purpose in life?’”⁵¹ Though there are hundreds of ashrams in India, Thailand, Indonesia and several other countries in Southeast Asia, they all follow the same guidelines.

Seekers may come and go, according to their spiritual needs, and the only vows they take are of obedience to the guru and/or swami and that they will respect the community’s conventions. These usually involve participating in a pattern of daily worship and meditation, sharing common tasks such as cooking and cleaning, living a life of great simplicity, and abstaining from alcohol, meat and smoking.⁵²

Ashrams are known for providing safe havens, a tempting thought for overworked Americans. With no technology allowed, set hours, furnished meals and the opportunity to focus solely on you and your journey, ashrams have a wide appeal. In this chapter I

⁵⁰ Swami Swahananda. *Monasteries in South India*. New Delhi: Vedanta Press, 1990, 92.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 92.

⁵² "Ashrams." In *Bloomsbury Guide to Human Thought*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1993.

will share my experiences in ashrams, the central pilgrimage center for all serious yoga practitioners. Comparing my experiences in ashrams of the east versus the west, I will point out similarities and differences, and draw conclusions of ashram life in both sides of the world.



The Yoga Barn ashram in Ubud, Bali

Parmath Niketan, located at the foothills of the Himalayas and right across the holy Ganges River (also known as “Mother Ganga”), is the largest ashram in Rishikesh. With over 1,000 rooms, thousands of seekers visit this beautiful ashram every year; I visited *Parmath* two years ago. During their stay, visitors are asked to adhere to all of the ashram rules and schedule which includes times to listen, practice yoga, meditate, attend talks, perform *karma* duty, *aarti* and eat. Each day begins with the morning bell ringing at 4:20 a.m., and again at 4:50 a.m. to announce morning *aarti*⁵³, which is optional. Much like the evening *aarti* ceremony described in chapter four, morning *aarti* is a ritual. Followers of the swami unlock the gates guarding the Hindu god statues, which are clothed from the night before.⁵⁴ The followers of the swami remove the clothes and circle the statues with incense while the early risers circle the statues while saying prayers, meditating or simply thinking.

⁵³ Aarti is a daily ceremony celebrated every morning and night to thank the sun and gods for another day of life. The ceremony always involves songs for the deities, lamps and offerings. Rosen, Steven. *Essential Hinduism*, 28.

⁵⁴ I was curious why the god statues were clothed each night so I asked one of the volunteers at Parmath. She said Hindus believe the care they show to the statues reflect the care they would give god. Since nights get cold in Rishikesh the least they could do for god was to offer him a blanket.



Parmath Niketan ashram in Rishikesh, India

At 5:20 a.m. another bell rings, this time announcing *satsang*. Meaning “highest truth,” *satsang* is the gathering of seekers to listen to the holy Indian texts, which are believed to be full of truth.⁵⁵ Sitting in a cross-legged position, every attendant listens to the swami read the texts for an hour. Though many ashram visitors do not speak Hindi, the practice of sitting in stillness with eyes closed and on the sounds of the words is encouraged. Many people hold wooden beads called *japa malas* while at *satsang*.⁵⁶ Used by Hindus and Buddhists, *japa malas* have been around for centuries. Traditional strings of *japa malas* have 108 beads, an auspicious number in the East. During the summer and winter solstice many yoga practitioners around the world do 108 sun salutations, a nod to

⁵⁵ Swami Swahananda, *Monasteries of South India*, 92.

⁵⁶ Swami H.H. Pujya Chidanand Saraswatiji. *Peace For Ourselves, Our Families, Our Communities and Our World*. Rishikesh: Parmath Niketan, 2006, 88.

japa malas and their purpose: to help the practitioner focus on one thing at a time.⁵⁷ *Japa malas* are held in one hand and touched one bead at a time, moving on to the next bead after a repetition of a mantra or chant. The use of *japa malas* transcends the ashram community; the beads are widely sold across Southeast Asia because of their artistry. Though most of the tourists who purchase the beautifully carved beads when they visit Rishikesh may not use them for their original intention, they serve as a symbol of the yoga ideal of contemplation and focus.



Yoga Hall at The Yoga Barn ashram in Ubud, Bali

6:30 a.m. marked yoga time as the sun slowly began to grace the edges of the Himalayas, an invigorating scene. The first day I practiced yoga at an ashram I was asked to change my attire. The instructor took one look at my bright, tight *Lululemon* pants and

⁵⁷ I participated in both the Summer and Winter solstice 108 salutations at two studios in Central Florida. The experience was rhythmic, and every sun salutation became more fluid with repetition. It was a great way to give thanks for longer days.

handed me a pair of loose cotton pants that were “less distracting” (her words, not mine). “I wish you could see yoga classes in America, what I’m wearing is on the conservative side,” I said to the instructor, pointing down at my long leggings and long sleeve shirt. (In the next chapter, “Money Under the Mat,” I’ll go into further detail about the differences in yoga fashion between the East and the West.) After an hour of yoga came two hours of meditation. Mats lined along the wall, seekers sit and listen to the instructor guide them through different styles of meditation. The first time in the meditation room can be hard, focusing on the day’s mantra is challenging. Meditation, like any practice of discipline, gets easier with practice. Attending meditation every day, along with the other planned activities in the ashram, is all about building discipline.

The dining hall opens at 8:30 a.m. for breakfast and masala chai (spiced tea with milk). The food at ashrams in East Asia is always vegetarian and incredibly fresh, wholesome and local. Everyone is asked to eat in silence, helping themselves to as much food as they’d like and washing their plate after they are done. It is expected for the practitioner to not only clean after him/herself but also partake in *karma* duty, or “selfless service.” All seekers staying for an extended time are assigned a duty to perform everyday, anything from cooking to rolling out the mats for yoga class to bathroom duty.



Food Hall at Parmath Niketan

The idea is that everyone in the community chips in to maintain the ashram's cleanliness, eliminating any additional distractions that come from a messy or dirty environment.

Some ashrams, like *Aurobindo* in New Delhi, grow their own crops for the food they serve or make their own products like incense and candles. The ashrams who make their own products often have a gift shop for the public to partake in. In the case of *Aurobindo* ashram the profits are used to maintain the ashram, as well as develop educational programs for seekers. *Parmath Niketan*, in addition to having karma duties to maintain the ashram, have various seekers volunteer for charitable efforts. *The National Aviral Nirmal Gnage Conference* is held every year, bringing together environmentalists, scientists, activists and government officials to address cleaning up the Ganges river.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Swami Chinadand, *Peace For Ourselves*, 103.

Parmath Niketan also hosts the *International Yoga Festival* every year. The festival gives the opportunity for attendees to participate in over 70 hours of yoga classes in multiple styles like *Kundalini*, *Power Vinyasa*, and *Iyengar* yoga. Masters of traditional yoga lineages as well as masters of International yoga schools gather every year to spread the practice across the world. Seekers at *Parmath* during the *International Yoga Festival* often serve their karma duty by assisting in the week long festival.



Crops from the garden at Aurobindo ashram in New Delhi, India

After *karma* duty seekers are free to do as they wish for a few hours. There is an array of classes offered at ashrams, not just yoga but spiritual lectures as well. Lecture topics like “the importance of yoga practice” at home are popular with Westerners. Practicing yoga at an ashram is a privilege, and there are many who never get the opportunity to carve out the time the ashram provides. When I interviewed Scott, an *Ashtanga* Teacher who spent

several months in ashrams in India and Thailand, he admitted the ashram lectures were his favorite part of the experience. After attending a lecture on building a yoga practice at home he came back to the United States and began to build an at home practice.

Building a home practice takes tremendous amounts of discipline. Though my at home practice is always evolving, my time at ashrams in Thailand and India gave me the foundation of a solid at self practice. Coming back to the States I missed the calmness of the ashram. The moment I set foot on American soil I was bombarded with emails, texts, technology, things I had left behind at the ashram. And because I hadn't had a lot of the conveniences we have here in the ashrams I frequented I am able to practice at home, in complete silence, every single day. I couldn't do that without experiencing life at an ashram.

The ashram lectures fed all the seekers who attended them with applicable concepts and gentle guidance. We are all eternal students of life and most times require someone to break down concepts into levels we can grasp.

At 6 p.m. evening *aarti* is held at the foot of the Ganges River, it is a *kirtan* ritual and lasts about an hour to an hour and a half. *Kirtan*, meaning “praise”, is a call and response chanting ceremony. Involving the chanting of hymns and mantras, the *kirtan* practice is widespread not only in Hinduism but in Sikhism and Buddhism as well.⁵⁹ Attendants participate by clapping and seeing the fire ritual ceremony held by the river and every attendee is given the opportunity to place an offering in the river. The offerings are flowers and a candle in a dried up banana leaf which is placed on the Ganges to float down stream. Many use the offerings to remember someone who has passed, or to send a prayer down the holy Ganges. There is always time after *aarti* to socialize and get to know other seekers before dinner is served at 8 p.m. A final, optional *satsang* class is held for another hour, and most seekers are usually in bed by 10 p.m. This is the schedule followed by *Parmath Niketan* ashram as well as the two other ashrams I visited in India

⁵⁹ Ibid, 32.

and Bali. Curious to find out if American ashrams followed the same pattern, I visited *Baba Siri Chand Ashram* in Altamonte Springs, Florida.



Baba Siri Chand ashram in Altamonte Springs, Florida⁶⁰

Visiting *Baba Siri Chand Ashram* is like taking a step into Southeast Asia. Surrounded with beautiful shrines and trees, the Altamonte Springs ashram is a sanctuary amidst the city. I was surprised to discover Baba Siri shares a lot of similarities to the ashrams I have visited in the east. The schedule allots daily times for *satsang*, yoga, meditation and lectures. *Baba Siri* also maintains a strict no technology policy for ashram attendees, giving seekers the rare opportunity to completely disconnect from the outside world. The masala chai was delicious, so was the vegetarian food and the company I encountered. Diana, *Hatha* Teacher, has spent several weekends at *Baba Siri*. “It’s been a

⁶⁰ Photo credit: thekundalinicenter.com

savior to me since I got back from India. Coming back to America after an extended stay in India I had huge culture shock. Visiting *Baba Siri* made me feel like I could have a piece of India here. It's a refuge," said Diana when asked about ashram life in America. Much like the friends I made in the Asian ashrams, the seekers at *Baba Siri* were kind and eager to learn, open to exploring the world and all it has to offer. I asked Kira, a friend I made at *Baba Siri* who was having her first ashram experience, what her favorite part of ashram life was.

That's a tough question to answer because there are so many lessons I've learned during my time here. Combining all of those lessons into one I would say I'm walking away from here knowing there is inspiration to be had in the world in every nook and cranny. I think most of us forget to be grateful everyday for everything we have. My time at the ashram has taught me I need to learn to see beauty every day and to share that with those around me.

Though worlds apart, ashram life has a lot to offer to both Eastern and American seekers. Imploring its attendees to carve out time to open their mind, hearts, soul and body, ashrams provide a beautiful experience to anyone who frequents them. This fact doesn't change in America, for there are many ashrams in this nation that can grow your practice and enrich your knowledge of yoga. Whether you're in East Asia or in America, ashrams offer a hyperfocused environment for every seeker. That said, ashrams in America are part of a larger business ecosystem unique to the West. The next chapter will explore the monetization of yoga in America.

Chapter Six: Money Under the Mat

“Our capitalist society exploits anything that is popular and yoga is not the exception. I don’t think people need bright colored pants or expensive mats to practice yoga. At the end of the day, none of that should matter.”

-- Lydia, Vinyasa Flow Teacher

In the previous chapter I mention the first time I practiced yoga at an ashram the teacher asked me to change my purple *Lululemon* pants for “less distracting ones.” Before this teacher’s comment I noticed yoga fashion at my local studio but never really gave much thought to it. Sure, I knew expensive mats and bright colored clothes were a staple in most studios across America, but I never questioned why. Somewhere along my yoga journey I began acquiring *Lululemon* pants, *Manduka* mats, *Yogitoes* towels -- I went full-fledged yoganista.⁶¹ By the time I visited India I had drunk the yoga fashion Kool-Aid. I thought nothing of bringing my *Lululemon* pants with me. It was my first ashram yoga class that made me come back to America with a more observant eye. I began asking myself why and when did yoga become filled with trends – when did it become synonymous with consumerism? The truth is you don’t need bright colored tops, an expensive mat or a \$60 towel to practice yoga, yet in America we’ve perfected the art of making you believe these are all necessities for the serious yogi. In this chapter I will explore the business of yoga in America including yoga clothing, studios and “famous yogis”, painting a picture of how capitalism has affected yoga in America today.

⁶¹ A yogi who is into fashion, a term I made up with my friends.

Valued at over \$13 billion, the market for yoga clothing and active wear is the fastest growing segment of the apparel industry.⁶² As practitioners in America have grown to over twenty million, the clothing industry has taken notice of this hot sector. Out of all yoga practitioners in the United States over 82% are women between the ages of 18 – 44, and over 55 percent of them cite practicing yoga to improve the way they look.⁶³ “The real reason, the whole truth of why women buy it: the gorgeous fashionability. The cachet of looking like a really cool workout person, and the fact that that terrific fabric makes your butt look good,” said Mary Lou Quinlan, CEO of *Just Ask a Woman*, a marketing company specializing in female consumer behavior.⁶⁴ Retailers saw the opportunity to appeal to women’s desire to look visually appealing and began creating yoga clothes, making this group a highly desirable market for any retailer.⁶⁵

Lululemon Athletica, one of the largest retailers of yoga clothing, had net revenue of \$690 million in the first two quarters of 2013.⁶⁶ At an average of \$100 a pair, this number isn’t surprising. There’s a lot of profit to be made when you take into account how much the pants actually costs to make. *Lululemon* pants are anything but cheap, yet in the midst of an economic depression *Lululemon* profits are growing. The Vancouver, Canada company went from having a few storefronts in its native land to spreading all across the United States; malls and outlets across America now have *Lululemon* stores. But the road to the top has not always been a rose-colored one for *Lululemon*; every business is open to scrutiny and the business of yoga is no exception.

⁶² Frojo, Renee. “Yoga Clothing Retailers go to the Mat for Market Share.” San Francisco Business Times. Accessed January 10, 2014. <http://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/print-edition/2012/12/28/yoga-clothing-retailers-go-to-the-mat.html?page=all>

⁶³ Yoga Journal, “Yoga in America Study.”

⁶⁴ Hershings, Sally. “Profits Soar for Yoga Fashion Maker Lululemon.” *MarketPlace Business*. Accessed February 4, 2014. : <http://www.marketplace.org/topics/business/profits-soar-yoga-wear-maker-lululemon>

⁶⁵ Yoga Journal, “Yoga in America Study.”

⁶⁶ Lululemon Athletica Inc. “Lululemon Athletica Inc. Announces Second Quarter Fiscal 2013 Results.” Lululemon. <http://investor.lululemon.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=790281>



*Lululemon pants display in Union Square, New York City*⁶⁷

There's no denying *Lululemon* items are expensive⁶⁸ but their quality is good, items last a long time...that's the way I felt for many years until I purchased a pair of defective *Lululemon* pants. I, like thousands of Americans, purchased a pair of black *Lululemon Wunder Under Pants* that transformed my first yoga class in them into an unintentional peep show. In March 2013 many of *Lululemon's* customers complained about the sheerness of their pants, leading *Lululemon* to recall thousands of pairs. The culprit was the wrong fabric, claimed *Lululemon*, who gave everyone who went into the store with defective pants a new pair of decent ones. Just a month after the sheer pants debacle *Lululemon* found itself under fire again. In November of 2013 Chip Wilson, then CEO of *Lululemon*, issued a statement that made waves in the yoga community. During an interview for Bloomberg TV's "Street Smart," Wilson made the following statement when asked to comment on recent complaints about *Lululemon* pants being too sheer and

⁶⁷ Photo Credit:Getty Images.

⁶⁸ A headband, one of the cheapest items *Lululemon* carries, costs about \$20. At Target a consumer can get a top and bottom for the same price.

not friendly towards full-figured women: “Frankly some women’s bodies just don’t actually work for it...They don’t work for some women’s bodies. It’s really about the rubbing of the thighs, how much pressure is there over a period of time, how much they use it...”⁶⁹ Wilson successfully insulted the majority of the American public. Though the “yoga body” stereotypically has a svelte figure, practitioners come in all shapes and sizes, and not everyone is a size 2. That doesn’t seem to faze *Lululemon Athletica*, which doesn’t offer women’s clothes larger than a size 12. After receiving a lot of backlash from the American public Chip Wilson issued a public apology a week after his statement, citing being “sad for the people at *Lululemon* who I care so much about, that have really had to face the brunt of my actions. I take responsibility for all that has occurred and the impact it has had on you. I’m sorry to have put you all through this.”⁷⁰ Less than a month later Wilson stepped down as CEO of *Lululemon*. The business of yoga is lucrative but it can be cutthroat.

Lululemon is not the only company making the fashion of yoga hip. Clothing giants like *Gap*, *Calvin Klein* and even *Target* have successful lines of yoga wear.⁷¹ The competition amongst retailers has become so steep that just last year *Lululemon* sued *Calvin Klein* for infringing design patents for their “Astro Pant”, which included distinctive overlapping panels of fabric at the waist, a trademark of *Lululemon* pants.⁷² As the world of yoga clothing grows so does the competition between the retailers. Nowadays going to yoga practice sometimes feels more like a runway show than a

⁶⁹ Bradford, Harry. “Lululemon’s Founder Blames Yoga Pants Problem on Women’s Bodies.” *Huffington Post*. Accessed March 2, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/05/lululemon-founder-some-wo_n_4221668.html

⁷⁰ Strachan, Maxwell. “Lululemon Founder ‘Really Sad’ He Offended Women.” *Huffington Post*. Accessed March 2, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/11/lululemon-apology-womens-bodies_n_4254594.html

⁷¹ The marketplace also includes independent retailers such as Onzie, Tonic, Tanya-B, among many others.

⁷² Jones, Ashby. “Downward Docket: The Yoga Pants War.” *Wall Street Journal*. Accessed March 2, 2014. <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390443696604577645891750143350>

practice of self awareness and humility. When asked about yoga fashion in America Diana, *Hatha* Teacher said, “I think Americans get absorbed in what we look like in our clothes, there’s no denying that. However, there is something to be said about wearing yoga clothes and that bringing on a certain mindset for the practice. As long as the clothes you wear help your practice I’m good with it.” Cindy, *Vinyasa* Flow teacher, feels the same way:

Having the right accessories can help you have a better yoga flow. People in my classes seem to care about what they wear because it helps them move better. If a little bright color helps you feel more comfortable expressing yourself through your body it’s serving its purpose. Yoga fashion is about function first, it’s not just something cute to wear.

But not all teachers feel the same. Ashley, *Vinyasa* Flow teacher, could care less what her students wear. “I don’t care who wears what, as long as you’re breathing and moving that is all that matters. If you have the money to buy the expensive yoga clothes and want to rock them go ahead, I don’t care. But no one should ever feel like the cool clothes are a necessity.” The business of yoga goes beyond clothing. We must address the thousands of yoga studios in the country.

With over 20 million Americans practicing yoga, various yoga teachers and even former corporate executives are opening up studios across the land. In my small neighborhood alone four studios have opened within the last six months. “As yoga has grown from a relatively unknown spiritual activity with origins in Hinduism to a cultural phenomenon and multi-billion dollar market with millions of practitioners in the United States, it has become increasingly possible to make a living from teaching it,” wrote *Huffington Post*’s Jaweed Kaleem in the article “Yoga: The New Career Path for Corporate Execs.”⁷³ Michelle, owner of a successful yoga studio in Miami, Florida, left

⁷³ Kaleem, Jaweed. Yoga: The New Career Path for Corporate Execs.” *Huffington Post*. Accessed March 2, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/19/yoga-teacher-career_n_3949026.html

her career as a marketing executive to open her studio. Though at first she made about half what she made in corporate America, as the studio reputation grew so did her income, but it wasn't easy. "Opening a yoga studio is a labor of love, you really have to want it. You have to be willing to put in countless hours to build a strong studio from the ground up but, if you're willing to put in the time, it's worth it. I wouldn't trade owning my studio for the world." Michelle wouldn't share how much she makes as a studio owner, however, she assured me she lives comfortably. I was curious to know how much a typical yoga teacher who doesn't own his/her own studio makes. Based on my conversations with several friends of mine who are yoga teachers, there seems to be a two part structure. If you're a yoga teacher at a gym or fitness center you get paid a flat fee regardless of the size of the class. The fee varies from gym to gym but is determined by your certifications and experience. On the flip side, if you are a teacher at a yoga studio, you get paid a flat fee per every student that attends class. The more students you teach, the more you make. "Your success as a studio yoga teacher depends on how much you market yourself. Coming from a marketing background, I knew the importance of utilizing social media to drive class attendance," said Michelle on her days as a commission based teacher. She goes on to say "the best part of being in the yoga business is getting paid for doing what you love. At the end of the day, your job is to spread the practice of yoga and that's a great thing because yoga is good for anyone who practices."



Laura Sykora sharing a photo on her Instagram account⁷⁴

Michelle brought up the ultimate business of yoga multiplier: social media. In an age where Facebook, Twitter and Instagram provide an array of channels for any business to stay connected to its consumers several yogis are finding a way to harness their power. Take Laura Sykora, Connecticut based yogi as an example. With over 750,000 Instagram followers, Laura has turned her blog, *Two Fit Moms*, into a revenue maker. Laura was originally a corporate professional but after opening an Instagram⁷⁵ account and gaining thousands of followers she decided to join the business of yoga full time. Today, Sykora

⁷⁴ <http://instagram.com/laurasykora>

⁷⁵ Instagram is a photo and video social media platform. It is owned by Facebook and has over 150 million monthly active users. Hernandez, Brian Anthony. "Instagram Reaches 150 Million Monthly Active Users." *Mashable*. Accessed March 2, 2014. <http://mashable.com/2013/09/08/instagram-150-million-monthly-active-users/>

is flown around the world to hold yoga workshops, has several sponsorships from yoga products and teaches at a booming studio. And Laura is not the only one who is “instafamous”, that is, famous due to Instagram. Kathryn Budig, with over 200,000 social media followers across Instagram, Twitter and Facebook combined, has created a yoga empire for herself. It was her social media success, posting difficult yoga poses in an array of locations, that helped her land a contributor role at *Women’s Health* and *Yoga Journal* magazines. A certified yoga instructor sponsored by *Under Armour*, Budig holds balancing workshops all throughout the world. Yoga has become Kathryn Budig’s livelihood, giving her a successful career in American and International yoga circles.

The clothing, studios and social media industries have catapulted yoga into a money making industry. Yoga in its original form requires no equipment outside of a simple mat, and yet, from sweat absorbent mats to copper infused clothing, there are several players in the business of yoga who are convincing the American public otherwise. Consumerism is at an all time high in American consumption of yoga with over \$10.3 billion spent a year on yoga classes and products, including equipment, clothing, vacations, and media, an increase of \$5.7 billion in the last four years.⁷⁶ While we should never turn a blind eye to consumerism, we have a long way to go to grow our mindfulness practice when it comes to this, the business of yoga does have its benefits.

Even in its capitalistic American form yoga is making physical and spiritual contributions to society. For starters, Americans are healthier because of the growth of the business of yoga. As more studios have opened, as more gyms have added yoga to its reschedule, and as more Lululemon stores have opened across the nation, American exposure to yoga is a lot more likely today. True, Americans initially seek out yoga for the physical benefits but they stay due to the byproducts of consistent yoga practice:

⁷⁶ Yoga Journal, “Yoga in America Study.”

increased flexibility, enjoyable activity, and mental health, all of which make America healthier. “Regardless of where and how much Americans practice I believe everyone who does yoga regularly grows more aware of their body. Through yoga we begin to feel comfortable in our bodies and learn to appreciate all the hard work they do for us. In that sense yoga is always authentic, no matter where it’s practiced,” said Kathy, Vinyasa Flow Teacher.

Another benefit the business of yoga has brought to the public is the offering of community; yoga studios also provide a sense of community unlike any I have experienced before. Maybe it is all the endorphins yoga produces, maybe it’s the consistency of their faces every time I go to class, but walking into the yoga studio and being greeted by smiling faces gives anyone a feeling of belonging. We could all use a more kind and happy people in our community. Lastly, the business of yoga has raised interest in travel to India and Southeast Asia, helping Americans become more cultured. Much like I first visited India due to my interest in yoga, so do several Americans every year. Michelle’s yoga studio in Miami organizes one trip a year offering their students the opportunity to visit Rishikesh. The beautiful ashrams I visited in Rishikesh, New Delhi and Ubud depend on American tourism to keep their doors open. Without the business of yoga many of the ashrams around the world wouldn’t be operating today.

Is there such thing as “yoga conscious capitalism” or is that an oxymoron? America, in the midst of a yoga consumerism explosion, is still trying to figure that out. “The yoga industry in the United States doesn’t have it all worked out. We’re still working on cultivating our own yoga-conscious capitalism,” said Lydia when discussing the business of yoga with me during our interview. Does capitalism make yoga less authentic, and is there such a thing as superficial yoga? The next chapter will deeply

explore the concepts of authenticity and superficiality using yoga as a litmus test for society.

Chapter Six: The Yoga Litmus

“I’m very aware that yoga looks very different here than it does in India and East Asia, there is no denying that. However, I’m also very aware of the positive impact yoga in America has had on me, my students, and my peers. There is no denying yoga’s transformative qualities, in America or anywhere else in the world.”

– Puri, Kundalini Teacher

If the definition of yoga is the union between the individual and the universal, the practice of asanas and meditation in order to gain insight into the nature of existence,⁷⁷ is yoga in America authentic or superficial? The yoga practiced in America today does not resemble the yoga of India; does this make yoga in the West less beneficial than that of the East? A student of yoga philosophy having practiced in the East and West, I have seen the difference of yoga practice first hand on both corners of the world. In the East yoga is a spiritual system with a physical component. In traditional, ancient yoga the body serves as an instrument to achieve better spiritual understanding.⁷⁸ The goal of yoga is simply yoga, the union of the individual with the universal. On the contrary, the primary goal of American yoga is to affect and change the body. “In the days of old, yogis gave up their worldly possessions and adopted a system of ancient techniques and rituals, with the intention to unite with God. Today, Americans have a slightly different approach.”⁷⁹ The dominant viewpoint of yoga in America is of yoga as a physical exercise, not a spiritual practice. Yoga in America is a physical system with a spiritual component. Practitioners in the West engage in yoga poses not with the end goal higher

⁷⁷ Eliade, *Pantajali and Yoga*, 64.

⁷⁸ Feuerstein, *The Shambhala Guide to Yoga*, 282.

⁷⁹ Lawson, Jill. “Romancing the Om: A Look into Yoga in America.” *Huffington Post*. Accessed March 31, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jill-lawson/yoga-america_b_1830809.html

understanding of the world, or a spiritual connection, rather, they seek better understanding of their bodies. In this chapter I will expand on the differences between the traditional yoga of the East and the modern yoga of the West, using yoga as the litmus of the concepts of authenticity and superficiality.

When reflecting on yoga's core teachings, such as the concept of detachment, it's surprising to see the growth of yoga in America, a country steeped in consumerism and extravagance.⁸⁰ How can a practice dedicated to praising these opposite of the United States values take off and become one of the largest growing sectors in fitness? The yoga tradition in the East has been upheld and transmitted through the spiritual guru/disciple relationship for thousands of years, a system that is non-existent in American yoga consumption. What happens when yoga is taken out of its spiritual context and placed in a vastly different environment like America? "Take Back Yoga", a campaign started by the *Hindu American Foundation* (HAF), believes the result is the superficial yoga offered in America today.

The popularity of yoga continues to skyrocket in the Western world as yoga studios become as prevalent as Starbucks and the likes of Lululemon find continued success in the mass marketing \$108 form enhancing yoga pants. As this \$6 billion industry completes one Suryanamaskar (sun salutation) after another, there has been growing concern from the Hindu American Foundation about a conscious delinking of yoga from its Hindu roots.⁸¹

The HAF believes yoga is a spiritual practice which has been stripped from its original form in America for the sake of mass consumption. The *Hindu America Foundation* agrees with the famous Swami Rama, one of the first yogis to be examined by Western scientists, who said "the word 'yoga' has been vulgarized and does not mean anything now." Swami Rama's view of yoga in America as a bastardized practice is supported by

⁸⁰ Lawson, "Romancing the Om."

⁸¹ "Take Back Yoga." Hindu American Foundation. Accessed April 1, 2014. <http://www.hafsite.org/media/pr/takeyogaback>

Hindus schools of thought and propagated by disciples like Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati, also known as Swami J, who had a guru/disciple relationship with Swami Rama. Spending several years under Rama's discipleship while living in the Himalayas, Swami J moved back to the United States after Rama passed away in 1996, to advocate traditional yoga practices in America. "Yoga is often not pursued as a spiritual tool because 'everybody knows' (incorrectly) that Yoga is merely a physical exercise program," states Swami J when asked about the state of yoga in America today. "While it is not true that Yoga is a merely physical program, it *appears* that way to the majority of people. Therefore, because of the *appearances*, many sincere seekers are *not* finding authentic Yoga, which has some of the highest teachings and practices known to humanity."⁸²

The word yoga in America may not mean what Swami Rama and Swami J want it to, but it definitely has a meaning – yoga is a giant institution. From yoga studios and ashrams to mass group exercise classes and for profit organizations, the word 'yoga' has become synonymous not with spirituality but with fitness and business in the West. The advent of yoga fashion giants like *Lululemon* and "instafamous" yogis made profitable through social media fuels the debate of American yoga superficiality. The wake of the growth of yoga has sprung not only for profit business but non-profit organizations committed to the growth of the practice in America. *Yoga Alliance*, a non-profit organization dedicated to the passage of yoga throughout America, believes yoga to be of paramount importance in this country. With over 45,000 registered teachers and over 3,000 schools *Yoga Alliance* is one of the most significant players involved in the

⁸² Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati. "Modern Yoga versus Traditional Yoga." Accessed April 1, 2014. <http://www.swamij.com/traditional-yoga.htm>

definition and preservation of yoga in the West;⁸³ most yoga teachers in America are certified by *Yoga Alliance*. When asked about the state of yoga in America today Diana, *Hatha* Teacher, had strong opinions about *Yoga Alliance's* role: “*Yoga Alliance* started with beautiful intentions but has slowly begun to embrace watered down yoga for the sake of profits. I don't believe they are committed to preserving true yoga in this country. There is a lot of superficiality in yoga in America today.” Not all the teachers interviewed agreed with Diana, many felt the organization helped preserve yoga to its purest state. Having one governing body keeping teachers accountable throughout the world is in yoga's best interest.

All throughout the country, the yoga litmus of authenticity and superficiality is discussed with passion. Though there are many who believe yoga in America to be superficial there are others who argue the opposite. While attending a community yoga class at a Miami Hindu temple I had the opportunity to talk to Puri, *Kundalini* Teacher originally from India, and asked her if she agreed with the “Take Yoga Back” movement and the *Hindu American Foundation's* campaign. “Claiming you are the authority in what is authentic yoga just because you are part of the Hindu community doesn't make your claims true. Nobody owns yoga, it is not exclusive to Hindus.” Although Puri loves teaching at the Hindu temple its not the only place she teaches because she wants to spread the message of yoga. To Puri, all yoga is authentic because yoga is beyond superlatives.

When I hear people say things like superficial or authentic yoga I always ask myself if that person is portraying their state onto what they do. People are authentic or superficial, not yoga. For example, If I'm a superficial person chances are the actions I go through will also be superficial. If you are a yoga teacher who is striving to be authentic, know who you truly are and work on

⁸³ Yoga Alliance. “About Us.” Accessed April 1, 2014.
https://www.yogaalliance.org/About_Yoga_Alliance

becoming better, everything you do – including practicing and teaching yoga – will be authentic.⁸⁴

The concept of yoga and authenticity are deeply entwined in traditional and modern yoga. In traditional yoga, Pantajali's *Yoga Sutras* define the yogi path as one founded on the pursuit of authenticity. According to Pantajali, yoga helps the practitioner fully understand the main aspects of human life, including the senses, breath, body, mind and relationships. Understanding these aspects reveal the truth behind all aspects of life, uniting the individual practitioner with the rest of the universe.⁸⁵ It is Pantajali's definition of authenticity as a journey to understand the main aspects of life that fuels the modern yogi stance of all yoga as authentic because of its nature. Yoga, in any form, always encourages us to look within and become more aware.

Regardless of your motivation for practicing in America, or the style practiced, one thing holds true: every yoga class reinforces an active practice of awareness. A student attending yoga for the first time knows he/she won't be sitting still in yoga – attending a class will require active participation and mindfulness. In order to move from pose to pose the practitioner has to be fully present, evaluating his/her body and staying attune to his/her breath. As he/she sits quietly at the end of class, the practitioner realizes the voices in his/her head become easier to turn down with commitment and concentration. Even in its bastardized Western form, yoga is making great contributions to our society — both physically and spiritually. In the article *Romancing the Om: A look at Yoga in America Today*, Lawson states:

Americans who spend time on their yoga mats are becoming more diet-conscious, environmentally-savvy, and genuinely interested in living a happy life. Poised and self-assured, today's yoga practitioners are leading a massive movement toward

⁸⁴ Puri, Kundalini teacher.

⁸⁵ Eliade, *Pantajali and Yoga*, 52.

something the world has not yet experienced. The timing of yoga's popularity in America might just be a saving grace.⁸⁶

As more Americans discover yoga many of them are making more conscious decisions like watching what they eat or taking time to breathe when dealing with difficult situations. The teachers I interviewed referred to this phenomenon as “on and off the mat.” Sean, *Ashtanga* teacher, always ends his classes with “I hope you take today’s lessons on the mat to your life off the mat, remembering to breathe through any challenges that arise.” Though students may not realize it yoga is teaching them more than stretching -- it’s reinforcing valuable life lessons and equipping students with techniques that are applicable and practical in everyday life. “Yoga is a relationship and like every relationship it teaches you about who you are, who you want to be and the ebbs and flows of life,” said Kathy, *Vinyasa* Flow Teacher, when asked about the contributions of yoga in America today. Cindy, studio owner and *Vinyasa* Flow teacher, agrees. “In yoga you learn to listen to your inner teacher, to become attuned to your intuition. You can use this knowledge to deal with any situation you have to deal with, whether you’re in yoga class or not.”

As the practice of yoga in America grows so too does the debate between authentic and superficial yoga in the West. Yoga in the East, regarded by many as authentic yoga, is a spiritual system with physical aspects. In contrast, yoga in America is widely accepted as a physical system with spiritual aspects, leading some to label it as superficial yoga. Exploring Pantajali’s definition of authenticity as the pursuit to know life’s main aspects, it becomes clear that yoga in the West is not superficial, for it helps you become more attuned to the senses, body, mind, breath and relationships. Though it’s true that yoga in America looks very different than yoga practiced in the East, it is also true that yoga in America is not superficial. Lydia, *Vinyasa* Flow teacher, brings the point

⁸⁶ Lawson, “Romancing the Om.”

home: “The word superficial implies something is happening at the surface. Yoga happens at the core, when you go inward and allow the time to know who you are better. By its very nature yoga cannot be superficial.”

Chapter Eight: Savasana

“What’s the future of yoga in America? I hope it’s one of love, acceptance and understanding. Whether there are thousands of practitioners or just 10, as long as those practicing are connecting who they are to the world yoga will always burn bright.”

– Puri, Kundalini Teacher

When I began this thesis the original intent was to point out how bastardized yoga in America is and how we, the practitioners, should look back to the East for guidance again. With little idea of how yoga arrived in the West, I sought out to discover its metamorphosis from its original roots. I was perplexed by how yoga became the fitness craze it is in America today but thankful it had because that is how I initially discovered it. Spending a full year researching yoga philosophy, reading the holy Hindu texts, interviewing therapists and yoga teachers, and practicing a varied mix of yoga styles, I managed to live out the definition of yoga: I binded my individual self to the universal. The universal I am referring to in this case is the universal view of yoga, shedding my individualistic, American perspective for the sake of a more holistic one. Through this thesis, *America the Yogiful: Insights into American Yoga Culture Today*, I tracked the metamorphosis of yoga from the East to the West. I explored the concepts of authenticity and superficiality, using yoga as a litmus test. The snapshot of yoga in America revealed vast differences from its original form and yet, yoga in America today continues to contribute to society in incredible ways. Americans are becoming more self conscious, taking better care of their bodies and taking the time to explore their inner being. Americans are also mobilizing community outreach efforts like offering yoga in prisons or underserved communities. Yoga in America is alive and well!

Dating back over 5,000 years, depictions of Hindu gods in yoga poses are found in Harappan terra cotta seals, the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Though most of the early citations of yoga are in Hindu texts, the Buddhist and Jain schools of thoughts were also pivotal in the shaping and procreation of yoga as we know it today. Yoga is used by the East as a spiritual technology, similar to prayer or worship. Helping the individual find balance in his/her life, yoga reveals the essence of who someone truly is through its teachings and paths. *Jnana* (knowledge), *bhakti* (devotion), *karma* (action), *raja* (meditation), *mantra* (sound), and *hatha* (purification) yoga are the six pillars of the practice set forth in Pantajali's *Yoga Sutras*. The *Yoga Sutras* break out each pillar into different categories including *Ashtanga* yoga, the most widely practiced form in America. *Ashtanga* yoga is composed of eight limbs that help the practitioner build self discipline and edify him/herself in order to understand the supernatural aspects of the world. The eight limbs are *yama* (integrity), *niyama* (discipline), *asanas* (postures), *pranayama* (breath control), *pratyahara* (withdrawal from external factors), *dharana* (withdrawal from internal distractions), *dhyana* (meditation) and *samadhi* (ecstasy); the limbs experienced by Americans are the third and fourth: *asanas* and *pranayama*. Through techniques such as *Vinyasa Flow*, the interconnecting of yoga poses based on their categorization, and *ujjayi*, breathing with intention from pose to pose, Americans are exposed to these ancient tenets of the *ashtanga* yoga practice.

The first documentation of a yoga lecture in America dates back to the 1893 World Columbian Exposition where Swami Vivekananda spoke to a crowd of seven thousand about the benefits of having a yoga practice. His message of acceptance and self awareness struck a chord with the public, opening doors for gurus like Paramahansa Yogananda to establish fellowships and lecture across America. The fascination with yoga officially hit the scene in the 1920s as scientists began to examine the incredible

control yogis had over body functions such as breathing, body temperature and blood pressure control. As word of mouth of the benefits of yoga grew, cultural icons like The Beatles visited ashrams in India, writing songs about their experience and opening the door to consumerism in the West. The advent of “fitness experts” such as Richard Simmons and Jane Fonda in the 1990s brought yoga outside of schools and into the homes of millions of Americans. As yoga became more mainstream its original guru/disciple relationship was replaced with the certified teacher/student relationship we know today.

Slowly but surely, yoga’s spiritual ties began to break in America, extracting just the physical aspects of the practice in order to appeal to the American ideal of fitness; yoga became a fitness craze. Studios and gyms opened all over America, thousands of teachers became certified and corporations began to take notice. The fashion industry, noting the appeal of appealing workout clothes in the yoga community, began to mass produce industry giants like *Lululemon*, *Manduka* and *YogiToes*. The advent of social media propelled both companies and individuals into stardom, seeing the rise of “instafamous” yogis all over the country who make a living through yoga. With over 20 million Americans practicing in 2012, the yoga sector became one of the fastest growing in the country. Even ashrams, long believed to be exclusive to the East, began to emerge in America as the sensationalism grew. Offering the same promise as the ashrams in India, ashrams in America allow its visitors to completely disconnect from technology and external distractions. A strict schedule devoting time to prayer, meditation, yoga and karma duty (self-service), ashrams continue to be a safe haven for seekers everywhere looking to deeply focus on self reflection.

Yoga in America looks very different than the yoga of its forefathers, but that doesn’t make it superficial. According to Pantajali, authenticity in yoga is the journey of

understanding the main aspects of life such as the senses, breath, body, mind and relationships. Because all yoga, including the versions of yoga offered in America, encourages practitioners to look within, it is authentic. American yogis are taking the lessons they're learning on the mat, such as breathing through challenging poses or simply taking the time to breath consciously, and taking them off the mat to their everyday lives. Speaking from personal experience, I have learned a lot of valuable lessons any time I have practiced yoga, here in America or in the East. In Chapter 2, verse 48 of the *Bhagavad Gita* Lord Krishna tells Arjuna: "Yoga is mental and emotional steadiness. To become established in yoga, practice selflessly; practice with the mind steadily self-content through both successes and failures." Every student practicing yoga anywhere gets glimpses of this way of life and over time learns to embrace it.

Where does yoga in America go from here? I believe yoga will continue to play a big role in American society. Universities in India have begun issuing Masters degrees in yoga, a future possibility in America as universities like Loyola Marymount begin to offer yoga classes within their programs. Athletes and Hollywood stars now have personal yoga teachers to travel with and guide them in practice everyday; this is the closest thing we have to a guru/disciple relationship in America. I believe as more teachers become certified yoga will become more affordable, and individual, one-on-one sessions will become more popular. Lastly, as yoga continues to grow outside the gyms and studios and onto parks, counseling sessions, corporate settings, prisons and hospitals, yoga will be a more prescribed form of medicine. Insurance companies will cover things like studio fees under their wellness programs and more counselors will prescribe yoga to their patients. Going beyond gyms and yoga studios will also bring yoga to more frequented places, potentially airports and doctors' offices. The future of yoga in America is one of continued growth for years to come.

All yoga practices are closed with *savasana*, the complete ceasing of all movement to soak up the benefits of the practice. Although *savasana* looks like an easy pose where the practitioner lies on his/her back, palms up, eyes closed, in complete rest, *savasana* is actually the hardest pose to master. The human mind is a busy place, blocking off internal and external distractions is a lifelong exercise and the reason why every practice ends in *savasana* – to help each of us learn to relax, disconnect and meditate. Looking back at the last year of my academic career and the work for this thesis I have learned a lot, struggling through various poses and learning how to breathe in the midst of it all. After four years in the MLS program I feel ready to take *savasana* and enjoy the benefits of a rigorous, exciting academic career. *Namaste*.



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"On my honor, I have not given, nor received, nor witnessed any unauthorized assistance on this work."

- Carolina Castaneda