

Yoga in Edinburgh: For the Mind or For the Body?

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It is hard to imagine a practice in which individuals might chant a sacred song from thousands of years ago; activate their quadriceps until their legs shake; send their feet soaring into the air, pressing their palms into the earth; observe flickering candles in every corner; or sweat profusely alongside high-tech ellipticals. Yet all these activities are possible components of the practice of yoga in the 21st century, as observed in Edinburgh, Scotland, over the past months. This diversity prompts questions as to why an individual would be drawn to one approach over another – what aspect of themselves are they attempting to cultivate? How does the practice enrich their mind, body, and soul?

In this ethnography, I aim to discuss the broader themes of spirituality and individuality that unite the practice of yoga¹. However, I also aim to focus on the significant differences between yoga classes held in two different settings: the gym and the studio. These distinctions (described by the students and teachers who identify with these spaces) become apparent when considering:

- an individual's underlying motivations
- the variation found in the language used to conceptualise breath, along with the positioning of the physical body
- how all of these elements interact with the individual's lived experience of the practice.



FIG 1: Informants 1 (left); Fig 2: Informants 2 (right)

Context

We quickly realised that each yoga practice could be classified into two distinct settings or approaches: the “gym approach” and the “studio approach”. We chose to actively participate in yoga classes offered at two gyms (Centre for Sport and Exercise CSE, and the state-of-the-art Pure Gym facility) and three studios (SoulShine Studio, the upstairs rooms in the University-owned religious sanctuary named “the Chaplaincy”, and

1. This essay is based on a longer ethnography produced by Ellis Reilly, Lauren Durward (also students also enrolled in “Ethnography: Theory & Practice”) and Alice Burgess.

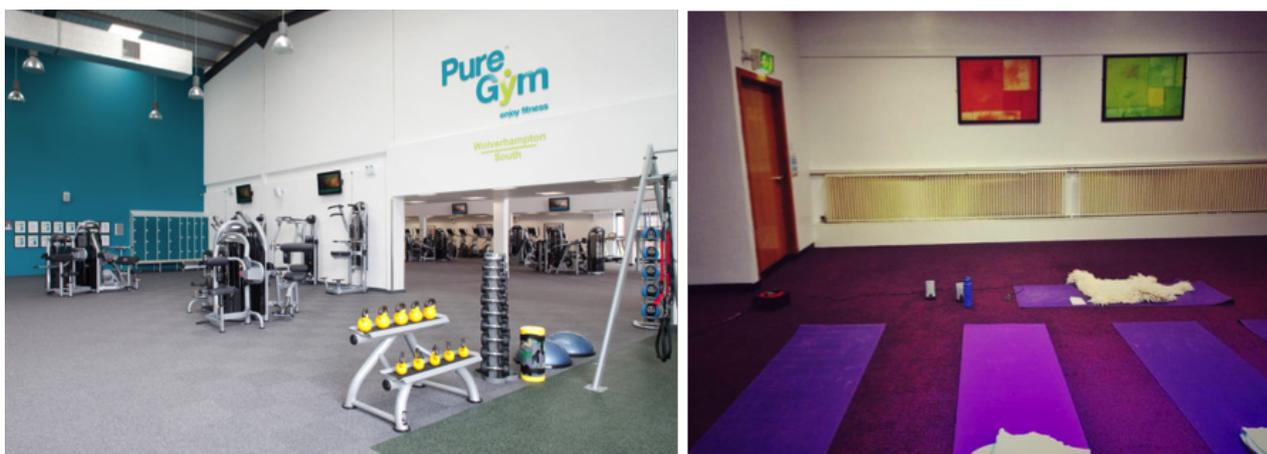


FIG 3: A Pure-Gym yoga space (left); an example of a studio class held in the Chaplaincy (right).

the Yoga Society's classes at "Gathering Essence").

With respect to spatial layout, gym classes were often held in sterile rooms lined with mirrors. In some cases, the yoga class was directly adjacent to other gym members using treadmills and free weights. Fast-tempo music and the sounds of nearby machines were constant. While the focus of the class was on the individual body (and its external appearance), the group setting in gym classes was one of rivalry – students were aware of others around them, their levels of ability, and their own appearance at all times. The studio classes included dim lighting, artwork or tapestries, and comforting elements like blankets, candles, or soft background music (either East Asian chants or instrumental). From the layout to the imparted lessons, being happy with oneself and making personal progress in a group setting was the guiding force.

Universal Themes of Yoga

While we discerned these two distinct approaches to the practice of yoga, there were certain unifying themes that were the foundations of each and every class, irrespective of the setting. These included the sacred nature of the ancient practice, the body-mind duality, and modern trendiness.

The word "Yoga" is derived from the Sanskrit verb "yuj" which means "to unite", emphasising the union of the "mind, body and spirit" (Garrett 2011: 2405). For thousands of years in India, yoga referred to both "a state of cosmic consciousness and the disciplined practice" that led to a state of "ultimate spiritual union" (Swan 2012: ix). Studio and gym yoga teachers alike have embraced yoga's holy past. CSE teacher Eva stated, "The philosophy was created more than 2,000 years ago by people who were the rebels, the punks, because they didn't believe in the Brahman and all those rituals – they went to the forest and that's where yoga was born." Ultimately, the philosophy of yoga has endured over centuries because it has proven to be "amazingly effective at explaining how to live in accordance with nature for greater health, happiness, and wisdom" (ibid: ix).

The overriding goals of modern yoga are "to establish a balance between the internal and external self" (Garrett 2011: 2405) – although, as our field work indicated, the level to which the practice focuses externally or internally varied massively. The internal self (mind and soul) is thus intrinsically linked to the external (body) – a "duality". In fact, the physical activity aspect of yoga prompts higher fitness and "positive effects on brain chemistry", and the additional focus on "relaxation and personal integration" allows for "mindful awareness and personal acceptance" (Ibid: 2405). Furthermore, from a "biopsychosocial" perspective, yoga has positive effects on psychosocial functioning including "self-efficacy, coping, depression and anxiety" (Ibid: 2405).

As Hunt (2010) elucidates, there has been a huge increase in the number of yoga practitioners across Great Britain over the past two decades. By 2008, there were approximately 2.5 million (ibid: 17); a majority of yoga participants in the UK are female, white, college educated, and middle class, (Ibid: 223) which matched the demographic data revealed in our research. .

However, teachers in both studio and gym contexts feel that yoga has been somehow corrupted. Chaplaincy teacher Maggie says that beneath it all is a “deep emptiness and pressure” pointing towards “a collective need for deeper consciousness.” Meanwhile, CSE teacher Eva stated: “The Western approach to yoga is completely misunderstood. Now it’s all about selfies and expensive mats and having a good bum or nice legs – that doesn’t make any sense to me.” While the teachers from both the gym and the studio expressed similar sentiments, the two approaches had fundamental differences.

What Motivates Yoga Students?

As Farmer (2012: 157) notes, “Yoga has never been a stable entity; it can mean almost anything to almost anybody”. Thus, we first considered why the individuals we encountered in both the gym setting and the studio setting chose to practice yoga.

Those interviewed within the gym setting placed predominantly more value on the physical side of yoga and fitness benefits as their main motivation. CSE student Beth Anne claimed, “I began practicing yoga at 16 because I was playing a lot of sports, and I thought the stretching element would be good.” Debbie described the practice as “one of the cool, hip things to do right now”, and initially felt pressured to get the “post-baby body that so many glossy magazines perpetuate”. Finally, Laura corroborated her approach to yoga as primarily a workout. She revealed, “Yoga is a far more intense, tiring form of exercise than I first assumed.”

Individuals who attended classes within the studio setting tended to place higher regard on spirituality and mental wellbeing. Domenic explained: “My goal for yoga is self-actualisation. It’s self-growth – I’m building growth as a person mentally.” For SoulShine teacher Evelyn, who suffered from anxiety for years, yoga offered a tangible solution: “Practicing yoga led to discovering mindfulness. Now I feel both physically and mentally healthy, and that has finally led to me having a good quality life.” Chaplaincy teacher Maggie sums up this concept eloquently: “I use the words yoga and meditation interchangeably. I haven’t graduated from the practice; I don’t think anyone ever does.”

Ultimately, participants’ motivations could be split into one of two models: the fitness model and the spiritual model, which aligned with whether the individual was participating in a class within the gym setting or the studio setting, respectively. This division is corroborated by Penman (2012), who reports that participants motivated by “increased flexibility/muscle tone” were a different group than those who aimed to “reduce stress or anxiety” (Ibid: 151). It seems that the desire for a better quality of life and to improve oneself unites all yoga practices, but whether this is done with a focus on the external or the internal differs.

Language of Breath and the Body

Breath is an experience regularly taken for granted, yet is intrinsic to participants’ understanding and bodily experience within yoga: “In the accomplished yogi, mind, body and breath are brought (as part of deepening practice) to interact with each other”, highlighting the connection between our internal notion of breath and our external form (Hess and Napoli 2008: 337). It has been suggested that breath is the most powerful tool to quiet the mind, especially in our fast-paced modern world (Buckingham and Degen 2012: 333). While paying close attention to an automatic somatic function is just a concept at first, over time, students learn to consciously observe and control their experience of their own body – the essence of yoga.

Within the gym setting, breath remains very much a side note. While core poses often match those in studio classes, reminders to breathe were given specifically to deepen a stretch and get maximum muscular benefit. At the gym, breath functioned as a verb, while in the studio, it functioned as a noun – a tool that enabled an individual to “find their center”, an aspect of conscious agency. A studio teacher stated: “Let your breath travel to any areas where you might hold tension: your legs, your shoulder, your back.” Despite our first instinct to question the sheer impossibility of sending a breath to a specific area, in the position of participant observers, we found ourselves becoming more aware of our own breathing via embracing the “focused breath” (where the breath is a metaphysical object that can be applied, akin to a healing remedy, to the body).

In addition, the language used within the class addressing the physical body emerged as a key area of anthropological interest. Within the gym environment, we consistently found that terms were literal and directions were precise. For example, “Turn to face the purple back wall” was used to describe the positioning of a seated spinal twist. Common yoga terminology was used (such as “cobra”, “downward-facing dog” and “warrior II”). However, the authentic Buddhist, Hindu and Jain names were never used within this setting, and instead, appearance-centered language (i.e. developing abdominal muscles for “bikini bodies”, or holding a pose to create a “tight bum” or “toned legs”) was commonplace.

In contrast, in the studio setting, organic metaphors and nature-inspired imagery were frequent. Studio classes also focused on the inner organs of the body. Chaplaincy teacher Maggie constantly referred to strengthening the central nervous system, cleansing the digestive system, and activating the sex organs, ensuring all systems were in concordance.

How Do All of These Elements Inform the “Lived Experience” of the Practice?

Themes of togetherness, individuality, competition, and self-care emerged when discussing participants’ opinion of, and emotions during, their practice. Whether students were affiliated with the gym or the studio, the group dynamic of the class was viewed in a positive light. Naomi of the Yoga Society stated that she found it crucial to “enjoy the presence of the other people around you – and let that help you focus”; the spiritual comfort of being surrounded by like-minded peers was what kept her coming back week after week. Chaplaincy teacher Maggie believed the studio approach helps people realise the possibility of existing amongst others and looking inwardly concurrently: “Once you see everyone has positives and negatives, you’ll have more compassion for other people who might do things you don’t necessarily agree with.”

While studio students reported closing their eyes and accepting their own bodily limitations, the gym students embraced the competitive nature of the shared space as an inspiration to push themselves physically. While he now finds yoga to be a relaxing way to keep his body in top condition, PureGym student Ed felt such worry about attending the class at first that he watched tutorials on YouTube so as not to “make a fool” of himself in the high pressure fitness environment. Despite enjoying the group presence, CSE student Beth Anne found classes at the gym to be far more competitive than her past studio experiences – she was aware of everyone around her, and their fitness level versus her own.

Yoga Society member Domenic found that yoga in the studio not only avoided generating a competitive vibe but presented concrete methods to deal with complex feelings of envy or self-doubt. Domenic stated: “If you don’t care how other people look at you or what they think about you, it’s so refreshing and powerful. If you’re happy within yourself, that’s what matters.” Nicola of the Yoga Society commented that her spiritual strength that has arisen from her yoga practice has allowed her to “keep a level head and show empathy – especially at work.” These sentiments are reflected in literature; Buckingham and Degen (2012: 334) state that yoga can offer deeper insights into humanity as it both “enables the expansion of one’s own bodily knowing, and heightens the awareness of the non-verbal knowing of others” .

Ultimately, the gym approach was more about the “trend” of yoga – a way to cleanse your mind while building a flexible, toned, strong body. Informed by ancient wisdom, the gym approach was centered on the individual, yet was fueled by a culture of comparison and competition. Far from stress-free, the environment was one of bright lights, constant motion, and an externally focused dialogue. In contrast, the studio practice aimed to embrace the link between the mind, body, and spirit. Chaplaincy teacher Maggie felt the key to yoga is the internal journey: “It doesn’t matter if you are bendy and can fold yourself up and stand on your head, or if you sometimes need to just sit in a chair. It is all about bringing yourself to the practice and meeting it wherever you are.” Studio students felt that yoga would be a practice that they used to ground themselves for years to come – a nourishment of the soul and a lens to view the self and offer crucial perspectives.

However, despite these differences in students’ and teachers’ “lived experiences” of the practice, self-care (setting aside valued time for simply taking care of oneself) was an aspect valued by both the studio and the gym approaches. CSE student Beth Anne said that she feels refreshed leaving the practice, and the



FIG 4: Yoga students lie quietly during the final meditation. (All photos © Alice Burgess)

complete zen can realign not only her spine but also her spirit. According to CSE teacher Eva, the busiest people are the ones who need the wisdom of yoga the most – for both the physical relief it provides and the meditative clarity. Though yoga is linked to a number of religions, there are many (such as our informant Nicola of the Yoga Society) who believe yoga is a religion for people who aren't religious. She commented, "You can bring yourself to the mat no matter what you are going through. It's just you and the mat." She feels that her newfound priority to come to the mat and practice self-care has made her a well-rounded and happy person. Across the board, we found that yoga helps people to attain happiness, either in the form of a healthier and fitter physique or greater mindfulness.

Conclusion

There are universal aspects that unite all yoga practices (namely, the sacredness of the ancient practice, the body-mind duality, and the modern trendiness) yet there are components that differ dramatically in gym and studio settings. Those attending gym-style classes were motivated by the prospect of fitness, whilst those attending studio-style classes concentrated on improving their mental wellbeing. As far as the language describing breath and the body is concerned, in the gym, breath was an aerobic aid; in the studio, breath was a transformative tool. Finally, an individual's conception of their place within the practice illuminated their "lived experiences" – whether they sought competition or collectivism, an external challenge or an internal lens. These lived experiences transcended yoga and impacted participants' daily lives.

Ultimately, no matter what first brought people to the mat, the vast range of benefits inspired them to return. The common curiosity and desire for change confirms that many yoga students are indeed on a journey of personal improvement. No matter the course of one's journey through yoga, the fact that everyone is on a journey in the first place remains at the heart of this ancient discipline.

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