

Virág Dvorácskó

Spirituality on the mat | Exploring contemporary yoga practices

Abstract

This paper attempted to explore Western yoga practices and their connection to spirituality. The goal was a deeper understanding of the modern interpretation of yoga through exploring physical practices, mental and spiritual rituals, and the attached value systems. I focused on individual motivations and experiences. Through these factors, the paper attempted to understand personal values associated with spiritual and mental consumption. I joined an online yoga group and analyzed the community members' posts about their personal journeys. This approach expanded modern yoga practices to the yoga industry and to the attached spiritual and personal values. The online space provided an inside view of personal motivations, and lead to an understanding of group mechanisms among contemporary yoga practitioners in the West.

Introduction

With the progress of time, yoga has transformed from its original roots. It has developed into a mind-body unifier “exercise and meditation” in the modern interpretation. It integrates physical, mental, and spiritual components by combining yoga poses and meditation. The postures provide physical movement while meditation creates mental concentration, inner attention, and emotional awareness. The practice's roots lie in a spiritual tradition and extensive history with far-reaching development paths. Yoga stems from the philosophical roots of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, which emphasize the development of one's soul toward enlightenment. Many types of yoga exist, with varying ratios of bodily or spiritually focused interpretation. My interest was based on the popularity of yoga, especially its Western interpretation. As a religiously rooted cultural heritage, contemporary yoga raised many issues with its presentation as an industry. Cultural appropriation, inequality in availability, inappropriate interpretation, and exploitation are some examples of critics of modern times yoga practices. I aimed to

discover these social and economic forces behind yoga, through the yoga group's point of view. I used Ronald Purser's and Andrea Jain's works, as these scholars have explored and examined modern times' yoga practices and mindfulness trends extensively,¹ and provide a critical examination of the placement of modern yoga and spirituality in the capitalist system. These considerations argue that today's spiritual interpretations are inseparable from consumerism and the market.

To understand the individuals' choices and the working mechanisms of a yoga group, I analyzed an online yoga community. It is a subscription-based yoga community, that provides classes online for its members. The site offers different types of yoga classes through videos on the channel's video library. It also provides guided meditations, live classes, online, and monthly personal life-update titled as "lifestyle vlogs" from the yoga teachers. I found these additional video types useful, as these incorporate more focus on meditations and explore spirituality through personal lifestyle advice. The members and subscribers engaged in conversations in the comment section and created a private group for themselves. This group proved to be a great opportunity to explore personal choices in the yoga industry. The community was a cohesive, online yoga group that shares personal, spiritual, and physical journeys in their online group.

I registered to the platform and joined the live classes daily for the following 4 months. With the permission of the closed group's mediator, I joined the closed Facebook group of the community members and analyzed their personal experiences and daily thoughts through their posts.

I argue that yoga practitioners, - whether consciously or unintentionally - engage in spiritual and mindfulness-promoting consumerism. Methods of yoga have been adopted in the West and reformed to the desire of the market and consumption. By buying products, consumers also enable the spread of a globally promoted lifestyle of an "ancient practice"².

¹ Jain, A. (2014). *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (Illustrated ed.). Oxford University Press
 Jain, A. R. (2020). *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality* [E-book]. Oxford University Press
 Purser, R. (2019). *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*. Repeater

² The term of an "ancient practice" is more complicated and complex than a pure, cultural practice of the ancient times. Since culture and practice cannot be treated and found in isolation from other social influences, I will elaborate on this term in the following chapters of the thesis.

First, I will introduce the roots of Yoga, and explore its spread to the West through history, to later be able to understand the changes and reforms that have made, and led to the present state of yoga, its representation in the West, and the industry around spirituality.

What is yoga?

Textual evidence for the first occurrence of the word "yoga" dates back to the 3rd century BCE. The word is derived from the verb "yoke", with the meaning of unity. It refers to the connection between one's spirituality, soul, and to a "higher way" of living (Feuerstein, 1998).

Hindu scriptures³ and Sanskrit⁴ texts founded the oldest occurrence of philosophy and meditation as the ancient form of yoga practice. The texts dealt with rituals and ontological knowledge, serving as one of the most important pieces of literature on Indian culture and history (Flood, 1996). The ancient remainders summarized Hindu teachings.

The *Upanishads* are massive compilations of texts, including over 200 scriptures. These consist of cultural documents of ancient belief systems and activities attached to them. The *Upanishads* described yoga as a six-step system, naming the limbs of *breath control, withdrawal of the senses, meditation, placing of concentrated mind, philosophical inquiry, and absorption* (Müller, 2010). Yoga's extensive history may be split into four distinct sections for a better understanding of its periods of development. (Newcombe, 2009)

The (1) Pre-Classical period of yoga origin can be traced back over 5000 years. The word "yoga" initially appeared in ancient religious texts. Yoga has evolved and developed over time. The ancient remains of *Upanishads* summarized Hindu teachings and philosophy, maintained healing methods throughout history, and explored teachings of love, death, joy, and pain. Later the *Upanishads* described yoga's six-step system.⁵ The

³ Manuscripts and extensive historical literature relating to any of Hinduism's various traditions are known as Hindu texts.

⁴ Hinduism's sacred language is Sanskrit.

⁵ Naming the limbs of breath control, withdrawal of the senses, meditation, placing of concentrated mind, philosophical inquiry, absorption

teachings of ego⁶ sacrifice through self-knowledge, action, and wisdom were one of the first examples of diversified varieties of yoga.

During the (2) Classical yoga period, many ideas, beliefs, and techniques clashed and contradicted one another frequently. Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* define the classical period as the earliest systematic presentation of yoga. Patanjali was an ancient sage in India, thought to be the writer of early texts on yoga. *Yoga Sutra* is a collection of *aphorisms* in Sanskrit. Aphorisms summarize a brief expression of "universal truth". (Feuerstein, 1975)

During the classical period, yoga was divided into an "eight-limbed path" that included steps and stages. The term "eight limbs" is derived from the Sanskrit term *Ashtanga*, and refers to the eight limbs of yoga: *Yama* (attitudes toward the environment), *Niyama* (attitudes toward ourselves), *Asana* (physical postures), *Pranayama* (restraint or expansion of the breath), *Pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses), *Dharana* (concentration), *Dhyana* (meditation) and *Samadhi* (complete integration). (Ram, 2010)

During the (3) Post-Classical period, yoga masters created a system of practices designed to rejuvenate the body and prolong life. They embraced the physical body, as the means to achieve enlightenment. Their techniques were intended to cleanse the body and mind, with a more physically focused practice. These physical-spiritual connections and body-centered practices led to the creation of what we call yoga in the West: Hatha Yoga.⁷

During the (4) Modern Era, yoga gurus⁸ began to travel to the West in the late 1800s and early 1900s, gaining attention and disciples. Hatha yoga was heavily promoted in India during the 1920s and 1930s, thanks to yoga practitioners. Through the modern era, yoga was performed and became known all across the world, due to the East India Company and the rise of globalization.

⁶ The individual's perception of who they are — their thoughts, desires, and personality, as shaped by the mind. It is referred to as ego. Because it is shaped by one's perspective of the world, it is frequently referred to as the "false self."

⁷ Hatha yoga, according to yogapedia.com, was a comprehensive life philosophy that included how we relate to external and internal experience as a way to inner calm. Hatha yoga has come to be linked primarily with a physical practice in modern times. It's a slow, static pose-holding exercise.

⁸ 'Teacher' is the literal translation. A yogi is a yoga teacher who practices yoga and dedicated towards the practice. Yogini stands for the female practitioners.

Yoga is developed further today by its industry, treating it as a product, labeled as “exotic”. The representation of the East can create an image of a stereotypically spiritual and rich culture, but a “socially and systemically backward” world. (Jain, 2020) The “distant exotic”, romanticized culture simultaneously emphasizes the view that the “advanced” Western culture uses what the East can provide, but at the level of a higher-positioned society. This phenomenon reinforces a problematic, stereotypical view of the East, and commodifies the culture through the industrialization of yoga. The modern interpretation of yoga creates a nostalgia for the practice labeled as “ancient”. It simultaneously brings the self-development narrative for practicing it along with the material goods of the market. This phenomenon emerges the inquiry of yoga today. The personal motivations for practicing and consuming products of yoga and mindfulness promised to be a field of exploration for the aspect of yoga in the 21st century.

Spiritual and physical motivations behind the practice

I will focus on the spiritual limb of yoga, and the communal experience. Spirituality and religious practices are connected to institutionalized traditions. These institutions provide a system of beliefs and group values that can have power over the individual. Thus, personal motivations can be connected to the institutionalized forces of connection. For a better understanding of the systematic forces and motivations behind these actions, I will explore the theory of religion, as a foundation of spirituality, through the online yoga classes.

Modern yoga can be embodied as an exercise. Physical exercise also has underlying symbolic meanings with the spiritual and philosophical limbs. As a result of this symbolic aspect of yoga, the adopted value system unites those who share common values through practice.

Karma, mindfulness, committing to “*watch our thoughts*” and “*rejuvenate by accepting them as they come and go*” are some examples of these values from the online classes. The often-mentioned unity occurs during the sessions: “*Mind, body, and spirit are all one and cannot be clearly separated*”.

This statement not only shows, how present the spiritual aspect in a practice, which also mentions calorie burning and focuses on weight loss many times, but brings up a question: if these can not be separated, then what exactly is that spiritual element in yoga, and more importantly, how it is embodied during practicing it?

The community which enables the individual to connect and practice together, in the online space, has an effect of belonging. Regular practicing, in a certain group, with structured movement can be considered a ritual. It also creates a unifying aspect through the different asanas, symbols, and values of the practice. For that reason, I highlight the religious and spiritual role in society through Durkheim's work on religion, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2018).

Religion, according to Durkheim, is a unified system of beliefs and behaviors related to sacred things. Beliefs and practices bind all individuals who adhere to them in a single moral community. Religion has three basic elements: belief in the transcendent, religious organizations or cults, and ritual (2018).

Based on this theory, the ritual aspect is one of the main connecting points of the individuals. Collective practicing and values according to Durkheim are one of the pillars of religious grouping. Through the practice, they embody the symbols and values of traditional yoga, even if this is unintentional. The practitioners can be divided into two groups according to their intentions: the ones whose aim is based on physical motivator factors, and the other group who chose yoga because of the need or interest to bring spirituality into their life.

Inquiry about spirituality was represented among the posts of the online community. The posts and comments were including questions about the correct interpretation of poses, spiritual interests, yoga philosophy, mindfulness practices, and self-help tools. The members shared their daily thoughts and answered each other's questions about personal preferences. The practitioners were presented with different attitudes towards spirituality and religion. "Spiritual but not religious", "religious but practicing yoga" or seeing yoga as "training but not interested in spirituality". These terms were used as statements for one's personal view and self-described position towards religion and spirituality, without further explanations. The comments highlighted the narrow barriers between one's religion and spiritual belief system. It raised the question about the lines between certain practices.

The fluidity between neoliberal practices and spirituality

This section explores the spiritual aspect of yoga, through neoliberal spirituality. The aim is to understand the practitioners' motivations while using contemporary theories on new age religions, spirituality, and religious practices in consumer society. I argue, that

spiritual habits provide not only a wide range of choices in the market, but also create permeability by mixing spiritual elements with different religious practices. The blurred categories have created a new, intertwined religiosity. I will examine the fluidity of modern society first, to be able to understand spirituality afterward.

Liquid modernity

According to Ronald Purser, neoliberal individualism emerged mindfulness and spirituality. (Purser 2019) Mindfulness assists people in coping with the conditions that give them stress without addressing the root cause of their anxiety (2019). To understand and explore this phenomenon, I will explore modernity first, in the context of contemporary spirituality. The term “Liquid modernity” according to Zygmund Baumann (2000) refers to modern life’s constantly changing quality. The metaphor symbolizes the fluid characteristic of social boundaries, global economics, and identity formation. These aspects of modern life developed a constantly changing behavior and fast-paced mobility. Baumann argues that modernity exists among blurred lines of boundaries. He claims that spheres and categories of life are not separable. The barriers between personal relations and boundaries became fluid, and the focus on individual self-creation is highlighted. Individualism among these fluid relations causes pressure, as the focus is on personal achievement. Liquid modernity suggests that personal mobility depends on the individual’s actions, which puts social pressure on the individuals, to maintain achievements and create their own success. Thus, the need to find tools that can help to deal with this individualistic pressure has grown. The emergence of this pressure can not be simplified to only one component. Modern reality has created needs and desires for spiritual and mindfulness products and practices, which the market serves and thus created a profitable industry.

While achievement became such an important value, it has caused not only motivation towards entrepreneurship but a new form of weight on individuals. Anxiety over personal responsibility for one’s self-creation extends to every dimension of life. (Jain 2020) Productivity became an important aspect, and self-optimization plays an important role in achieving the desired maximization of oneself. One of the pressures of contemporary times is the freedom of one’s self-creation. It suggests that they are in control over life and overemphasizes personal responsibility for one’s chances.

These components create the urge towards a structured solution. In order to reconstruct, heal or search for one's identity, individuals took action and attempt to reach their highest potential. The desire for religious practices and spiritual solutions can emerge from the effect of modern liquidity. According to Baumann, insecurity and uncertainty are the most common features of contemporary life situations. The individual might discover the required instruments to try to re-establish a sense of stability and therefore prevent insecurity and uncertainty (Baumann 2000, 161). This uncertain position is the product of a neoliberal society. It creates a void with the above-mentioned pressure and offers spirituality and alternative religious practices as a filler for that. I will focus on these alternative practices in the following.

Liquid spirituality

From the 1970s onwards, a progressive transition from religion in the direction of "alternative spirituality" or "new spirituality" could be observed in the United States and Western Europe (Rivadossi, 2020). This dynamic peaked in the 1990s when new spirituality movements lost their "alternative" status and merged with the mainstream. The individuals and their search for a new definition of self was the foundation of new spirituality.

Yoga participants expressed their connection towards spirituality in the online group. Their comments and reflections show, how healing and the pursuit of self-maximizing activities appear in their daily lives. Sharing experiences in the common space creates a community attachment and connection. During the written posts, they comment on each other's experiences, reflect on each other's thoughts and fall into conversation about specific experiences and spiritual struggles about emotional waves. *"Growth makes me happy... spiritual, mental, physical.."* is written under 3 shared pictures of yoga postures, showing development in the interpretation of those asanas. The comments reply as: *"Well done"*, *"Keep going, nice job"* and *"Thank you for sharing, we all are developing here, our souls are healing and extending towards a higher self and higher way of existing"*.

The reflections not only motivate each other to continue exercising but refer to a deeper and more spiritual journey. Using expressions like "soul healing" and aiming for a "higher self" demonstrated that the post, which was reflecting on the physical postures, also attached with the spiritual aspects to the practitioners. A different post written by

the community members articulated personal experiences on meditation. *"I realized, that yoga is a way to cope with stress, and with life with all of its craziness, all of its uncertainty, all of its rat race, and all of its tears. Meditation gives me peace and fuels me, to have enough energy, when life happens. These times are especially hard for me, I feel lonely and uncertain about my future, my job, and my health. But I trust the process of yoga. The healing comes through peace and magic happens inside. I trust the universe and manifest every day. This gives me strength from the inside out. Thank you for this lovely community, Namaste!"*

This post summarized the struggle and stress of modern life with the author of the post. For meditation and calming provided by yoga, it is a tool that provides security and does not just strengthen you physically. The post writer clings to this method against a sense of insecurity. The term "trust the process" occurred as a daily motivational quote, and emphasized personal determination. It is a great example of how confident they are in the power of practice and that the practitioners consider it more than just practice.

A deeper meaning is attributed to yoga, which contributes to its healing. The term "healing" was also common in posts. Both in case of physical injuries and referring to mental healing or spiritual search. Anxiety, depression, grief, or stress are some examples of the emotional battles they come across. The posts often have spiritual guidance sentences in a form of *affirmations*. As the post below mentioned the trust in "universe" and "manifestation". Others also emphasized the personal belief in one's ability to attract and create circumstances. *"Nothing holds me back, I'm free and I know always be guided. I have the power to create the world I want to see around me."*

The desire to be able to manage one's desires and to have enough power over one's life is connected with self-creation and achievement-oriented modernity. It is articulated, that the practitioners not only try to reach a certain position or goal but also believe in a power, which will show "*guidance*" for them. Inner strength plays an important role in an individual's value system. They find support by relying on spiritual leadership. *"I'm letting my inner voice talk to me. Listen to my emotions. Accept the past and create the future."* Individual entrepreneurship is highlighted in the form of "*future creation*". Reaching goals and aims tied together with their belief in yoga. The phenomenon of trusting in spiritual guidance resembles traditional religious systems. Belief in a certain element of a higher power, trusting in it, and showing communal interests are all manifested in these posts.

"I trust, I believe, and I am able to create the highest good. The universe leads me, holds my hand, and will show me the way. If there is a wish, there is a way." "I am guided, I am loved, I am grounded. Everything happens for a reason." "We are all one. We are love. I am love. Namaste". The word "Namaste" reoccurs at most of the end of the posts, to say goodbye to each other. Every yoga practice on the online platform ends with a meditation (differing length) and saying "Namaste" to each other. This connects the practitioners, providing them with a language that unifies the group. The comments express their belonging and gratitude towards the members. They feel understood and powerful.

"This community is my second family. Hard times come and go, but this place is my place to recover and to feel loved. Thank you!" "I feel supported. The energy is so powerful here!" "So many lovely souls in one place. So much love, so much positive energy." The community was described by them as "family". As they articulated, the emotional support and shared experiences in yoga create an intimate, supportive space for them online. It affects their sense of belonging and occurred as an opportunity to share personal thoughts, and emotions and to connect. The members often refer to each other as "souls". The personal posts include deep and emotional thoughts while referring to personal thought as the "truth of one's soul". Thus the community shares each other's trust, bonded, and respected each other's "soul". The spiritual community expresses their way of "*feeling positive vibes*" and "*energies*" even through an online space. The yoga exercise videos have titles referring to bodily goals⁹, and the teacher also refers to instructions as "*calorie burning*" or "*weight loss exercises*". This duality shows the way yoga unifies physical practice with a modern focus on the body and the spiritual aspects. Highlighting goals in physical appearances and recovering from injuries comes along with the "rejuvenation after a stressful day" – as the yoga teacher often summarized at the end of the classes.

The online community expressed the spiritual limb of yoga. It represented their desire to heal and to have support. The classes end with a short meditation, focusing on breathing, and expressing "*gratitude for showing up to ourselves on the mat*". Yoga practitioners believed in yoga's ability to provide a solution to almost everything which causes undesired effects on the individual and blurs the lines between physical healing and mental, spiritual guidance. Yoga as a spiritual practice and bodily exercise stand in a

⁹ Titles include "20 min yoga workout, better than the gym", "Full body yoga for result" "Yoga for weightloss", "Detox yoga for better digestion"

middle ground between physical and spiritual healing practices. The common desire for “healing” was reoccurring among the class takers’. “Healing” was used in different contexts and referred to all of the class takers’ motives: the physically driven and the spiritually motivated ones.

“Yoga gives me a pause, helps me to wind down the stressful everyday life. I literally reborn after the class from week to week.” “No other sport could heal my anxiety this efficiently. It really heals the body, the soul, and the mind. It just works.” The expression of healing refers to recovering. The summarized rejuvenation from “the stressful *everyday life*” is emerged and generated the need for the practice. Social constructions achievements, being productive, maintaining active life in the professional area and also in personal relationships cause fatigue and exhaustion. These were motives to find spiritual healing, rejuvenation, and peace on the mat. The post-writers articulated that their motivations for healing are caused by stress or work-life. These components of modern life exhausted them, so they wanted to find a solution in order to be able to continue working, and being productive. The harmful experiences usually came from the system’s characteristics and the individuals were the seekers of possible solutions.

This phenomenon contributes to the peculiarity of liquid modernity. Problems caused by social order articulated the negative effects on individuals, who sought to resolve them. In this sense, individuals are not only burdened with the search for and creation of their own identity, but they also believe that it is up to the individual to solve the damage. Those problems are imposed on them by the system.

Healing was also connected to different spiritual methods besides meditation and affirmations. The online community exchanges experience with Ayurvedic foods and natural herbs. Since ancient times, Ayurveda has been a traditional Indian treatment system. To regain a balance between the body, mind, spirit, and environment, Ayurveda promotes various lifestyle modifications and natural remedies. Internal cleansing is followed by a particular diet and herbal treatments. It not only connects to yoga practice because of the ancient cultural roots of India. Yoga and meditation belong to the Ayurvedic treatment regimens. (Mukherjee et al. 2017) Self-help books, massage techniques, oil-cleansing, and body brushing are some further examples of the tools and practices they share with each other besides yoga-related topics.

The sphere of medicine and physical healing has become a part of spiritual methods. Ayurvedic medicine became popular among spiritual and wellness trends. The

view on certain foods, herbs, and practices is claimed as “exotic” and “ancient” remedies to almost every illness. Just as the name suggests, they offer a solution to stress, anxiety, and depression, while healing joint pain, and headaches, a boost of the immune system, etc. In addition to the popularity of “ancient” products and cures, there are further practices and routines among the group members. Journaling and manifestations, sound bowls, and incense are used. Acupuncture and vegan diet are also popular, and they also share detoxification methods. The diversity and mixing of methods of ancient Indian and modern Western techniques of spiritual therapies and spiritual self-help books also blend into the pattern of liquidity. Crossing boundaries between different tools and methods manifests itself not only in the field of self-help but also in religious diversity. Some community members shared pictures of themselves, while they do yoga with Buddha statues in the background. In many posts, they expressed spiritual thoughts about “energies” and about a “*higher level of existence*”, that can be achieved through meditation. A community member shared her tradition of celebrating Christmas and Hanukkah both in her family. She explained, that she enjoys both traditions and doesn’t want to reject any of the religions, as “*there are many components that seem pleasant to practice*”.

This attitude of selecting from religions, traditions, or beliefs that are favorable or sympathetic to them, and collectively internalizing them was present in the online community. The members also engaged in debating religions, as they saw many forms are compatible with their personal preferences and inquiries. Incorporating and mixing of religion and spirituality can also be an inherent feature of modern liquidity. The lines are blurred, consumerism can be extended not only to market goods but spiritual and religious consumption as well. Personal doubts about religious and spiritual practices, their compatibility, or exclusivity also occurred in the online group. In the following, I will demonstrate these thoughts.

“Melted” practices and consumerism

The lines between religious practices and spirituality have become fluid. Spirituality can offer alternative approaches or renewed methods to religion, but choosing one practice is not exclude another. In addition, the mindfulness industry also provides a place for combining all of the personal interpretations of spiritual, religious, and physical desires. The yoga community members summarized their experiences towards mixing and trying

alternative self-help methods, holistic medicine, and experiencing different aspects of religions. Their standpoint was open to any form of practice that suited their values.

Liberation and individual freedom were important aspects to them, which enabled fluidity and personal preferences in choosing different spiritual and religious practices at the same time. Individual choice was considered as the main importance. It provides personalized forms and self-created practice combinations.

Traditional religions connect to a community. According to Rivadossi, they are unable to participate in the new process of identity creation (Rivadossi 2020). Neoliberal spirituality stands in between individual identity creation, and the traditional connection to a community. The online form of communal experience does not require such a strong commitment to a group. Individuals create and choose their practice, while the extent of their commitment is determined by them. The function of neoliberal spirituality assists between individual freedom and commitment to a value system that creates a sense of belonging. The popularity of mindfulness and spirituality does not replace existing religions and practices but rather places them in a liberated context. It is up to the individual to create their own belief system and practice. The individual can be both a spiritual and a religious practitioner.

The interpretations of religious practices are also existing in liquid modern reality, which causes the blurred lines between spiritual practices next to religious ones. Religion has a new function, as it serves a modern purpose: provides a moral structure and solution to the modern identity re-creation. Rivadossi (2020, 36) calls it a “melted form of religion” which serves the market’s needs and thus feeds the individual to reach towards an already existing framework.

Combinations between Buddhism, and Christianity while using healing crystals and manifestations were present in the community. Most of the time, the crystals returned with photos, to which the group members were given “healing energy”. However, they did not detail their personal experiences, only indicating that it was a “healing method” for them. Several religions were considered sympathetic, and it was even emphasized that they believed that all religions had a common ground that offered the possibility of a “*higher existence*” and internal security. Thus, many members felt the benefits of spirituality, and yoga, while praying or meditating with crystals. Religious holidays were held by several members, and they enjoyed the festive character of those events.

The structure of religion is still playing an important aspect to many yoga community members. A question arose from one of the group members about the compatibility of religion and yoga: *"I'm always told by my Christian friends that Yoga is not for Christians. I always respond that yoga is my passion and my purpose. It's my ministry. May I know your thoughts about this?"* The interest of the post-writer group member raised the question about the relationship between yoga, spirituality, and religion. The post followed many comments about personal opinions: *"I'm also a Christian but I don't think yoga is somehow against any religion or belief system. Yoga is not a religion, it's a personal journey! It teaches us the same good morals and I personally think it can go hand in hand with any religion."*

"I find it ridiculous that a lot of Christians convincingly believe that yoga is somehow channeling an evil spirit or the devil. Yoga is looking after our body by stretching, quietening the mind, and focusing on relaxing into a pose. It is so beneficial to our health to move our body, I believe our body is our temple, and yoga is one of the ways to look after it. I'm a Christian, and some of my friends from the past asked me how I lived with myself professing to be a Christian and doing yoga openly. You do what you enjoy, and what you believe!"

"Yoga is not a religion, it's a personal journey! It teaches us the same good morals and I personally think it can go hand in hand with any religion." "Jesus meditated, a lot! What about yoga wouldn't work for someone who wants to follow Jesus?"

The respondents were religious to varying degrees, but they all believed that yoga and spirituality could be a complement to religion, regardless of trend, which caused a different vision and deepening in one's belief system. Jain (2020) argues that spirituality is not an alternative to religion, but rather a reformed way to experience the sphere of a systematic belief construction. The urge towards existing symbols and solutions is thus created by the individualistic way of living. Some comments on the religions and alternative approaches summarized the member's approach to the subject. *"I love all religions! Many of them have something to offer. I often switch between religions, believe in Karma, and go to Buddhist temples while being a practicing Christian, who meditates and does yoga. I adore Judaism and enjoy exploring new approaches to God. I believe all religion is about one God, in different ways of seeing it. So I want all of it!"*

"Nature is my own religion. I believe in love and that what you are experiencing is just one little part of the whole. Body-mind and spirit such a unity, what we can not even imagine."

“Life after death and before we were born is real in my opinion, but so distant and can not be experienced through the present moment. Mindfulness is the present and I believe that all of the answers what religions seek will be answered. But now is the most important.”

The comments support Jain’s observation of an alternative approach to spirituality. The practitioners observe and embrace different religions from a perspective that does not exclude any religion from this new form of spirituality. Rather, it emphasizes its diversity and openness. They create personalized belief systems, which have the components of belonging, and individual freedom. Thus they can experience communal belonging while keep remaining in the self-creation aspect. The communal experience provides a moral framework and foundation, while the personalized form enables them to be focused on themselves.

The fluidity between religious practices and spiritual ones highlights that spirituality is rather a collector of practices, not an alternative to already existing religions. It incorporates methods from traditional and modern interpretations. The combination of many practices targets individuals, with different motivations. Spiritual belonging and value-seeking are important pillars to many yoga class takers. It provides norms and a foundational lifestyle framework to the practitioner, who wishes to work on him or herself.

On the other hand, the physical aspect of these spiritual practices is hardly separatable. As the teacher referred to the movement, as a *“moving meditation¹⁰”*, which *has benefits without actually realizing that the meditation is happening*. It shows, how strongly connected these limbs of yoga are, and that the market serves both mental and spiritual lines at the same time. The modern idea of health is not restricted to only physical well-being. It consists of both of the components: a healthy physical body, - often desirably muscular and slim as the commercials presented it, - and emotional health. Meditation, journaling, self-help books, and breathwork are supposed to reach that healthy mental state, without actually defining the term “health” clearly.

¹⁰ The yoga teacher referred to „moving meditation” as a state of calmness, concentration on one’s breathing while engaging in yoga postures and movement. This methods cause a meditative state, which creates easier meditation without “actually noticing this state”. The teacher also highlighted, while many students have difficulty in reaching meditative state, without having “distracting thoughts”, the focus on movement and breath cause the same deep focus and has “healing effect on the mind” – causing calmness.

The motivation to keep oneself healthy is not only an individual decision but social motivation as well. Society needs healthy individuals, and as Jain and Purser argued, it needs to keep individuals busy. Just like religion, neoliberal spirituality has the strength to the individual to promise a solution while keeping the members accompanied. Modern life, as they described it as “crazy” or “rat race”, referring to its fast-changing characteristic. Spirituality provides freedom in self-creation, and more importantly: deals with the pressure through the identity-creating process. This pressure is the object of healing, which the individuals intended to manage. As Purser argued, this phenomenon of keeping one’s busy has a significant social effect. The individuals will keep concentrating on themselves, working on themselves, and creating solutions for themselves. Through these processes, social problems, like inequality, racism, pollution, and many social factors will remain in the social sphere. The identity creation serves the individual focus, while the systematic solutions remain untouched.

Yoga and spiritual practices are popular worldwide. The popularity of this benefitting industry has emerged movements, concerning the cultural appropriation of the practice. Yoga has separated into different, often conquering types of practices, and has several versions of the “ancient” methods. Consuming these practices, purchasing products, and using healing methods contribute to identity creation in modernity. Spirituality does not always mean neoliberal values. Moreover, conservative morals in the practitioners’ posts, intentions for working on oneself, being a “good person”, “spiritually engaged” or aiming for “purity from the ego” are often spotted. These terms refer to reaching stillness, doing yoga, and meditating after a stressful day. These intentions aim for personal change but also reflect social circumstances, through the individualistic aspect of modern liquidity.

Conclusion

This paper explored an online community of yoga. The practitioners are presented with different attitudes toward spirituality and religion. The lines between religious practices and spirituality have become fluid. Spiritual and religious practices were adopted and mixed by the practitioners, thus creating their own interpretations. In addition, the mindfulness industry also provides a place for combining all of the personal interpretations of spiritual, religious, and physical desires. The yoga community members summarized their experiences towards mixing and trying alternative self-help methods,

holistic medicine, and experiencing different aspects of religions. Their standpoint was open to any form of practice that suited their values.

The Western interpretation of yoga, which often omits the spiritual limb, has been considered by them as void, and they pointed out that the practice "*is working together with the spiritual pillar*". But these statements did not cause deeper debate or more reflection. Yoga has entered into many spheres of our life. It is present at fitness centers as an exercise, commercialized and used as a self-help method, a tool for stress management through meditation, and as a choice of healthy living through practicing and using ayurvedic products. The reachable characteristic of a product contributes to the bigger the chance that one will consume a product. Yoga mats, the spiritual self-help books can be found in many local stores, and we register for a yoga class at the gym or join a mindfulness program easily online. The yoga industry became huge and spread globally.

Neoliberal attitudes towards mindfulness support capitalism and even further it. Purser explained "capitalist spiritualities" as the colonization of mindfulness, creating individualistic spiritualities. A privatized practice, which is working at the individualistic level of stress management. But the effects from a societal perspective also contribute to the acceptance of negative social forces affecting the individual rather than supporting change.

The practitioners focus on the individualistic, personal sphere of life, by accommodating mindfulness. Thus, they do not pay attention to the social, economic, and political aspects of the world, which may also conflict with the possibilities of individual life. A social-level examination of spiritual practices presents an aspect of modern capitalism that demonstrates the implications of modern entrepreneurial attitudes and individualism. Yoga communities were carrying the individualistic characteristic of practicing yoga. Their intentions to "heal", in the spiritual and physical sense, focused on personal spheres. The aspect of belonging to a group occurred in both places, as a connection between the practitioners, but it also remained at the individual level. They were able to decide whether they commit to the group or remain in their individual sphere. This phenomenon is an alternative to traditional spiritual and religious practices, which required more commitment than individuality. Yoga has numerous types and personal motivations differing in practicing it.

Just as the practice of yoga has never appeared in a coherent and exclusive form throughout history. Similarly to its modern interpretation, it also provides at least as

many branches in neoliberal society. Yoga can be the subject of a study through which these social processes can be excellently explored whether we are talking about an increase in individual focus, consumer habits, and the values associated with them, or even discovering methods of physical and mental regulation.

There are many areas of the topic, which hold the possible expansion of research. that Exploring spiritual communities online and the contrast of personal participant classes, group identity in-depth, or the possible change in the world of yoga after social movements all promises to be an interesting process in the future. Yoga, mindfulness movements, and spirituality in the market and in the yoga industry can highlight personal reflection on social phenomena, that promise to be an exciting field of further exploration.

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