



Excerpts from  
**Yoga beyond Fitness**  
Getting More than Exercise from an  
Ancient Spiritual Practice

Tom Pilarzyk

October 2008 • ISBN 978-0-8356-0863-3 • \$17.95 pb • 6 x 9 • 260 pages

**Part 1 Chapter 1**

***Yoga Class, Culture Clash***

“That strap really helped me, and the teacher’s assist released tension in my shoulders.” “I didn’t like her approach, and I hated the background music.” “My mind was focused in class, yet completely relaxed.” “I appreciated his discussion of yoga philosophy.” These feelings, attitudes, and judgments reflect the existence of a yoga subculture—a shared knowledge among its *yogis* and *yoginis* (male and female practitioners) that forms a unique part of American life. In this subculture, one finds unfamiliar movements and exotic gestures, shared terms of subtlety and grace, ritual sights and sounds, and people and places to which we are relating in growing numbers. Feeling a part of this legacy—and solidarity with other students—depends on our commitment to yoga and the extent to which we consider it a central part of our lives.

In *A History of Modern Yoga*, British historian Elisabeth De Michelis describes the contemporary yoga experience this way:

The actual classroom may be a gym, or community centre hall or the more soothing atmosphere of a yoga centre or a teacher’s living room. There may be an introductory and/or final short reading or theoretical ‘instructions’; different styles of yoga will be characterized by a slower or faster pace, or different paces will be found across various sessions of the same style of yoga; some styles of yoga or sessions will be run with a greater sense of ‘social’ or ‘communal’ event, others will emphasize inwardness and quiet individual work, etc.—but the overall structure remains the same.

Despite variation in content and style, almost all classes share, on some level, in Indian terminology and beliefs. They also share physical artifacts, like clothing, music, belts, mats, and blocks. Most students observe the same class norms about not staring, talking, or touching. And no doubt most have had that shared experience of release, frustration, and laughter at an unplanned landing on their sitz bones.

A traditional yoga class in America includes an identifiable ritual order. A centering phase with relaxed mind and felt-separation from our everyday life leads into an active phase of asana practice (ideally with breath awareness). A cooling-down follows, with a final phase of rest and relaxation. Then, there is that resulting sense of rejuvenation or feeling of exhaustion. From a yogic perspective, these stages mirror, in microcosm, the wider phases of our lives—birth and awakening; activity through concentration, effort, and determination; decline and eventual death; only to be followed by our rebirth into the world. In one sense, yoga class is our continuous dress rehearsal in the art of living and dying.

Despite this broadly shared classroom experience, yoga's rapid growth yields a range of class offerings, approaches taken by teachers from different backgrounds, and widening student expectations about what yoga should be. Yoga's greater popularity means we are often taking classes for overlapping reasons, and yoga's subculture has shifted in character and splintered into segments. Maybe this has always been the case with yoga, but now it is easier to distinguish the three broadest motivations for practicing—to get a good physical workout as a form of fitness, to promote our health or healing, and to follow a deeper transformative path. There are now fitness yogis, health and healing yogis, spiritual yogis and all possible combinations. Some of us practice for all three reasons.

## ***Making Room***

Beth, Ross, and Amber appear to be the typical middle-class suburban Chicago family, yet they are less than average in one glaring sense: they all practice yoga. Beth is in her forties, a school teacher and follower since the 1980s of Gurumayi (also known as Swami Chidvilasananda), leader of Siddha Yoga at the Shree Muktananda Ashram in South Fallsburg, New York. She practices Hatha yoga postures daily as part of her spiritual path, which also includes a session with pranayama, devotional chanting, and meditation. Every other year, she travels to the ashram from her Midwestern home. The term “spirituality” for Beth does not mean exclusive adherence to doctrine and faith, as much as it entails exploring her shared humanity through experiential practices that open the body, mind, and heart to a deeper understanding of life and one's place in the wider world.

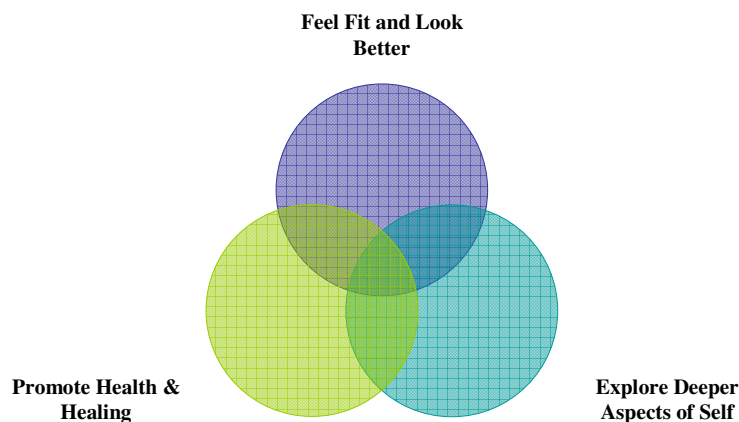
Beth’s husband Ross is a contractor who respects her holistic lifestyle and recently began taking a restorative yoga class after surgery for a work-related injury to his rotator cuff. Amber, their on-the-go teenage daughter, became a vegetarian a few years ago for health reasons and because of a love of animals. She has no interest in yoga’s spiritual side—the breathwork, ethical precepts, meditation, and metaphysical teachings. For her, yoga is merely a good fitness workout that her mother pays for weekly at a local wellness center.

**A student census conducted among ninety-four students at an urban Midwestern wellness center found the following reasons for practicing yoga:**

<b>Keep fit / Get in shape</b>	<b>77%</b>
<b>Deal with stress or health condition</b>	<b>73%</b>
Work with a specific teacher / yoga style	73%
Become more centered	65%
How I feel afterward	54%
Convenient days and times	54%
Convenient location	50%
<b>Spiritual outlook or practice</b>	<b>35%</b>
Challenge myself	35%

This Midwestern family typifies the diversity found in yoga classes today. Those motivated largely by deeper transformative concerns are likely to differ in outlook, expectation, and training from those attracted to yoga as a fitness workout or therapeutic rehabilitation. In other words, segments among the yoga subculture are looking for slightly different things from yoga. With the growing number of secular teachers and students entering the market, the subculture as a whole is being transformed. This transformation is reflected at yoga retreats and conferences, in teacher training programs, at chanting sessions, and wherever else its members gather.

**Figure 1. Overlapping Reasons for Practice**



Some students fall cleanly into one of three broad and interrelated practitioner segments—fitness yoga, health and healing yoga, or spiritual yoga—while others do not (see Figure 1, above). With time, students may evolve to integrate more of these reasons for practicing, yet their differences might just point to certain subtle tensions in the yoga subculture today. If you practice Hatha yoga, ask yourself: At the beginning and end of a class, do you like to chant “Om” (that primordial sound of the energetic universe from which everything manifests)? Do you like a rock

or jazz background, *kirtan* chants, or silence? Do you prefer detailed description of musculature and movement, or is minimal wording best? Are assists important to you? Do you have a regular meditation practice to complement your asanas? Is strengthening, toning, or healing a goal? Do you prefer a loving, supportive teacher or a more impersonal, rigorous instructor?

### ***Diversifying Style and Motivation***

While many factors have contributed to yoga's recent popularity, an interest in fitness has dramatically expanded yoga's overall visibility and probably accounts for the majority practicing one of its many forms. Consequently, yoga is common fare in community, recreation, and fitness centers nationwide. In times of greater economic prosperity, the public has become predisposed to practice in greater numbers, and they have done so by the millions.

The popularity of fitness-oriented styles has had a profound influence on contemporary American yoga, reflected in the assessment by Georg Feuerstein, the Western world's esteemed yoga scholar: Yoga's deep philosophical and spiritual foundations are rarely understood by teachers and students, as yoga is "widely reduced to gymnastics and fitness training, without any reference to, or experience of, the kundalini and higher forms of consciousness, never mind the great ideal of spiritual liberation."

Srivatsa Ramaswami, a yogi in the tradition of the great Krishnamacharya, argues that

What you might call Western or American yoga has taken on a distinctive character. Yoga, with its unique approach to physical culture, has to compete with other popular forms of exercise, like gym workouts or even gymnastics. We have 'power yoga' and other similar systems in which considerable exertion is used, like the pumping and jumping in *Ashtanga* yoga vinyasas á la gymnastic floor exercises. Though these were part of the ancient vinyasa yoga, several parameters such as breathing requirements, keeping the heart rate and breath rate under check, have been passed over in favor of generating excitement.

Amber's fitness yoga, while often very physically demanding, is less personally challenging than the yoga practiced by her mother as a lifestyle commitment and as part of an

ashram. In other words, one can leave the fitness yoga subculture at the recreation center door, while yoga as a lifestyle affects everything—from diet and moral conduct to outlook and methods for seeking greater balance, or even liberation, in this life.

Health professionals have begun treating yoga as a complementary healing modality. When coupled with the popular fitness craze, their interest has led to greater acceptance of yoga's role in treatment and prevention. This acceptance has birthed another subcultural segment—health and healing yoga. Historian De Michelis argues that “except in cases of thoroughly utilitarian (fitness or recreational) performance . . . some notion of healing and personal growth is likely to provide the deepest rationale for practice.” Yoga's capacity to heal and promote health has broad interest among those holding different views of the physical body. Its healing role motivates Americans who follow the Western medical model as well as those who treat physical conditions holistically, as a function of a subtle energetic relationship between body, mind, emotion, and spirit. The latter approach blends well with yoga's transformative role as a form of spirituality and as an entryway for exploring ourselves more deeply.

As physicians and mental health therapists have become involved with healing alternatives like yoga in their personal lives, they also have begun referring patients like Ross to classes in growing numbers. While yoga complements mainstream medicine, it is experiencing a secular double-effect: It is being reduced to its physicality, while mainstream medicine subjects the more physical side of yoga to rigorous scientific and clinical investigations.

One measure of whether a yoga class falls more within the fitness and health categories or within a deeper transformative one may well be whether breath work is given serious attention. As Feuerstein has put it, “breath control equals mental control” in yoga practice. Where we are taught to place our attention in class and whether we learn and practice breath

work determines if we are able to work directly with prana, the breath's inner correspondence to our more subtle energy. Pranayama is a "threshold practice" to yoga's deeper side.

### *Spiritual Yoga*

While the physical emphases in both fitness- and health-oriented yoga reinforce each other, both types emerged from yoga as a holistic discipline and lifestyle. This subcultural segment preserves the path's essential meaning—the art of living fully—while feeding and being fed by the mainstream. New Age culture played a significant role in incubating yoga spirituality in the 1970s and 1980s. Even as the hippie counterculture faded as a movement, the concern for things natural to eat, wear, and revere became a common part of lifestyles in college towns and hipper, youthful sections of large cities. Natural food stores and restaurants, New Age bookstores, gem shops, natural healing centers, co-ops, temples, churches, and other establishments proliferated. An alternative spiritual press preserved awareness of yoga's transformative side and its ultimate goal of Self-realization.

Yoga began its slow evolution from alternative to complementary health practice at about this same time, as popular movements espousing optimal well-being embraced Eastern thought. Yoga remained part of the spiritual palette for those in the New Age following Asian gurus and Western psychotherapists, as well as for those branching out to create new yoga styles. Breath work, once reserved as an integral part of yoga practice, emerged as its own healing modality.

As the fitness frenzy captured popular attention by the new millennium, spiritually committed practitioners, who still applied yoga's essential teachings to their daily lives became a less visible and prominent part of the yoga scene. Ramaswami describes the change this way: "Only a fraction of the people are really interested in studying yoga in its original version." Gifted teachers of yoga's ancient traditions appear even harder to find than students, since "living yoga" demands a strong commitment to mind training and serious self-study while

showing little interest in treating yoga merely as a workout, body strengthener, or rehabilitator (as valuable as they may be). As yoga has slowly become a part of the modern health and fitness, fee-for-service industry, yoga teachers are required to speak the language of Western medicine (at least anatomy and physiology), more than they are of ancient Indian philosophical concepts. As a result, Ramaswami asserts, “many of the lofty and subtle principles of the older yoga system are being lost.” Serious study of ancient yogic physiology and diagnostic and curative methods remains largely unintegrated with the dominant Western medical paradigm. In turn, this lack of integration creates a Western yoga different from the more traditional yoga practice in India which, according to author Marina Budhos, tends to be “longer and devote more time to mindful breathing and meditation.” And as Feuerstein noted, the subtle and deeper energetic dimension is lost in the process.

### ***Losing Yoga’s Deeper Meaning***

Given these developments, America’s diverse yoga subculture may be a symptom of a deeper issue. While different segments of America’s new yoga family are often embodied in the very same teacher, student, or family, yoga as a social phenomena is morphing into something fundamentally at variance with what it was meant to be. Millions of us attend classes each week, because we enjoy what yoga has to offer. We may not think about the larger issue of what is happening to yoga, nor are we likely to consider this issue very important in the context of our daily lives—getting kids off to school, engaging in work, or relaxing and going out with friends. In short, yoga may be our hour-and-a-half “asana oasis” from that busy life. What we experience through yoga and what we enjoy about it may seem to have little to do with the broader issues of the wider world or the more personal concerns of our day.

However, the larger picture of contemporary yoga is that social forces beyond our control—media appetite for entertainment, population shifts around us, economics of the fitness

industry, ubiquitous star-gazing in pop culture, developments in the medical profession, or influences on the fringe of our culture—affect our personal experience of yoga. While practicing makes us feel good and heals us in many ways seemingly independent of these influences, yoga’s transformational work depends directly on how deeply we wish to travel down its ancient pathway. The deeper we travel, the more likely we are to confront the barriers and obstacles—the knots—that hold us back from releasing into who we truly are or what we can ultimately become. The deeper we journey, the more likely we are to fully accept and make friends with ourselves—to release the willful struggle of mind over body and to experience the bliss and happiness attending to the path.

At the other end of the spectrum is the shallow understanding of yoga spirituality which feeds the non-practicing public’s stereotyped image of it. This shallow understanding is offensive to those who view the path as a way to explore themselves more deeply, and yoga spirituality is irrelevant to those who do not relate at all to its deeper message. Shallowness leads to cynicism about yoga’s essential meaning as a holistic discipline and way of life. Even those who practice for fitness reasons are beginning to suspect that there is something amiss, reflected in the disturbing yet insightful observation by NBC Nightly News’ Clare Duffy:

“Yoga – it’s a way to feel slightly better about really a very self-absorbed pastime – i.e., working out at a gym and checking yourself out in the mirror. It gets grafted on with this sense of ‘Oh, I’m at one with the universe and the inner light in me goes with you.’ Is it really spiritual? I don’t know. In some ways it’s just a way to feel a little better about our essential self-absorption and not more than that.”

If this is what yoga has become for many American practitioners, then it is truly in a state of crisis. It is akin to celebrating Christmas without its essential meaning in mind and feeling lost under an avalanche of consumer gift-giving and self-interested concern for what we receive from it. Rather than reinforcing self-centeredness, yoga should be essentially the opposite – a process for dropping our self-absorption to live more fully in each moment and in the service of others.

The extent to which Americans in general and practitioners in particular do not hold to such an outlook on yoga is the single best indicator of how far yoga has strayed from its original meaning.

How then can yoga as transformative experience remain a viable, visible option for practitioners as its subculture spreads, diversifies, and becomes popularized as a fitness regimen? One measure of yoga's continued effectiveness is the very tangible benefit of well-being experienced by its students. However, if living in the moment, loosening opinion, addressing negativity, and opening the tender heart are not addressed by the growing number of teachers, yoga might only be seducing us, while it is being reduced to a physical workout. The millions turning to it today will not fully recognize yoga's power to transform them into wiser, more centered and compassionate beings while inducing in them a deeper awareness of higher states of being where the potential lies as well for transforming the world around them.

How did American yoga get to this crisis point- more of a weekly workout and helpful healer than a doorway to deeper understandings?