

Yoga isn't timeless, it's changing to meet modern needs



On June 21, for International Yoga Day, people will take out their yoga mats and practice sun salutations or sit in meditation. Yoga may have originated in ancient India, but today is practiced all over the world.

In the United States, it was philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who first engaged with the philosophy of yoga in the 1830s. Yoga gained a wider American audience only in the late 1800s.

Today, part of yoga's appeal is that it continues to be seen as a mystical, ancient tradition. However, as I've discovered in my research, the practice of yoga has gone through some profound shifts. Here are four.

1. Yoga for health and happiness

It was a Hindu reformer, Swami Vivekananda, who first introduced yoga to a larger audience. Vivekananda originally came to the United States to seek funds to relieve poverty in India. Several electrifying addresses he delivered at the World's Parliament of Religions, the world's first global interfaith dialogue held in 1893 in Chicago, brought him instant fame. He then traveled around the U.S. for the next several years, giving lectures and teaching yoga.

Vivekananda revived the tradition of an ancient Indian sage, Patanjali, that had been almost forgotten. Patanjali likely lived in India somewhere between the first century B.C. or the fourth century A.D. He claimed that the goal of yoga was isolation

from existence and freedom from the bonds of mortal life.

According to Patanjali, to overcome suffering, individuals needed to renounce the very comforts and attachments that seem to make life worth living for many today. As the journalist Michelle Goldberg, author of "The Goddess Pose," puts it, Patanjali's yoga "is a tool of self-obliviation rather than self-actualization."

No one today is likely to see yoga as a way to renounce their existence. Most people are drawn to yoga to find happiness, health and compassion in everyday life.

2. Value of physical exercise

Most people today associate yoga closely with physical exercise and postures, known as asanas, designed to strengthen and stretch the body. There is more to yoga, however, than the physical. Yoga also encompasses devotion, contemplation and meditation. In fact, the primary focus on the body would surprise both Patanjali and Vivekananda, who prioritized mental over physical exercise.

Patanjali treated the body with disdain, believing it to be a prison. He was emphatic that we are not our bodies, and that any attachment to our bodies is an impediment to yoga. Vivekananda echoed these thoughts. He treated asanas with scorn. Vivekananda argued that an obsessive focus on the body distracts from the true practice of yoga: meditation.

In contrast, contemporary practitioners embrace asana as central to yoga. Contemporary yogis recognize that the mind, and the soul, is embodied. By "getting smart in their yoga," contemporary yogis attend to

their bodies, and also to their emotions, because the health of the body impacts the ability to see clearly and act deliberately.

3. Focusing on the self

A central practice of yoga is self-study, known in Sanskrit as "svadhyaya." In the tradition of Patanjali, this means "the reading of sacred scriptures."

Today, svadhyaya has come to mean the study of oneself. People often take up the practice of yoga to lead happier, less stressed and more compassionate lives. Yoga involves, as I argue in my book "The Art of Gratitude," paying attention to one's habits. Only by first noticing one's habitual patterns does it become possible to change them.

Sacred texts, broadly understood, can help this practice of self-study, as they encourage reflection on deep and difficult questions that do not have easy answers. For today's practitioners, these questions include: What is the purpose of life? How can I live an ethical life? And, what would truly make me happy?

Ultimately, self-study resides at the heart of a healthy yoga practice. It allows yogis to recognize their deep connection to others and the world around them. This recognition of interdependence and inter-being is central to today's yoga.

4. Ethics of a yoga guru

In ancient practice, the relationship between a guru and a student was crucial. Today, the guru-student model is going through a shift. Yogis no longer train for years in their guru's home, as was the practice in ancient India. Yogis instead practice in studios, in parks, at fitness centers, or at home on their own.

Still, many contemporary yoga teachers claim the title of "guru."

However, some practitioners of yoga are calling for an end to the guru model, given



that it comes with an inherent power, which opens the door to abuse. There are many examples of such abuse, with a more recent one being the case of Bikram Choudhury, the 73-year-old founder of Bikram yoga, who fled the country to avoid an arrest warrant in California in 2017 after being accused of sexual assault.

In the wake of the #MeToo movement in the United States and India, many yoga practitioners have initiated important conversations about the ethics of being a yoga teacher. At the heart of these conversations is how yoga teachers must, above all else, treat their students, who are often deeply vulnerable, with dignity and respect.

Ancient, but not timeless

Indeed, there is great power, and great mystique, in just how old yoga is.

But as a professor of communication, I observe that one of the most common errors people make in daily conversation is to appeal to antiquity – what scholars call the "argumentum ad antiquitatem" fallacy – which says that something is good simply because it is old, and because it has always been done this way.

Yoga is ancient, but it is not timeless. By stopping for a moment to consider yoga's past, we can recognize the crucial role that all of us can and must play in shaping its future.

Yoga in the workplace can reduce back pain and sickness absence

Back pain is the single leading cause of disability in the world. In the US, four out of every five people experience back pain at some point in their life. In the UK, back pain is one of the most common reasons for visits to the doctor, and missed work. In fact, absence from work due to back problems costs British employers more than £3 billion every year.

But there is a potentially easy way to prevent this problem: yoga. Our new research has found that exercises from the ancient Indian practice can have very positive benefits for back problems. Our findings suggest that yoga programmes consisting of stretching, breathing, and relaxation methods can reduce sickness absence due to back pain and musculoskeletal conditions.

Wellness at work

There has already been plenty of research demonstrating the benefits of yoga for NHS patients, showing that patients with chronic back pain who regularly practice yoga take fewer sick days than those who don't practice yoga. But very little research has been done which looks into the benefits of implementing workplace programmes, like we did.

We worked with 150 NHS employees from three hospitals in North Wales. The staff were randomly assigned to either a yoga group or an education group. The yoga group received a total of eight 60 minute yoga sessions, once a week for eight weeks. In addition to this, the yoga participants were given a DVD and a poster for home practice. They were invited to practice yoga at home for ten minutes a day for six months. The education group meanwhile received two instructional booklets for how to manage



back pain and reduce stress at work. The yoga programme was based on Dru Yoga – which emphasises soft, flowing movements – and consisted of four parts. To start each session, there was a series of gentle warm-up movements, followed by eight stretches to release tension from the shoulders and hips. Then participants did four back care postures to develop suppleness in the spine, and improve posture. This was completed with relaxation techniques to create an overall feeling of positive health and well-being.

After eight weeks, the results showed that most yoga participants had larger reductions in back pain compared to the education group. After six months, employee staff records showed that the yoga participants had 20 times less sick leave due to musculoskeletal conditions (including back pain) than the education group.

We also found that the yoga participants visited health professionals for back pain only half as often as education participants during the six month study.

Those who improved the most were participants who also practised yoga at home for an average of 60 minutes or more each

week. Ten minutes or more a day of home practice was associated with doubling the reduction in back pain, and many participants noted that it helped them to better manage stress too.

Gains in productivity

In the US, about a quarter of all major employers deliver some form of meditation or yoga, but it has yet to be taken up so widely in the UK, or elsewhere in Europe. Insurance company Aetna, for example, offers free yoga classes to their 55,000 employees with reported annual savings of US\$2,000 (£1,520) per head in healthcare costs and a US\$3,000 (£2,280) gain per person in productivity. Preventing back pain makes economic sense all round. Yoga seems not only good for employees and employers, but also for the economy as well.

With more and more research confirming the health benefits of yoga, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in the UK now recommends stretching, strengthening and yoga exercises as the first step in managing low back pain. Public Health England also advises yoga classes in the workplace.

Since our initial work with the NHS proved to be such a success, the Dru Yoga healthy back programme used in the study has been delivered to staff at Merseyside Police, Great Ormond Street Hospital, the Institute of Chartered Accountants, Siemens, Barclays, Santander and many other private and public organisations. We now hope that many more will take up yoga to improve the health and well-being of their employees.



From India, with love: Celebrating nearly 60 years of 'Light on Yoga'

Nearly 60 years ago, Indian guru BKS Iyengar published an instruction guide to yoga that helped to make the practice a global sensation. Today, *Light on Yoga: Yoga Dipika* (1965) is regarded as the book that introduced the physical and spiritual practise of yoga to the West.

While Iyengar – who died in 2014 – might have been pleased by his ongoing impact, the past 59 years have also witnessed controversy about the globalisation of yoga. Recently, the University of Ottawa cancelled a free yoga class for the disabled. Why? Because of concerns about "oppression, cultural genocide and diasporas due to colonialism and western supremacy". This decision has sparked the latest round of debate on whether yoga in the West constitutes cultural appropriation. It's true that yoga has a special relationship to India. While yoga is not a singular tradition, India is usually seen as the land of its birth. In recent years, the Indian government has made worldwide headlines with its nationalist promotion of yoga. India now boasts a national yoga ministry and has promoted the International Day of Yoga. It encourages yoga within schools. It includes yoga within its Traditional Knowledge Digital Library.



But yoga has also long been a participatory culture with practitioners in many different places. For many people – including some Indians – it no longer connotes much other than the globalised wellness industry. Indeed, it's quite possible that yoga's success within global consumer culture has inspired much of this nationalist fervour.

Nationalism and globalisation have often gone hand in hand. For many 20th-century Indian promoters, spreading yoga beyond the nation was frequently an important nationalist project.

Late 19th-century advocates of yoga, such as Swami Vivekananda, thought that the practice could represent a distinctively Indian contribution to the world. When Iyengar's now classic *Light on Yoga* appeared for an international English-reading audience, it represented Indian cultural heritage in empowering rather than embattled ways.

Appearing in the mid-1960s, a period of dispirited national mood after India lost a border war to China, *Light on Yoga* projects confidence that India has much to share with the world. Despite its modest demeanour, the book exudes poise and openness, not fragility or anxiety, when it comes to spreading the practice worldwide.

While we usually think of *Light on Yoga* as a set of physical instructions, it also offers cultural instructions about how to consider the practice. Iyengar's manual brought together philosophical description, imaginative storytelling and scientific language. The book created a very distinctive form that described each pose, or asana, through stories, philosophical teachings, physical instructions, medical effects, and photography. This form of writing located yoga within different ways of knowing the world.

By including these diverse ways of thinking about yoga, *Light on Yoga* valued the ability to speak in many ways to many people. Indeed, this diversity reflected something important about yoga itself.

As the book famously declared: "As a well cut diamond has many facets, each reflecting a different colour of light, so does the word yoga, each facet reflecting a different shade of meaning and revealing different aspects of the entire range of human endeavour to win inner peace and happiness." This concern for plurality shapes the modern ideas of Indianness that emerge in the text. Reading *Light on Yoga*, one can feel simultaneously connected to forms of devotional Srivaisnavism and to Darwinian theories of evolution.

The manual's rhetoric resonates with the language of the Upanishads – the central texts of Hinduism – as well as with the vocabulary of Western medical anatomy. Anticipating today's hot question of whether yoga is religious, *Light on Yoga* suggests that yoga is not exactly a religion in itself: "Instead, it is a science of religions, the study of which will enable a sadhaka the better to appreciate his own faith."

Being "Indian" and being "Western" are not adversarial identities in Iyengar's book. Instead, they are intimately intertwined. This approach, which suggests how yoga can support expansive forms of identity, is one of *Light on Yoga*'s key legacies. Yoga was globalised by Indians, in dialogue with people from many parts of the world, long before the practice became a billion-dollar industry.

None of this is to say that we can't productively ask questions about how power, inequality, and respect shape yoga in its travels around the world. I believe we should. But one of the important legacies of *Light on Yoga* is its cosmopolitanism.

If we're going to defend yoga against desecration, let's defend this generous openness to the world.

