

Perceptions of Spirituality of Yoga in Minnesota

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the perception of Yoga spirituality in Minnesota. In this phenomenological study, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven Yoga instructors about the traditional spirituality of Yoga. Although they all perceived that Yoga is traditionally spiritual, many said the spiritual aspect was not well presented in most classes, if at all. Most perceived that spiritual opening occurs with asana practice, and that many benefits were experienced when traditional spiritual Yoga was practiced. Barriers to teaching and learning the traditional spirituality of Yoga were: the fear of being exploited by a guru, the fear of non-Christian spirituality, prohibitions against spiritual talk in public institutions, lack of understanding because of insufficient training, and cultural colonization of Yoga. The implications of these findings are that, although non-spiritual yoga can be a bridge to yoga's benefits, more training for instructors and respect for Indian culture are needed. More awareness of the spiritual aspect of Yoga and more study of its practice are needed.

Key words : Yoga, Perception, Spirituality, Colonization and Phenomenology

In the United States, the popularity of yoga has steadily increased since the late 1800's within academia, among intellectuals, and recently, among the general public. A Harvard survey of use of Yoga in the United States estimated 7.5% of Americans have tried Yoga, most often to help relieve a health complaint (Saper, Eisenberg, Davis, Culpepper & Phillips, 2004). Yoga classes are currently available in many settings such as yoga centers, hospitals, schools, and pre-schools, and are supported by referrals from psychiatrists, psychologists, stress management programs, personal counselors, fitness facilities, massage and holistic health centers (Douglass, 2007). Swami Rama helped popularize Yoga in the United States and founded Ashrams in Minneapolis and St. Paul, as well as other cities in the United States, to increase the peacefulness of the world, making possible "a new world order of love" (Rama, 1998, p.4). AYUSH (the Department of Ayurveda, Naturopathy, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy) in India has developed a data bank of traditional knowledge to help preserve and share with the world the traditional healing

knowledge of India. Yoga is the intellectual property of India. Certification of yoga teachers and therapists in the U.S.A. is voluntary, and training requirements vary by institution; Registered Yoga Teachers have 200 to 500 hours of training, but standardized competency testing would be another way to regulate Yoga Teacher qualifications that we do not have in the United States (Seitz, 2010, p.39). While the research literature shows Yoga is effective for healing the body, mind and spirit, (Evans, Tsao, Sternlieb & Zeltzer, 2009; O'Brien, 2008) modern researchers in the United States rarely address the spiritual aspect of Yoga practice. Some studies bring up the issue of spirituality and how to detect it (Mohandas, 2008). A Yoga researcher from Minnesota (Horton, 2012), suggests that, in North America, Yoga is less spiritually grounded than it is in India, and that the majority of people who practice asana do so without meditating or considering Yoga philosophy. Two studies found the health benefits of Yoga were increased when the practice included reflection on philosophical and spiritual aspects of Yoga, compared to

practice without mention of Yoga philosophy (Bussing, Hedstuck, Khalsa, Osterman & Heuser, 2012; Smith, Greer, Sheets & Watson, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to describe the perceptions of spirituality within the Minnesota Yoga culture, to determine if these perceptions reflect the traditional spirituality of Yoga. In order to find out, we interviewed Yoga instructors about their perceptions of the spirituality of Yoga. In the process, we learned about: cultural colonization of Yoga and the disservice done in the United States when Yoga is taught without spirituality, some of the barriers to the practice of traditionally spiritual Yoga, and ways Yoga opens the spiritual lives of people even when they do not know it is spiritual.

METHOD

Our culture of inquiry, based in Samkhya philosophy and the phenomenology of perception, understands the material world is shaped by conscious perception as well as it shapes the perceptions of conscious individuals. Traditional Yoga descended from Vedic non-dualistic philosophy, is based on the premise that body, mind, and spirit are one and we can experience union with the universal divine (Shaw, 2010). Both Samkhya and phenomenology place the conscious individual in command of reality, rather than expecting truth to conform to the expected rules, as in empiricism. The phenomenology of perception is perfectly suited to be paired with Samkhya philosophy because both recognize the underlying unity of all beings and utilize conscious perception to know the truth. According to the phenomenology of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), the “natural and antepredicative unity of the world and our life, being apparent in our... evaluations, and in the landscape we see, more clearly than in objective knowledge, ... furnish[es]... the text... our knowledge tries to translate into precise language” (p.20). All are one. The goal of Yoga is to

experience oneness. The goal of the phenomenology of perception is to translate the individual’s experience of the unitary world into a precise language. In this research project, we examine how East meets the Midwest, and use Eastern and Western thought processes to inquire into the current phenomenon of yogic practice.

From an on-line list of 125 centers that teach yoga, we made a list of teachers to contact. This list included all of the lineages discernable from the titles in the listing and from a Google search of yoga teachers in Hastings, Minnesota, where one researcher resides. We sent email requests, and when we received no response, we attempted to reach them by phone. We were able to reach five teachers from the original list, the rest did not respond. We then asked St. Catherine Holistic Health students, the Holistic Medical Association, and friends for contacts among Yoga teachers. From these, we found six more teachers from a variety of lineages and traditions, including a Yoga Calm (aimed at children in the public schools) teacher, a Yoga Therapist, a Yoga Spiritual Minister, a Core Power teacher, a Yoga teacher from India living here in the Minnesota, and Yoga teachers who have practiced in other parts of the United States and now live here.

We developed an interview schedule based on the literature and our own experience. The first question, “Please describe your background and how you learned Yoga, including your lineage or guru, or specific spiritual tradition, if any,” was designed to provide data about the participants that would illuminate their spiritual perspectives. The second question: “*What are your perceptions of the Yoga culture here in the Midwest?*” was designed to bring the conversation in the direction of answering the research question in an open-ended way. The third question: “What is your sense of how the spiritual aspect of Yoga is (or is not) a part of how Yoga is taught?” allows further exploration of the teachers’ perceptions of the spiritual foundations of Yoga as they learned

and taught it. The fourth question: “Do you believe the current Yoga culture follows the spiritual tradition?” was intended to explore what they believe is true here, and further ask them to describe how the experience of Yoga is affected: “If so, please describe how that affects how Yoga is taught and practiced. If not, how does the break from tradition affect the experience of Yoga?” Fifth, we asked: “What ideas do you have about how the traditional spirituality of Yoga might be encouraged among Yoga instructors? Among Yoga students?” This question brings the subject into the future, allowing the participants to express what they think could be as well as what is. The final question: “What else would you like to say about this topic?” provided the participants with another opening to express their unique perceptions and say anything the researchers neglected to ask. The interview subjects signed consent forms and their interviews were audio recorded. The recordings were transcribed and printed in different fonts and color-coded to distinguish between the different interviews while allowing them to be broken into parts for analysis. The researchers read the transcripts for thematic analysis. In this process, keywords and phrases emerged, and words, phrases, and paragraphs were sorted according to similarity of meanings. Meaning was explicated from what is common and uncommon in the various interviews. Language and messages were compared and contrasted, and relationships between ideas and components of themes were examined.

RESULTS

The Yoga instructors we interviewed were aware of the traditional spirituality of Yoga. Four of the five primary themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data directly reflect the nature of traditional Yoga spirituality and the fifth theme reflects the barriers to traditional yoga practice. There was disagreement about how

much the over-all Yoga culture of the Minnesota reflects tradition.

Eleven participants were interviewed for this study. Two participants trained at Core Power and now teach elsewhere, a participant both trained and currently teaches at a Core Power studio. Core Power is a membership based chain of yoga studios in 15 states in the U.S.A. Five participants practice Kriya Yoga, a system of pranayama (breath work) passed to Americans by Paramahansa Yogananda and Swami Rama. One practices Iyengar Yoga, focusing on asana that are very precisely performed. Two Yoga Therapy teachers participated both certified by a school that teaches asana as physical therapy. One Yoga Calm teacher participated who specializes in teaching in the public schools an American curriculum of Yoga for children developed in 2000. Of the 11 participants, 2 were male and 9 were female. We did not gather data about the teachers’ ages. One teacher offered that she was originally from India, and learned Yoga there. The remaining ten teachers were from the United States.

Five themes emerged from the data: 1) The importance of a meditation, 2) Yoga philosophy teaches students how to live, 3) Practice is key to entering into the mystery of traditional yoga spirituality, 4) Going deeper into yoga practice brings benefits, 5) Barriers to the practice of the traditional spirituality of yoga.

The importance of a meditation

When talking about traditional Yoga spirituality, participants specifically mentioned meditation and elaborated on the practice and its importance. There were several words that were repeated in the interviews regarding meditation. These included words like *stopping*, *stillness*, *mind*, and *quiet*.

One described meditation as quieting the mind; “*I teach pranayama to focus, to quiet the monkey mind. I love that focus.*” One participant said: “*I really liked the effects it had on my mind.*”

I have always been a very emotional person and very reactive, Kundalini yoga brought me to my center ... so it was one of those things that I had to teach to others..." Conversely, a Yoga expert expressed these thoughts about how meditation is experienced in the yoga community in the Midwest:

And so, the yoga culture is one thing, the meditation culture is another, it should in effect be part of the same thing. Most people don't necessarily get that hatha yoga is really a precursor for meditation. And the practice of hatha is part of a system called raja yoga, and it's kind of like a warm-up before the marathon. So it's intended to remove energy obstructions from the body and create a physical platform of health, so that one can then subsequently practice meditation techniques without physical impediment or mental restlessness and obstacles. It is not supposed to be a stand-alone physical fitness regimen, which is teased apart from meditation.... I would say (it's) disconcerting to me, that -- and I've taught many quote-unquote yoga teachers and instructors over the years -- they know very little about meditation and the science of meditation and the yogic system. So they draw on a quick and easy fallback of some mindfulness technique things, and while well and good, mindfulness itself is a much deeper practice, and comes from a different sort of orientation which is, of its own, very good. But it's not part of the yogic tradition per se. And a lot of teachers could benefit by learning more about what's in the yogic roots of which they're training and a part of because yoga itself is a spiritual science, and it's about reuniting the soul and spirit so there's a great deal to be learned there.

Another participant saw the same lack of meditation in yoga centers, or lack of traditional yoga meditation, but saw that mindfulness was

being introduced to shift the culture back toward the traditional spirituality of meditation.

I have facilitated a number of yoga centers and they really tend to be body-centric. They tend to shy away from really going deeper with the meditation. I think there is a mindfulness that's trying to permeate beyond the pop culture of yoga. We're still a little too much into mental perceptions, and not into the meditative, spiritual...

Another participant said including meditation is ideal and is the gateway to yoga spirituality:

I knew for myself I called my yoga a moving meditation...It's tantric yoga and it's very meditative breath and mantra based. I find myself seeking out that depth and that meaning in my practice with fewer chattering's and more breath....Meditation is basically why yoga started, to create this optimal position to meditate so that your body is comfortable to be seated for a really long time. That's how Yoga started. I think meditation is rarely even put into a Yoga class right now.

Meditation was especially important when teaching yoga to children in the public schools, to benefit the children's brains, and the lack of meditation was perceived to be damaging:

We end with what we call a relaxation, where they put the heads on the desk on their fists, one potato, two potato we call it, with their head on top, and in a way it's the savasana I guess, but a nice time to calm...Meditation helps to, well; it helps the brain so much. We're seeing all of this research about how it rebuilds the brain and if that's how we're supposed to end Yoga, and we're not doing that, people are not meditating, then it's affecting the experience of Yoga...

Going to India helped one participant realize the importance of the traditional spiritual practice of meditation, and the healing potential of Yin Yoga:

Yoga asana prepares the body and mind for meditation...Meditation in samadhi to the higher-self connection to the universe to divine grace sort of thing, and so I think that first of all teachers have to live that before they can teach it and then once they live that then they can teach....I went to India to study and in India I was relieved and sort of vindicated when my concept of yoga was realized. There, they moved much more slowly and much more about meditation... than what we convey here in typical western yoga class.

Yoga philosophy teaches students how to live

With this theme, we found words or references to the Eight Limbs (*self-control, commitments, physical poses, control of the breath, withdrawal of the senses, focus, fixation, and perfect meditation*). Other words and phrases that helped develop this theme were: *whole, how to understand ourselves, truth, way or path and guru or master*. In the data, there were many references to the Eight Limbs as being instrumental to the union of body, mind and spirit. The knowledge of the true self, revealed by a guru, the discovery of wholeness, and the way or true path were common themes among the participants.

I believe the current yoga culture follows its spiritual tradition ... teaching and practicing on care of the whole being including the chakra system. Yoga meets each of us where we are in life and soon enough, yoga encompasses all for each student, eventually getting to all parts of mind, body, spirit ... connection to universe, interdependent, interconnected to all things...The yoga culture in the Midwest consists of classical yoga encompassing the Eight Limbs of Patanjali Yoga Sutras, the guidebook of yogic philosophy.

One participant perceived that with time, traditional Yoga becomes natural:

After a while you're going to commit to a Yoga practice, ahimsa, non-lying, non-cheating, non-stealing, to really live up to your ideals instead of being a hypocrite, getting drunk, if you're a Yoga person you'll avoid things that are toxic to you.

Participants perceived that lack of knowledge of the whole system of traditional Yoga was a problem:

When teachers who don't have knowledge of all the limbs of yoga teaching, I think it's just spreading misconception and people are missing out.

Another participant said that she believed half of the people practicing yoga are not interested in the Universal Truths, or traditional Yoga:

There are people who want just the physical aspects of yoga and on the other side is the person who wants it... for the spiritual aspect, and it's pretty much split right down the middle.

One participant stated that spiritual progress still happens when the traditional Yoga is not taught, but it's faster if spirituality is included:

I really don't think that yoga can really harm a person or make your situation any worse but without the spiritual piece it may be a very slow process...when you add breath work and really focus on the spiritual part of the person rather than the physical, you are essentially accelerating your path....

Part of traditional Yoga is finding a guru. Although it is understood that a guru is an individual whom one studies under, and means the dispeller of darkness in the Sanskrit, one participant said:

The guru is your conscience. It is not an individual. The purpose of the teacher is to introduce you, as it were, to yourself

Some participants did not have a specific guru:

I wouldn't necessarily call her my guru, but she was definitely the one who inspired me the most on my yoga path.

Some instructors believe we obtain the peace and spiritual understanding intended by the practice of Yoga, whether we study the philosophical and spiritual traditions or not. Others lament the loss of the true value of Yoga when the traditions are not understood.

So, we come back to this notion of tradition. Tradizio is the Latin word for it that means to hand down. What are you handing on? Is it just physical postures? Is it breathing, for that is an essential part, do you know how to meditate? Do you know how to bring this into your active life through virtues? This must be covered in a genuine yoga tradition offered in a studio, or else you are only getting a very small part, like the postures, which may be excellent, but that's not what it's about!

It is perceived that *half, or more*, of the people who do Yoga in the Minnesota do not understand the traditional spiritual aspect, but half of our participants believe that it is ok, the universal truths come through with time and practice.

Practice is the key to entering into the mystery of traditional yoga spirituality

Practice in Yoga can mean routine or repetition of yoga poses and practices, or it can mean a lifestyle including *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *aparigraha* (non-greediness), which are reinforced by daily meditation. The themes that emerged that reflected practice related to the use of words such as:

Teacher training, number of hours and whether at a spiritual institution versus a commercial establishment, additional training needed, benefit of ties to India. Others related practice to: *relaxation, socialization, nurturing for the individual and in the community.*

Although each participant had gone through some formal training to become a Yoga Instructor, there were also some references to the practice of Yoga as being more than just learning about it, and the importance of experience.

One participant responded that practice isn't "*just reading about it, but really doing the practice*"

Another participant told us that she did not take her training in order to teach others, but more to build on her own foundation in pursuit of her personal practice. However, her personal philosophy "*is that when you nurture your practice, your practice will nurture you*". Practice can be equated with a way of being or living, as noted by these participants:

Just do the practice and it works. Come to the Yoga mat every day. Not to be judgmental, oh this practice was not as good as yesterday's ... just do the practice and see things as they are without passing judgment.

Another participant believes it is important to teach people more about the spiritual traditions, because they are principles that work. He said:

Spiritual aspects are...attractive to people and in part one reason why folks are very drawn to Yoga is... they sense that something is going on... these are universal principles, and it's hard to tell people, I have to keep reminding them, the term Yoga simply means union. ...it is about uniting the soul to spirit ... The principals involved, much like physics, there's no Christian electricity or physics, there's no Muslim or Hindu or Taoist physics or electricity or gravity, they just are.

Real practice was perceived to be a way of being that is appropriate to any religion:

I don't think its religion or secular, it's a spiritual practice and that doesn't require anybody to believe anything. You can be atheist

and practice real yoga, you can be Christian and practice real yoga, you can be Hindu and practice real yoga, it is both a way of life philosophy and a practice, not a religion but includes a spiritual component... as with all yoga, we learn to flow with the current of life rather than against it, to be compassionate and accepting of self and others.

Although Yoga is appropriate for any religion, cultural differences can affect practice here in the Midwest:

...Here, I think we try and get that (spiritual component) in, in the Midwest, but it's more scholarly pursuits, and it's more mental, more mental and physical, pretty much a hard work ethic I feel here. I think there's a real desire to have more of that spiritual aspect, but I don't feel it's as strong here... So I think that while we may not be talking about the spiritual aspect of Yoga as overtly as it would be traditionally taught, it's still there and it's done in a very American way and I think that that's ok...

Going deeper into yoga practice brings benefits

The spiritual tradition of Yoga provides for balance while letting go, allowing and embracing change with the integration of self and universe.

This provides for a deeper experience of spiritual meaning and healing. The theme of going deeper was expressed as: *getting it, healing trauma, deep healing, better connected, deeper, diving in, integration, being in sync, mystery, miraculous, deeper spiritual tradition.* Going deeper was experienced even in the absence of traditional spiritual knowledge. We found it was perceived that the magic and power of Yoga can be experienced by secular Americans in the Midwest. When they commit to Yoga practice, they perceive synchronicity with the universe. Participants perceived more control over their lives, and more connection within themselves and

with spirit, and believe in the power of Yoga, as a set of universal principles, to transform the world.

One participant said: *more and more people are finding that the physical yoga is great, however, wow, the spiritual aspect, that calming, that balance that... was something deeper.*” She sees a shift occurring.

No matter where they practice Yoga, they have an experience that is different from that of a run or an aerobics class or something, there is something that keeps them coming back to their mat and it's so often something deeper than: it makes the back of my hamstrings feel good...

Another participant found the magic increased after bonding with a guru ...

I have seen some really awesome things at play... Now I am much more on this path of... claiming him as my guru and... instead of exploring my Yoga practice personally and my teaching as more physical... I feel it is more rounding out...

Another participant said of his guru:

He was examined by both the Russians and the Germans in his ability to control his entire autonomic nervous system. That can't be done, by the manuals in medical school, but he knew how. And so what he wanted to pass on was an appreciation for your human destiny. And that's basically what our tradition is all about. How to understand ourselves, so that we can live lives that are fruitful and happy...

He said anyone can learn to master their own life:

They need to be exposed to more than just what they're learning in their postures. Stop reducing Yoga back to just physical hygiene, that's the point. Now for example, here at the University of St. Kate's..., can they fall asleep at night at will? Do they have stomach problems? Are they riddled with anxiety before exams? Yoga can remove all of that, but it takes more than

postures... They should learn how to manage their own powers, and it's easy... So Yoga comes in and wants to answer those questions... It wants you to understand how to be freer in this culture, how to live more intelligent and happier lives. Where you call the shots. Where you recognize that you have such reserves in you that are just waiting to come forth. You can't deplete them. In our tradition, we live to be a hundred and fifty, because we want to, and then we leave our bodies when we want to, we just cast off the body. It's totally in our power.

One participant who did not have a traditional lineage, noticed that when she made a personal commitment to daily practice, magical things started to happen for her:

Since I made a commitment to go to the mat every day, I have felt so in sync with the universe...When I think about somebody, or talk about somebody, then suddenly I will get a phone call from them...Since January, constantly, everyone is giving me calls: Hey can you do this? Let's do this...I think it's doing this Yoga, doing meditation, I don't know, I feel kind of selfish, by doing this all these good things are happening.

She also believes her students will “get it” (experience the magical synchronicity in the universe) if they practice, even though Yoga Calm is taught without reference to spirituality...

There is so much power. Tell yourself “I am strong, I am confident, I am in control” using those words and having that positive self-talk, that's good, so..., they are creating these mantras in their head, telling themselves I am strong, I am confident, I am a warrior.

Agreeing with the idea that the magic of going deeper with Yoga can come to those who practice, even if they do not know they are practicing a

spiritual discipline, a participant said: “...And I think there is something miraculous happening when we try to reach our toes...”

There are still possibilities of a true Yoga practice, no matter where you are or where live, even in Minnesota: *Yoga has a way of living that allows you to live with other people no matter where you are...You are able to be a lot more equanimous... go out into the world, to make a difference, not just sit at home and meditate, to meditate with your life.*

Yoga is powerful, no matter what lineage is taught: *That is a very powerful practice, to let divine energy flow through me...it doesn't matter where you start, Core Power or Lifetime Fitness or Iyengar, if you really get into it, you're going to find that soul level consciousness.*

Another participant said: “Yoga is a great way to heal traumas and it helps to kind of figure out your purpose in life, it's not just about getting a hot body that is the opposite of spirituality.” She believes our purpose is part of a larger purpose, and in the destiny predicted by her guru:

Santayana said Yoga would emerge as a mighty world culture and change the course of human events, and that is something that I think about a lot and he also said it should be spread from door to door and shore to shore, and I'm sure he meant real Yoga and not just asana.

Barriers to the practice of traditional Yoga spirituality

Most of the participants said there is a desire in Minnesota to increase the emphasis on spirituality in Yoga practice. According to the perceptions of many of the participants, Yoga is practiced differently here than elsewhere because of cultural characteristics, legal structures, and values. More training for teachers and respect and connection to India are recommended, by our participants, to improve the spiritual aspect of Yoga.

All of the teachers perceived Yoga as a spiritual tradition, but all of them mentioned the existence of a break from tradition, here in Minnesota. Some teachers said that the study of Yoga has progressed during the last 20 years here, but one teacher said:

It's like a butterfly that's trying to fight out of the cocoon, it's got a leg out but it doesn't have the body. Midwest is pretty conservative and guarded spiritually. To get people to show up for Kirtan like at the meditation circle in Minneapolis is very difficult... there are some that are really seeking that spiritual component and ... there are definitely those offering and giving that in their classes... I think there is a desire to have that spiritual component.

Two participants also liked the fact that Christians could do Yoga at a studio that does not mention spiritual traditions because some Christians here would not try Yoga if they were to know it is a spiritual tradition. One perceived the difficulty for Minnesotans in learning the spiritual aspect is that Yoga is a guru culture and we are...

...very independent minded people. We have a lot of defense mechanisms; there was a time when folks felt they really had to be on their guard about having their money, their bodies..., all kinds of stuff, taken advantage of and exploited by people that were non-genuine.

Another participant said:

...we have a very difficult time putting our faith and our trust in... a guru or teacher because it's been proven time and time again that teachers are human, fallible...how dare they... you look at John Friend or Mr. Bikram... with whom people have placed their trust and they have taken it and not necessarily done honorable things with it...

According to another participant, who spent three months in India studying Yoga, it is difficult to

live up to traditional spirituality of Yoga in Minnesota:

We do this Yogic lifestyle and it's hard to do here, where it is a lot more expensive to live here....when you're here you have to work, go to school, have to make money, you have different priorities...

One participant sees materialism, the opposite of spirituality, happening in the Yoga culture here:

...driving their fancy cars around and they're not contributing any more to their communities and their families... I am disheartened by it because it's all about money...our culture does not value a person based on what they contribute to their communities, ...this is how Western yoga is ... spirituality is not a part of it.

Another cultural barrier to the practice of Yoga as a traditional spiritual practice here in Minnesota is the fear we have of stopping, according to one: *"Many adults are just terrified to stop, and when they get to savasana at the end of class, they just leave."*

One participant said there are people who are drawn to the spiritual aspect and those who are drawn to the physical aspect... *and not a lot in between.* She said the majority of her students, who are drawn to her because she teaches spiritually traditional Yoga, are around age 50 or older. She said aging brings more spiritual understanding, overcoming barriers to Yoga spirituality: *...as women we are constantly changing evolving and growing, it's just a natural aspect of who we are and there is a lot that comes with age.*

Another said people here are scared away by spirituality and a delicate balance between the physical and spiritual is needed to keep people coming to Yoga.

Lack of knowledge was perceived to be a primary barrier to the traditional spirituality of

Yoga. Eight of the teachers recommended further or continuing study, for teachers and students to improve the sense of the traditional spirituality of Yoga here. Yoga instructors are not licensed by the government, but can apply to be certified by the Yoga Alliance. One participant recommended going to the Yoga Alliance to ask them to increase the number of hours of study required for teacher certification. Two teachers recommended we boycott the Yoga Alliance because they demand royalties of ashrams in India and practice cultural imperialism.

Some participants discussed studio and classroom guidelines that prevent the discussion of spiritual values during Yoga classes. They said those restrictions make it possible for Midwesterners to learn about Yoga without being scared away by spirituality and allow Yoga to be taught in public institutions that forbid the endorsement of spiritual values or beliefs, like public schools. This barrier is not really a barrier according to two participants that said doing asana brings their students to spiritual knowledge without calling it spiritual.

Other participants pointed out cultural problems and social justice issues specific to the Minnesota Yoga culture. For example:

... tends to be... more exclusive than most people in the Yoga culture would even want it to be...middle class white, able-bodied people with money... it is... disrespectful to take what we want, that this is a little smorgasbord of multi-cultural spirituality laid out before us to consume...I don't think it's enough to say... my classes are accessible and everyone is welcome, you really have to extend...and that means people of any race, any body type, of any physical ability... they aren't going to know it especially with the messages they are getting from the media...it is important (to)... stop supporting magazines like Yoga Journal and even institutions like Yoga Alliance because they have ... hijacked this yoga ...

Body image is seen as a barrier to traditionally spiritual Yoga practice. Participants commented on body type: *all body types can do Yoga. But in the media (here) they can't. It's just these skinny, fit bodies...in traditional Yoga over there... there are all body types...*

Two participants recommended going to India to learn more about traditional spirituality. One said it would help improve the spiritual quality of Yoga instruction here if we had more connection with India and worked with ashrams there. Another participant agreed with the need for more connection with India:

I don't think our current yoga culture follows a spiritual tradition at all... you really have to look for it...outside of the U.S. You have to go back to the source to look at Indian tradition and find authentic... practitioners, truly. Because that knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation...white people are not entitled to that knowledge ...Yoga is caring for yourself. And it's a privilege that not too many people have. And I really feel that yoga culture, just the whole having to pay money for it, going to studios that sell these trendy clothing and play trendy music and the yoga instructor will usually have a perfectly toned body... my perception is that people do yoga as an exercise kind of like yoga aerobics and that it is more ego based... I feel that yoga is a privilege and that those who are privileged, such as middle class white women are the ones who participate in yoga... perhaps they don't even realize that they are upholding this cultural norm to appear a particular way....

The privilege of practicing “yoga aerobics” is confusing to people, one participant said:

...when you strip away all the spirituality and the context of Yoga, and then you call it Yoga you are confusing people like I was confused when I first started classes in the U.S., oh, maybe I was wrong, maybe I had a lot of illusions about Yoga, maybe it isn't about

meditation...I don't think you have to go to India to find out Yoga's not just about physical practices but I do think we need to be conscientious in how we are presenting Yoga.

Another participant thought the loss of a holistic perspective could be corrected by more training:

A lot of these folks just don't know beans about what's going on. And they may be excellent... with their physical postures skills and alignment and all that kind of stuff, but they... it's kind of like Western medicine doctors, why don't they discuss more about nutrition- it's just not part of their training curriculum. And so a lot of teachers right now are basically given instruction simply, or mostly, in the physical aspect of training and how to run a class and how to do that properly and safely. They don't have the next step training. And so it's advanced stuff, it should be part of the curriculum for any legitimate teacher; it just is typically not there... if I were running a center again, I would create some kind of continuity of experience for people, so that when they are learning there would be a natural progression...and it would be good for the teachers to give more voice to how hatha practice is really not supposed to be just about the body."

DISCUSSION

The first four themes reflect the Yoga teachers' perceptions of what traditional Yoga spirituality is. The last theme, barriers to spirituality, provides direction about how and why spirituality is impeded and can be improved in the Yoga culture of Minnesota. Our study also had some unexpected findings. First, finding the perception that yoga institutions in the United States are practicing cultural colonization of Indian culture was surprising. The perception was expressed that white middle class Americans consume a *smorgasbord of culture*, take what they want from

indigenous knowledge from around the world to enforce a cultural ideal of thin, fit, white people.

This finding is important because the potential for creating a more peaceful world is damaged by the commercialization and trivialization of profound Yogic philosophy for building a better human society. According to some participants' perceptions, commercial Yoga denigrates the tradition of Yoga and the people who practice it. Engagement with AYUSH and Indian Ashrams could help us shape a more authentic Yoga culture here.

We were surprised to find that some Yoga centers and teachers contacted were unresponsive, and apparently not motivated to share their perceptions with us. We can only speculate as to the reasons - lack of interest in subject matter or too busy. This is significant because any shift in perceptions and practice of traditional Yoga spirituality requires the active engagement of community. This sampling related finding may reinforce the perceptions of our participants that half or more of people who practice Yoga here in the Midwest do not experience the traditional spirituality of Yoga. It is possible that Yoga teachers did not respond to our requests for interviews because they may not know Yoga to be a traditionally spiritual practice and thus our results may be biased. The study is limited because of a small convenience sample. A convenience sample is not representative of the general population and therefore the results cannot be generalized. Also, there may be inherent biases in a convenience sample. There are Yoga lineages, like Bikram and Iyengar, the researchers were unable to connect with for this study due to time constraints for both the researchers and the instructors. Multiple interviews of each participant would also be helpful because participants often gain more trust with the interviewer and become more open to state their true perceptions after multiple interviews (Seidman, 1998). Due to time constraints, the

participants were only asked for one interview each.

Conclusion

In conclusion, expert Yoga teachers in the Midwest United States perceive a lack of spirituality in the practice of Yoga here, even though spirituality is inherent to the practice of traditional Yoga. Because many Yoga Centers lack knowledge of traditions, and some fear spirituality that is different from their own religious tradition, Yoga is widely practiced as an exercise. The success of exercise only programs brings more people to the practice of Yoga, but teachers and students need to go deeper and learn more to experience the true nature of Yoga. It was strongly perceived that the colonization of Yoga benefits upper class people, and is harmful to the science of Yoga. More connection to the source of Yoga, India, would improve the spiritual aspect of the practice here in the Midwest, and advance the cause of greater peace in the broader culture of the United States. This short study indicates a need for greater awareness and more study of the spiritual aspect of the tradition of Yoga.

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