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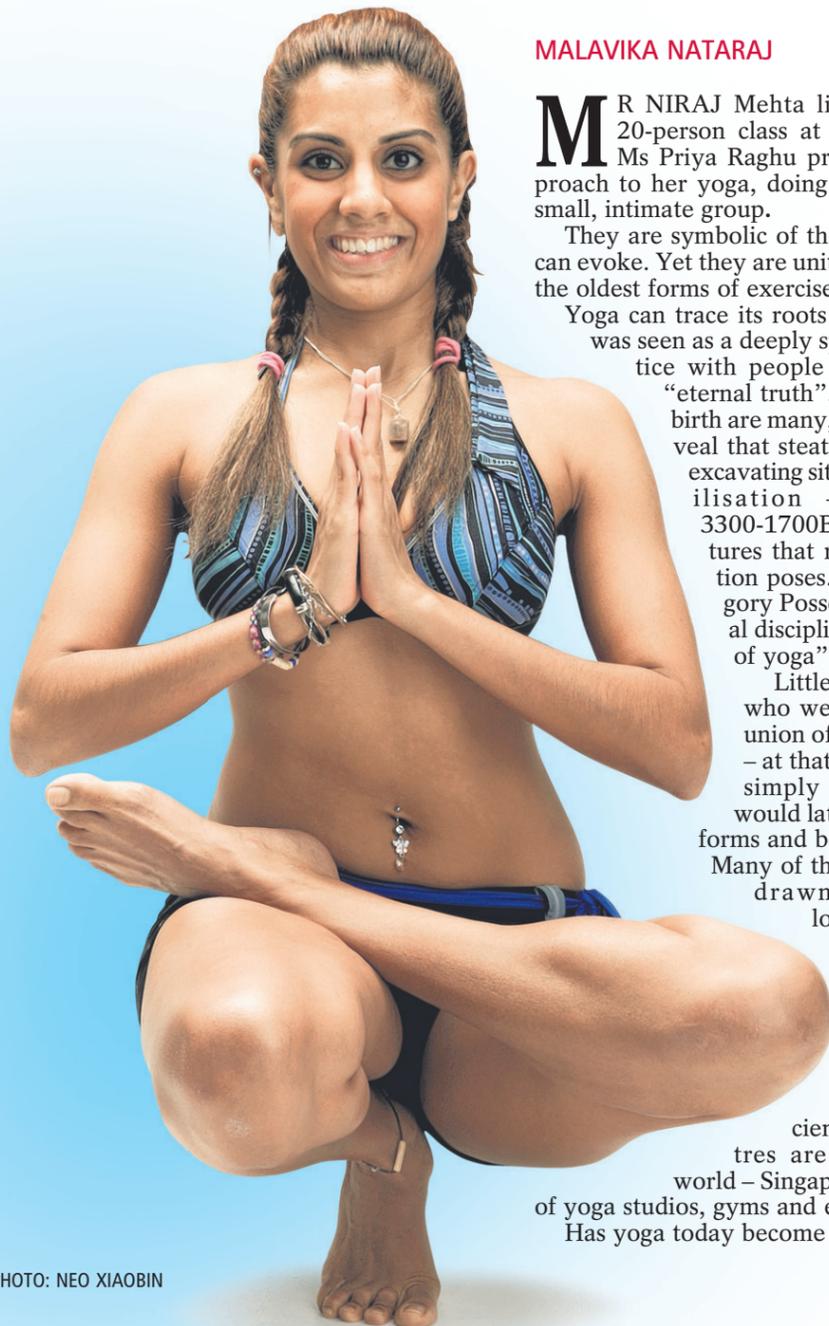


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YOGA Trend or tradition?



MALAVIKA NATARAJ

MR NIRAJ Mehta likes doing his yoga in a 20-person class at a modern fitness centre. Ms Priya Raghu prefers a more solitary approach to her yoga, doing it alone at home or in a small, intimate group.

They are symbolic of the two extremes that yoga can evoke. Yet they are united in their belief in one of the oldest forms of exercise.

Yoga can trace its roots to ancient India, when it was seen as a deeply spiritual and physical practice with people seeking the meaning of "eternal truth". While the versions of its birth are many, checks on the Internet reveal that steatite seals discovered when excavating sites of the Indus Valley Civilisation – it dates back to 3300-1700BC – depict figures in postures that resemble yoga or meditation poses. Indus archaeologist Gregory Possehl calls it "a form of ritual discipline, suggesting a precursor of yoga".

Little did the hermits and sages who were doing yoga – it means union of the mind, body and spirit – at that time know that what was simply a way of life for them would later take on many different forms and become a global business.

Many of those doing yoga today are drawn to the promise of long-term physical benefits.

Others, who stretch and breathe with equal fervour, see it as a much more spiritual endeavour. While India has seen a renewed interest in this ancient practice, new yoga centres are sprouting all over the world – Singapore included – in the form of yoga studios, gyms and even spas.

Has yoga today become a fashion trend, therefore

PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

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Hot stuff... a yoga session at Absolute Yoga.

YOGA

Trend or tradition?



tabla!'s cover girl Daphne Lakhiani is a fan of hot yoga. Having done sessions at Bikram Yoga for a year, the 23-year-old Singaporean is now based in Perth where she is pursuing a degree in bio-medical sciences at the University of Western Australia.

PHOTOS: NEO XIAOBIN, ABSOLUTE YOGA, YOGA VEDANTA CENTRE

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losing its very essence? Or is it really an opportunity for everyone, regardless of race, religion or economic background, to enjoy its benefits, whatever their objective may be?

The birth of modern yoga can be traced back to 1893, when Swami Vivekananda visited the Parliament of Religions in the United States. His speech sparked a wave of interest in yoga and many new schools of thought were born in the West.

In India, too, several new masters grew to prominence. Among these were Swami Satchidananda and Bhagwan Rajneesh (also known as Osho), who were popular through the 1970s and '80s. In south India, the great Sri Krishnamacharya propagated Viniyoga Hatha Yoga, and now his son Desikachar runs the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram. His son-in-law, B.K.S. Iyengar, has also gained recognition across the globe for his own Iyengar Yoga.

Whether it is the build-up of stress – a global issue – or the accessibility, yoga has been accepted as a tool to help people cope with hectic lives. Of course, the endorsements from celebrities have given it fashion cred too. While A-listers like Madonna and Sting opted for vigorous styles like Ashtanga Yoga, an athletic practice that combines breathing and dynamic postures that generate concentrated internal heat, others chose to apply the heat externally with Bikram Yoga.

Named after its founder Bikram Choudhury, it is the only form of yoga done in a heated atmosphere (usually 35 to 40 deg C). And fans of this type of yoga swear the heat improves their flexibility, and thereby minimises the possibility of injury.

Ms Tara Melwani is one of them. Having started yoga in 1996, she "flirted with different styles such as Ashtanga, Iyengar, Hatha" before giving it all up. Reason: Instead of finishing her yoga session with



Tradition at its best... a yoga camp being conducted at the Yoga Vedanta Centre in Dhanwantri, Kerala.

a relaxed feeling, she was feeling tightness and pain in her neck and shoulders.

Last December, a friend invited her to try Bikram Yoga and she was hooked. "At first, I was hesitant. Then I thought, what do I have to lose? After all, I was still searching for a type of yoga that would help loosen up my neck and shoulder muscles and relieve this constant pain. After the first class, I felt worked out, sore, but so relaxed in a way I had never felt before, after a yoga class. That prompted me to go back the next day and, after the second class, I signed up as a member at True Yoga's Bikram Original Hot Yoga studio because I couldn't get over the fact that my neck and shoulder pain had eased by 50 per cent. The pain was completely gone after the third class and I am now free of pain – what a precious gift!" says Ms Melwani, who is a director of the Jay Gee Melwani Group.

Director of Absolute Yoga, which specialises in hot yoga, Jeanne Chung feels that the modern takes on yoga do not rob it of its spiritual dimension. "The popularity of yoga today is primarily driven by yoga asanas – the physical poses, the physical side of yoga. And this, in my opinion, is where most of us need to start. Pushing, stretching and opening the body in yoga poses is a process of discovery. This process requires the breath and it results in a deepened awareness and control of the breath. The breath links the body and the mind and when these are linked, the heart is open... and this is the centre of all spiritual practices," she says.

However, there are some traditional practitioners who feel that yoga should not be practised as a fitness routine. Using Hatha Yoga, popular in most modern yoga centres nowadays, as an example, they say it should integrate meditation, breathing and kundalini (the energy of the consciousness).

Sisters Shreya and Nikhila Bommu trained at the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Dhanwantri Ashram in Kerala – a traditional yoga school with branches around the world. It was established by Himalayan mas-

ter Swami Sivananda and his disciple Swami Vishnudevananda. The sisters are convinced that learning the philosophy of yoga is as important as learning its physical aspects.

"Hatha Yoga is now practised for physical fitness and aesthetics only, which is not its true purpose," says Nikhila. "In fact, there are a lot of spiritual and mental benefits that students should experience from yoga, but most teachers themselves are unaware of these benefits." Shreya adds: "Yoga is gentle; it has no sudden movements. It was not designed to tire the body, but rejuvenate it."

Janaki – yes, that's her name... she is known only by her spiritual name – runs the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre in Singapore and prefers to take a more moderate view. She says she sees a good mix of people at her classes: Race and religion are not an issue. "Yoga is spiritual, and spirituality is universal. It is a way to connect with oneself. People looking for a healthier way to live come here," she says.

Even the proponents of hot yoga caution against seeing it as merely a way to lose weight. Bikram Yoga director Diane Lee says: "Many are only interested in finding out how much weight or calories they can lose in one lesson. Yoga is a lifestyle to complete wellness and weight loss is only one of many benefits it can give you. The more effort you put in, the more benefits you receive. Bikram says 'give me six months (practising one yoga class a day), and I will give you a new life'."

"I have seen people try to lose weight by just being in the hot room... they gave up in a month or two. It takes discipline and determination."

That said, there is no denying the trend of people who view yoga as a form of physical conditioning being drawn to the more modern places while people who are after a more spiritual experience head for traditional yoga centres.

Ms Raghu, a professional in her early 30s, regrets signing up for a year's membership at one of the modern outlets. "Given a chance, I would prefer to practice on my own, or join a more intimate group. Yoga should be done slowly, and with good breathing techniques, which doesn't happen in a group gym atmosphere," she says.

Mr Mehta, on the other hand, enjoys the atmosphere at the modern yoga centre he is a member of. "I have a stressful job and I travel frequently. I feel rejuvenated after my class. I like the atmosphere there – it feels like a spa and helps me de-stress," says the finance professional who is from Mumbai and moved to Singapore five years ago.

Ultimately, the true effect of yoga can be seen only with regular, disciplined practice, regardless of where – or in what form – it is learnt. What each person takes away from a yoga class depends on what they are looking for. Although the higher spiritual plane is out of reach for most ordinary people, it is the awareness of this that is important.

Yoga teacher Dana Carroll feels "most people come to yoga for health and beauty reasons to start with. But as they get more into the practice, and experience the full benefits of yoga on their mind and body, then it is no longer a 'fashion trend' but rather, an inner journey towards the self".

Ms Carroll, who teaches at Art of Living which was founded by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and propagates his vision of building a violence-free and stress-free global family, says yoga is all about enhancing the quality of life as a whole. "Every yoga centre or gym has different ways of delivering the same message. Just like every tree grows and reaches towards the sunlight," she adds.

She does have a point. In this fast-paced world, more and more people are turning to yoga to help them find the right balance in their lives. And whether it is the traditional or the trendy they embrace, it doesn't really matter.

After all, it is a matter of personal choice when it comes to finding that bit of "sunlight".

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Yoga for everyone

KEEN to do yoga? Here is a list of some of places you can visit, and the types of yoga they offer:

ABSOLUTE YOGA

Types of yoga offered: Hot, Hatha
Contact: 6223-8254 or log on to www.absoluteyogasingapore.com

AGNI YOGA CENTRE

Types of yoga offered: Ashtanga, Hatha
Contact: 8280-6023 or log on to www.agniyogacentre.com

ANANDA MARGA YOGA SOCIETY OF SINGAPORE

Types of yoga offered: Mixed, Tantric Meditation
Contact: 6344-6519 or log on to www.anandamarga.org.sg

ART OF LIVING YOGA & MEDITATION CENTRE

Type of yoga offered: Sri Sri Yoga
Contact: 9873-3886 or log on to www.artofliving.org.sg

ASHTANGA YOGA

Type of yoga offered: Ashtanga
Contact: 9388-2716

BIKRAM YOGA

Type of yoga offered: Bikram
Contact: 6339-6639

BLISS THE ORIGIN

Type of yoga offered: Tantric
Contact: 9848-9840 or log on to www.blisstheorigin.sg

COMO SHAMBHALA URBAN ESCAPE

Types of yoga offered: Hatha, Ashtanga, Vinyasa/Flow-based
Contact: 6735-2163 or log on to http://www.singapore.comoshambhala.bz

DR. VENKY'S SHIVSHAKTI YOGA

Types of yoga offered: Mix of techniques, all except Ashtanga
Contact: 9675-9042

INNER ENGINEERING – ISHA YOGA

Type of yoga offered: Isha
Contact: 6444-4064 or log on to www.ishafoundation.org

INSPIRE MUM & BABY

Types of yoga offered: Pre- and Post-natal, Mother-Baby
Contact: 6348-7881 or log on to www.inspiremumbaby.com

IYENGAR YOGA CENTRE

Type of yoga offered: Iyengar
Contact: 6220-4048 or log on to www.iyengaryogasingapore.com

IYENGAR YOGA SINGAPORE

Type of yoga offered: Iyengar
Contact: 9161-6434

NATUROPATHY YOGA CENTER

Types of yoga offered: Naturopathy (including Pranakriya, Chandrakriya and Mudra)
Contact: 9722-0071 or log on to www.naturopathyyoga.com

OASIS HOLISTIC

Types of yoga offered: Ashtanga, Vinyasa, Swastha, Iyengar, Hatha
Contact: 6442-2881 or log on to www.oasisyoga.sg

OM SHIVA YOGA CENTRE

Types of yoga offered: Hatha, Iyengar, Sivananda, Ashtanga and Power
Contact: 6466-2257 or log on to www.omshivayoga.com

PURE YOGA

Types of yoga offered: Hatha, Ashtanga, Power, Bikram, Pre- and Post-natal
Contact: 6733-8863 or log on to www.pure-yoga.com

REAL YOGA

Types of yoga offered: Holistic, Shakti, Chikitsa, Hatha, Vinyasa/Flow
Contact: 6734-2853 or log on to www.realyoga.com.sg

SIVANANDA YOGA VEDANTA CENTRE

Type of yoga offered: Sivananda
Contact: 9067-9100 or log on to www.sivananda.com.sg

SPANDANANDA

Type of yoga offered: Anusara
Contact: 9731-5271 or log on to www.spandananda.com

SVASTHA YOGA STUDIO

Type of yoga offered: Svastha
Contact: 9838-5242 or log on to www.svastha.com

THE YOGA HUB

Types of yoga offered: Hatha, Vinyasa, Meditation
Contact: 6482-3659

THE YOGA SHALA

Type of yoga offered: Ashtanga
Contact: 9363-5544 or log on to www.theyogashala.com.sg

TIRISULA YOGA

Type of yoga offered: Mixed
Contact: 9009-8889 or log on to www.tirisulayoga.com

TRUE YOGA

Type of yoga offered: All types
Contact: 6235-9919 or log on to www.trueyoga.com.sg

WASABI YOGA STUDIO

Types of yoga offered: Mixed, Maternity
Contact: 6534-3454 or log on to www.wabisabi.com.sg

YOGA CONNECTIONS

Types of yoga offered: Hatha, Kriya, Pranayama
Contact: 6293-9262 or log on to www.yogaconnections.com.sg

YOGA EAST

Type of yoga offered: Kundalini
Contact: 6219-1404 or log on to www.yogaeastsingapore.com

YOGA SPACE

Types of yoga offered: Mainly Ashtanga and Meditation
Contact: 6338-9642 or log on to www.yogaspace.com.sg

Every yoga centre or gym has different ways of delivering the same message. Just like every tree grows and reaches towards the sunlight.

– Yoga teacher Dana Carroll