

The Social Life of Yoga: Exploring Transcultural Flows in India

Mimi Nichter

Abstract This paper draws on fieldwork at the K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute (KPJAYI) in Mysore, South India and in the surrounding community. The purpose of the paper is twofold. First, I describe the social life of yoga as experienced by different types of global health tourists who arrive in India with an array of expectations, differing agenda, and an imaginary of India. Second, I provide observations about Indian entrepreneurs and cultural brokers who flourish on the edges of the yoga school and interface regularly with the foreign yoga students. Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews, I present a heuristic of Western yoga students in Mysore: (1) the yoga tourist or “yoga lites,” (2) the yoga traveler, (3) the yoga practitioner “going to the source,” and (4) the yoga professional. These categories allow me to draw attention to the heterogeneity of yoga students and to highlight ruptures and frictions in the transnational flows of ideas and concepts. I also briefly discuss the practice of yoga in cosmopolitan India among middle-class women.

Introduction

During the 1970s and 1980s, I conducted long term ethnographic research on local health cultures in coastal Karnataka in South India.¹ Occasionally, I left the villages where I worked and traveled to Mysore, a traditional city about 5 h from my field site. By the early 1990s I experienced a noticeable change in the city. Alighting at the main bus stand, I was now greeted by rickshaw drivers and touts who approached me asking “yoga, yoga?” Mysore was in the process of becoming the

¹ Nichter and Nichter (2001), Nichter and Nichter (2010).

M. Nichter (✉)

School of Anthropology, University of Arizona, Emil Haury building, Tucson, Arizona 85721, USA

e-mail: mimin@email.arizona.edu

epicenter for yoga for the foreign traveler, and Indians who were engaged in the business of tourism were all too ready to direct me to appropriate yoga destinations. I also observed that the burgeoning interest in yoga in the West was resulting in a revitalization of the practice of yoga in cosmopolitan India.

Over time, as I developed a yoga practice in the United States and continued to do health-related research in India, I became increasingly interested in transnational yoga flows. In the spring of 2009, I enrolled as a student at the Sri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute (KJPAYI) in Mysore. My goal for studying there was to conduct pilot research about the motives and practices of international yoga tourists and practitioners who were flocking in increasing numbers to Mysore. Additionally, I wanted to make ethnographic observations of the response of the local Indian community to the phenomena. To this end, I practiced yoga and conducted formal and informal interviews with foreign students as well as with Indians who had established businesses near the institute offering eclectic services to Western students. I engaged in participant observation in the yoga school as well as on the street. My focus in this paper is twofold: First, I unpack the social life of yoga as experienced by Westerners who arrive in India with an array of expectations, differing agenda, and an imaginary of India. Second, I provide observations about Indian entrepreneurs and cultural brokers who flourish on the edges of the yoga studio, interfacing with foreigners and offering them an array of “authentic” Indian experiences ranging from ayurvedic treatments, Sanskrit classes and chanting, Indian philosophy, *prāṇāyāma*, Indian cooking, and mandala (*maṇḍala*) drawing. I also briefly discuss the practice of yoga among the Indian community.

As a heuristic, I describe four broad categories of Westerners who come to India to study yoga: (1) the yoga tourist, (2) the traveler for whom yoga is a conduit into Indian culture, (3) the yoga practitioner who is “going to the source,” and (4) the yoga professional. I use these categories as a way to highlight several different streams of yoga practitioners. In this paper, I concentrate on the third group as those people were the most numerous types in Mysore during the time I was studying there. Although the first category, the yoga tourist, typically does not come to study at KJPAYI in Mysore—at least not at present—I describe this group to provide background to the larger yoga scene unfolding in India today.

The international attraction of Mysore was recently featured in the travel section of the *New York Times*, which listed Mysore as one of the top 20 places in the world to visit in 2010. “Yogis seeking transcontinental bliss are heading to Mysore, the City of Palaces, in southern India,” the description read.² The short blurb went on to praise the potential of a yogic pilgrimage to practice Ashtanga Yoga, described as a “rigorous sweat-producing, breath-synchronizing regimen of poses.” After yoga class, the article suggested, one could partake in a potpourri of exotic experiences ranging from ayurvedic treatments, to the study of Sanskrit, or visiting a palace. Introduced in this cavalier manner, the austerity and difficulty of this yoga practice was minimized and a trip to Mysore appeared to be for every “body.”

²“Best Places to go in 2010,” in *New York Times*, 10 January 2010.

The Sri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute

The institute was founded by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009) in 1948. His grandson, Sharath Rangaswamy, now serves as director and is assisted by his mother (Jois' daughter), Saraswathi. Sri K. Pattabhi Jois (referred to by his students as “Guruji,”) respected teacher, was a Karnatak Brahmin who studied with the yoga master Krishnamacharya for 25 years. A scholar of yoga and Sanskrit, Jois taught for many years at the Sanskrit college in Mysore, and began teaching yoga to Western students in India in the mid 1960s. In 1975, he made his first trip to the United States to teach yoga, although at the time he was relatively unknown.³ For most of his life, Pattabhi Jois taught yoga from his home, where 15 students at a time would practice in a small room, often in multiple batches throughout the morning. Over the years, his popularity grew and he became increasingly well known to practitioners around the world through his international workshops. Flows of students began to arrive to study in Mysore.

In 2002, the Jois family moved to a wealthy suburb of Mysore, where they built a multi-storied building with a large room to accommodate the hundreds of students who were now coming regularly to study with Jois.⁴ During the high season, there can be approximately 400 foreign students, mostly Westerners, registered for classes at KPJAYI in a given month. To study there, one must sign up for a minimum of 1 month of classes, which in 2009 cost approximately \$600 (US). One also signs a waiver of exclusivity that they will not practice at other studios during their stay in Mysore. Practice occurs in the early morning and the rest of a student's day is free to fill in with activities that suit their interests. Students need to find their own accommodation and food, but community residents have rapidly renovated their homes to accommodate yoga students in private rooms with high-speed internet connections.

The practice room is large and bright, accommodating 50–60 students. During the busy season, the *śālā* (literally, the hall, referring to the space where students practice) is full with practitioners from 4:30 a.m. extending till 10 a.m. with students completing their practice and others beginning theirs. While waiting for a spot to lay down one's mat, a student has an opportunity to observe other practitioners on their mats, all of whom are at different points in the fixed sequence of Ashtanga Yoga poses. Once one enters and begins her or his own practice, there is little opportunity to carefully observe anyone else although the energy in the room is palpable. Unlike many yoga classes in the West which are over 80 % women, and often taught by women, at least half of the students at KPJAYI are men.⁵

³ Jois (2002).

⁴ Smith (2007) provides a detailed description of studies at the KPJAYI *śālā*.

⁵ Birdee et al. (2008). See also Andrew Tilin's report “Where Are All the Men?” in *Yoga Journal*, 20 March 2007. That Pattabhi Jois and his grandson, Sharath Rangaswamy, are both male may also account for the attraction of Ashtanga Yoga to men.

For most students at KPJAYI, the postures and rigid sequencing has been learned and memorized elsewhere, as there is little formal instruction in the *śālā* itself.⁶ Rather, a yoga student goes through the established sequence of *āsana* and linking breath and movements (*vinyāsa*) in the primary series and stops at the final pose they have been taught. Sometimes students receive hands on adjustments or assistance in performing a pose from the teacher during the class. A teacher-led class—a concept popular in the West—is ‘led’ in name only once a week in the *śālā*, when the names of the *āsana* and the count of the *vinyāsa* breaths are called out by the guru in Sanskrit and the assembled students practice the pose together at the same time.

Attracting the Yoga Tourist: Yoga Lite

Health tourism is a burgeoning business in India today, and yoga has increasingly become commodified for foreign and national tourists. Transnational interactions are immediately evident in the marketing of yoga as both a commercial and spiritual product. The *Incredible India* website, the main portal of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, features a well-known American yoga teacher (Shiva Rea), in a short colorful video, dressed in traditionally colored guru garb, albeit with a distinctly Western twist. She dons bright, orange, tightly-fitting yoga clothes (her own well-marketed brand) and is shown practicing advanced *āsana* on remote mountaintops of the Himalayas and near sacred rivers. Her message, rather ironically, is that yoga is accessible to all and that the place one needs to experience it is in India. For the would-be yogi, the Ministry of Tourism website offers a “yoga quiz” to determine what style of yoga might be suitable for you, dependant on such variables as the type of activity you like, what clothes you wear when exercising, etc.⁷ For reading on the topic of yoga, the Ministry recommends Western guides to yoga hotspots such as *From Here to Nirvana: The Essential Guide to the Yogis and Gurus, Ashrams and Temples of Spiritual India* alongside classic texts such as *Light on Yoga*.⁸ It is noteworthy that of four recommended texts on yoga, only one is

⁶ Although the Ashtanga Yoga series is taught in a specific sequence, it is important to note that the practice of Ashtanga Yoga has been changed considerably over time, which is why the center was previously called the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute. According to long term practitioners, Pattabhi Jois adapted many components of the series over time.

⁷ The use of the internet to advertise a wide variety of yoga learning opportunities in India represents a significant departure from the early 1990s. In her book, *Positioning Yoga*, Sarah Strauss (2005) notes that in the course of conducting research she visited several tourist offices in North India and Government of India information offices in Europe and North America. When she inquired where she should learn yoga in India, for the most part she was referred to “the Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh.” Clearly, the sites where one can learn yoga in India has expanded greatly in the past 15 years.

⁸ Cushman and Jones (1998), see Iyengar (1988).

authored by an Indian. Clearly, this repackaging of yoga into a highly accessible activity offers great potential for health tourism, as India attempts to capitalize on a product which is uniquely theirs.⁹

There are many different levels of yoga tourism in India today. Of late, notions of the yoga retreat in austere Himalayan ashrams have been transformed into a new breed of “ultra-luxury yoga retreats.”¹⁰ For example, a 14-day yoga package at a Himalayan destination spa, which comes with a personal breathing and meditation instructor, a villa with private pool, and two ayurvedic massages costs over \$14,000. High-end designer retreats are custom tailored to the individual, so rather than needing to learn a practice, a teacher creates a program suitable to your needs. Like having a personal trainer, your Indian coaches are there to help you achieve your goals. Spa culture including yoga classes and ayurvedic treatment and massage are expanding exponentially across the subcontinent, appealing to an elite global market comprised of Westerners, NRIs (non-resident Indians), and upper- and middle-class Indian nationals.

In addition to these ultra-luxury yoga vacations for yoga practitioners with deep pockets, there are also multiple workshops offered throughout the year, typically in beach resort areas. These workshops are taught by popular foreign yoga teachers (some of whom teach Ashtanga Yoga) and appeal to a global audience who come to India for 1 or 2 weeks to study yoga. Classes are typically offered in the morning providing ample time for relaxation and pampering. These prepackaged yoga tours provide an entry level experience to the reality of India, offering a sheltered, peaceful haven where all one’s basic needs are provided resulting in little need to venture into the India beyond the spa gates. During such workshops, some yoga tourists learn of other opportunities to study in India, gain confidence about traveling, and later return to have a different type of experience. One older American man described his earlier 1-week workshop experience in Goa as “summer camp” noting that “it was a great and safe introduction to India.”

The Yoga Traveler

Many of those at KPJAYI are yoga travelers. This is a broad category, including repeat travelers to India, and first-time visitors looking for a respite from the arduous work and upheaval that characterizes low-budget travel in the country. Typically, these backpackers had learned about studying yoga in Mysore from travel books like *Lonely Planet* and from travelers’ blogs, and most had little prior

⁹For a discussion of the legal fights that have emerged over branding yoga, see Fish (2006). Recently, the Hindu American Foundation has taken up the question of who owns yoga and has launched a movement called “Take Back Yoga.” Their main concern is that “yoga has thrived but Hinduism has lost control of its brand.” *The New York Times*, 27 November 2010.

¹⁰See Jerry Guo’s article on “Upmarket-Facing Do (the Good Life),” in *Newsweek International*, 5 July 2010.

yoga experience. Beyond the KPJAYI, which is certainly the most well-known and prestigious of the yoga centers in Mysore, there are numerous teachers offering classes in diverse styles of yoga, and the internet makes it easy to plan one's stay online. Because practice time at the *śālā* was in the morning, yoga travelers had time to experience other "traditional" Indian teachings available in the area.

The story told to me by a 27-year-old Spanish student captures the experience of a traveler who heard about Ashtanga Yoga in Mysore and decided to study at the *śālā*. His decision to travel around India was made shortly after his long-term girlfriend had broken up with him. In his mind, India was a place where one could become immersed in the culture and forget one's problems. Raoul had taken a few Ashtanga Yoga classes in his native Madrid. The idea of staying in one place where he could study yoga and other aspects of Indian culture and also be surrounded by other travelers appealed to him.

On his first day of practice at KPJAYI, Raoul was confused as to what he should do as everyone was at a different point in the practice and there was no teacher guiding the class. Observing his confusion, the teacher, Sharath, taught him sun salutation A (*sūryanamaskār* A), the first pose in the series which he practiced several times before he was told that he was done for the day. Other travelers who were unfamiliar with the Ashtanga Yoga series, related similar stories of being given one pose which they would repeat several times for their first few days, resulting in a practice of about 15 min. This style of teaching was not what most students expected to find at the *śālā*, and while it appealed to some, it did not appeal to others who desired hands-on verbal training in yoga postures and some lectures on yogic philosophy.

Raoul decided to extend his stay at the *śālā* beyond the month because he enjoyed meeting other yoga students after class. He spent several hours each morning at a popular café where one could find foods produced for Western palates. He enjoyed the ethos of the yoga community and had several sessions with a past life regression counselor which he found helpful in understanding difficulties in his present day relationships. He was also attending classes in Indian philosophy. What appealed to him was the entire package, an experience he did not find when he was on the road in India.

Scott, a 40-year-old American traveler, had attended a 1-week workshop in Goa with an Ashtanga Yoga teacher and was on a return trip to India. His motivation for staying in Mysore for a month was that he had a break from work and had been traveling around India in the hopes of recovering from a broken heart. In his interview, he explained:

Coming to India removes me from my emotional pain. All this hard-core travel that you do here, you just have to look, look, look around and everything is so different that it's just kind of cathartic. Everything is upside down here: what is being sold on the street and in stores, the rickshaws that drive you around, the cows in the middle of the road, just everything. Being in India lets me put everything else aside and when I go back home, I feel like I've been away a really long time.

Like the other yoga travelers, Scott found that Mysore was a good respite from arduous travel. While yoga was an additional “perk,” he felt that it was not the sole reason for staying in Mysore:

I can do yoga at home and doing Mysore-style yoga in the U.S. is not so different than doing Mysore here. It’s not like they’re really hands on here, but you do get the energy of all those hard-core yogis when you’re in that room. It’s almost like a *darśan*. For me, what is different here is that I can also eat *dosai* and *idli*, watch bodies being burned, and just be around all this intense culture.¹¹ I also meet lots of interesting people and get to hang out with them.

The journey to India, as described by these yoga travelers, may be considered a secular ritual that serves as a counterpoint to everyday life or as a personal transition or rite of passage at a particular point in one’s life.¹² In addition to the relaxation that comes from settling in to a place for a period of time, the yoga traveler may also seek this experience in an effort to see themselves from a different perspective.

Going to the Source

Most of the people I interviewed at the institute were in this category of dedicated yoga practitioners who had established, long-term daily or near daily practices of Ashtanga Yoga prior to coming to Mysore. They distinguished themselves from those who took “yoga vacations” in places like Goa or Bali, and referred to their own practice at the *śālā* as being a “no frills” more basic experience. Most of these foreign yoga students had attended numerous workshops in their native countries with senior Ashtanga Yoga teachers, and had prepared themselves for the trip by talking with their teachers and other yoga practitioners who had practiced at the *śālā* before. Several had completed a teacher training course in their country, and some were teaching Hatha Yoga or Ashtanga-based yoga part-time, as an adjunct to their “real job.” Melanie, a 30-year-old American woman explained that it was her experience as a yoga teacher that inspired her trip to India:

After teaching for a while, it just did not feel authentic anymore to me to teach anyone else. I felt the need to meet my teacher’s teacher. I needed to understand what that relationship was all about. I wanted to understand the passing on of information in the Indian way, to see where this yoga came from, and who practices it. Where I practice in the States there is a lot of light-heartedness. Here you meet people from studios all over the world and you see a lot of advanced people. Coming here demonstrates a level of commitment to the practice.

¹¹ Scott’s statement “It’s almost like a *darśan*” literally means “It’s almost like seeing the divine.” *Darśan* is a Sanskrit term which in the Hindu ritual tradition refers to religious seeing, or auspicious sight. Thus, Chris describes being with advanced practitioners and the teachers in the *śālā* as a form of auspicious sighting. *Dosai* and *idli* are two popular South Indian breakfast foods prepared from rice flour.

¹² Nash (1996).

This “lack of authenticity” experienced by practitioners who have learned yoga only outside of India was echoed in several interviews. A person who had an “authentic yoga practice” was described as a person who “lives what they teach,” and “who has spent a long time in India and paid their dues.” Having traveled to India to study yoga “at the source” conferred legitimacy and a credential, “a badge of authenticity and deeper knowledge about the practice.”

Similarly, “going to the source” was also cited as a reason for coming to Mysore by Jenna, a Finnish woman. Although she had practiced regularly for several years and attended workshops with Pattabhi Jois in Europe, she sensed that her practice was not authentic, which to her meant that “it was more external than internal.” She explained how this had changed after her first trip to the *śālā* 1 year ago:

I became more committed to my yoga. After being in Mysore, yoga was more a part of my everyday life and it felt deeper in me. Before I came here, my practice was very physical, strenuous and external. It was like once I got the connection here, my yoga went inside my body. This visit I know that I am even more connected.

Not only did she feel her connection to the physical space of the *śālā* where she learned from the vigor of more advanced yoga practitioners, she also liked the feeling of connection with a guru. Jenna explained:

It’s having a guru, a teacher, a lineage. It’s not something we have in our country. In Finland, we don’t have the type of relationships where people eat dinners every night and have close ties with family and their grandparents. When you’re eighteen, you move out of your parents’ home and you live by yourself; you are independent and free. In some ways it’s good but it makes everyone separated. So the young people are living alone. For me here in India, it’s about the teacher and the lineage. Having that connection with a teacher here, I don’t feel a need to talk and ask questions. I just have to do the practice.

Thus, studying at the *śālā* resonated with her not only because of the teacher-student (*guru-śiṣyā*) relationship, but because it situated her in a lineage which she could no longer experience within her own kin network and wider community in Finland. The Mysore community—literally, a community of practice—filled this need for her.

The importance of the connection with a lineage and going to the source was also emphasized by Angela, a 32-year-old American woman who was visiting Mysore for the first time. She had discovered Ashtanga Yoga in Los Angeles 5 years before and had immediately experienced it as a refuge after “corporate yoga” where she felt disturbed by the scripting of the practice (referring to Bikram Yoga).

I prefer to practice with those who have paid their dues and who know the culture from which yoga comes. A lot of the yoga studios in L.A. sell beauty; they try to sell self-control. I just don’t resonate with them. I like those who are ascetic and who take that as their frame of reference for doing yoga.

Angela had come to Mysore because she “liked the association with old secret knowledge, the silent practice and the fact that there was a guru.” Beyond the value of the lineage, other informants talked about the connection of Ashtanga Yoga to

“ancient philosophical texts,” even if the source could not be authenticated.¹³ Others explained that they had come to Mysore because they felt that “it was their time.” For example, a 35-year-old German woman, Kerstin, a professional athlete turned yoga practitioner who was visiting Mysore for the first time, explained her motivation for coming:

It was time to taste the birthplace of Ashtanga [Yoga], not just to go to workshops. I’ve been practicing this yoga for three years and there’s a point when you just want to come here. If you want to know the sweetness of sugar, you have to taste it, and that’s it. Like that, if you want to know what Ashtanga [Yoga] is really about, you have to come to Mysore to experience it. I wanted to go beyond the intellectual. I’ve read so much about yoga but I wanted to feel it more inside. I’ve started to feel and understand more since I came a month ago.

Like other Ashtanga Yoga practitioners, Kerstin spoke of how the daily practice of working with the “gross physical body” was leading her to an awareness of the more “subtle inner body.” She had not experienced any “transformational breakthroughs” in Mysore; indeed, she recognized—as many other practitioners I spoke with—that any changes she experienced in India would be better understood over time. Kerstin did however feel that yoga was more “easily digested” in India because she had the time after her practice to absorb what she had experienced on the mat. “I can’t practice like this at home,” she mused. “Here I can take a full rest after class. I don’t have to run off to work and do a million things. I can let the experience of the yoga, whatever happened on the mat, just settle in.”

Culture, Gender, and Generation on the Mat

Some of the yoga practitioners who had gone “to the source” made interesting observations about cultural and gender differences they observed among Ashtanga Yoga students both from their own country and from other regions of the world. While I recognize the need to be cautious about essentializing cultural difference, interview data revealed some interesting, if preliminary, observations about how people from different countries responded to Ashtanga Yoga. Several informants talked about how Ashtanga Yoga seemed to match an aspect of their national character, resulting in its popularity. For example, Jenna from Finland observed:

Ashtanga [Yoga] is very popular in Finland because it is a highly structured practice. Finns practice it precisely. They do their breathing and the *āsana*—they can focus on that. We like someone to tell us what to do and we like to follow. We listen carefully, we concentrate on that strictly, we do what we are told. Ashtanga [Yoga] suits us well.

¹³ The reference here, which emerged in several interviews, is to the *Yoga Kurunta*, supposed to be the ancient text which Krishnamacharya (guru of Sri Pattabhi Jois) received through his own guru in the early 1900s and passed down to Jois (see Sjomann 1999; Smith 2007).

She went on to describe American practitioners, whom she felt were more interested in the spiritual aspects of yoga. “I’m surprised when I hear how Americans can talk openly about the spiritual side of yoga. We Finns don’t like to do that.” Reminiscent of this observation of Finnish Ashtanga Yoga followers, Haruko, a Japanese practitioner explained that in Tokyo many students were attracted to the physical form of the practice, not the spiritual component. “Japanese like the rules of Ashtanga [Yoga], but they don’t think about what’s going on inside. We are very obedient and we like to follow what we are told very carefully. We are anxious to improve, to get to the next series. We always want new poses.” Haruko had hoped there would be more discussion of yogic philosophy and the deeper purpose of the practice. “When I am done with my practice and I’m standing outside the *śālā*, other Japanese students will comment on my flexibility or ask me what pose I’m up to in the series. I feel like there’s a lot of competition to get ahead.”

Daniel, an Austrian man who had been living in San Francisco for several years explained that although he had been practicing Ashtanga Yoga for many years, he had not wanted to study in Mysore because he received good instruction in California where he also attended workshops which offered “good concentrated knowledge.” Daniel knew Pattabhi Jois did not speak much English and he preferred teachers who could articulate clearly what the precise bodily movements should be, and how to get into particular poses. As he explained,

I didn’t understand that there could be other forms of teaching that were valuable. In Western culture, information is passed on verbally. I had not experienced a form of teaching that depended on the presence of the person and observing how the person conveys the teaching inside the setting. Being in Mysore, I have begun to appreciate other ways a student can learn.

Studying at the *śālā*, he became cognizant of how Sharath could “skillfully read the students.” Daniel stated:

It’s like if you have too much ego and you’re showing off. . . even if you are practicing beautifully, he may not give you a posture. I don’t know how he does it but he is working with expectations all the time. It’s hard to explain. Everybody hangs on his every word and movement in the *śālā*. There’s a total teacher-student relationship, which doesn’t really exist in yoga classes outside of here.

Several experienced practitioners who had studied with Pattabhi Jois before his passing, also described how he was “a master at seeing people’s strengths. . . at reading their energy” and how his teaching was hands on with little verbal instruction. This is captured succinctly in his famous aphorism: “Yoga is 99% practice and 1% theory.” In daily afternoon meetings which Jois used to hold with students, he would resist answering questions about body positioning (how are you supposed to rotate your internal thigh in this posture?), yogic philosophy, and any of the more cerebral components of the practice. Anthropologist Benjamin Smith who also conducted fieldwork at KPJAYI observed that the greatest emphasis in

Mysore-style practice is on “haptic communication, involving somatic involvement by the student of their own body as well as somatic attention to the body of the teachers.”¹⁴

For some students, particularly North American males, the nature of the *guru-śiṣyā* relationship was uncomfortable. John, a Canadian student, captured this skepticism in his observations of the *śālā*. While he enjoyed the practice of Ashtanga Yoga and felt he was on a “spiritual quest,” he could not relate to what he observed was the “blind belief” of other students. Raised an atheist, John was dismayed by others who he felt were enthralled with a yoga guru and a foreign belief system.

I don't feel comfortable with the way people are with Sharath. . . the idea that this is *the only way*, the only yoga, that it's so exclusive. I didn't like signing a waiver not to practice any other yoga here in Mysore, and I feel uncomfortable when I see people bowing at the door as they enter and leave the *śālā*. Just to be so captivated with a person or a belief system. I can't be that led. I have my own individuality.

This struggle between being an individual and being a devotee (*bhakta*) was expressed by several other North American males who retained a skepticism towards accepting a guru. The idea of surrendering to the feet of a master was in direct contrast to notions of hyper-individualism that are an important component of identity projects in the West. While some people accepted that poses were given when one was ready to learn them, other students were anxious to “nail a pose” so they could move on in the series. Some who were tied to a culture of achievement found the system of “being given poses when you were ready” frustrating, as they felt they could handle much more than they were given.¹⁵ In contrast, a *bhakta* of the practice was upset by questions he was asked by other students which tried to place them in a hierarchy, such as “What pose are you up to? How long have you been practicing? How many assists have you gotten since you've been here?” To these devotees, such questions represented competition and comparison; traits which they believed were “anti-yogic.”

Several women spoke about their surprise at the behavior of some students at the *śālā*, mostly belonging to what I have categorized as “yoga travelers.” As Katherine, an American woman, explained:

I didn't think I'd find myself in a subculture of Westerners on vacation. There are tons of parties here and lots of drugs. They say “what happens in Mysore stays in Mysore.” People come here to cheat on their partners back home. There are just lots and lots of hookups. Mysore is a den of illusion.

By calling the Mysore scene a den of illusion, Katherine is referring to the differing types of people who come to study at KPJAYI and how it is important to see that they are not a homogenous group. Many of those who have to come to study are not “hard-core yogis” but are actually looking for a good time. In a similar vein,

¹⁴ Smith (2007, 35).

¹⁵ Smith 2008 also discusses the issue of ego and frustration among yoga students based on what they perceive to be lack of recognition of their hard earned abilities in the practice.

Nicole, a nutritionist from Canada visiting Mysore for the third time expressed concern about students who were supposed to be “into their bodies” but showed disregard for their health. She observed that some travelers put themselves on cleanses, sometimes consuming sugar cane juice and chili powder for days on end in an effort to “detoxify” themselves.¹⁶ She noted:

I've seen lots of people here who smoke weed in quantity, drink alcohol, and smoke cigarettes. Then they think if they do a juice cleanse, it will balance out all these impurities. . . it's a Western mentality, they just want a quick fix. It's like people think they can spend their time partying, then in the morning go to class and then do a cleanse. . . it really bothers me. If they're smoking cigarettes, don't they think their lungs are full of tar and nicotine? If you think drinking sugar cane juice or tender coconuts will cleanse all the stuff out of your body. . . well, it just doesn't work that way.

The Professional Yogi: From Blessing to Certification

Over the past decade, obtaining the proper credentials has become an important part of being a teacher of Ashtanga Yoga.¹⁷ Previously, when there were fewer students at KPJAYI, one needed to receive the blessing from Pattabhi Jois to be able to teach Ashtanga Yoga in the manner in which they had been taught. This blessing was given to some long-term students who had apprenticed not only with the physical *āsana* practice but who had become true devotees of the tradition and were believed to have embraced Indian culture. Karen, an advanced practitioner who had been visiting India for many years, explained how she had gotten certified to teach Ashtanga Yoga in the 1990s:

It was very different than compared to now. At a certain point, I realized that I had gone to India and studied with Guruji many times, and that since I was teaching at home, it would be good to get authorized. I wrote Guruji a letter and listed all the times I had studied there and requested his blessing to teach. The *sālā* was a small and intimate experience back then and he knew me well. He sent me his blessing to teach. Now you can't ask for it, you can only get it when they say you are ready to have it.

In Western countries, one can take a teacher training course in Ashtanga Yoga but these courses are not recognized officially by the KPJAYI. Indeed, certificates gained from study with various senior level Ashtanga Yoga teachers in the United States (even from those teachers authorized and certified by Pattabhi Jois) typically do not bear the name of Ashtanga Yoga, but rather the name of the teacher with whom one studied. It is worth noting that over the last several years, a strict

¹⁶ This cleanse appears to be of Western origins where it is sometimes dubbed the “master cleanser diet” or the “lemonade diet,” for those who make it in the West where lemons are substituted for sugar cane. It is believed that this diet eliminates toxins from the body and cleans the kidneys and digestive system.

¹⁷ While this distinction is important for the hierarchy of teachers, it is less so for students who may not understand the subtleness of these distinctions.

authorization and certification process has been set in place by the KPJAYI. On their website, it states that to be an “authorized” teacher requires at least four extended trips to India for at least 2 months each time, and that one needs to achieve a certain level of proficiency in the primary series. However, having fulfilled these requirements does not constitute authorization to teach; one has to have embodied the practice according to the lineage, and obtain the blessing of the director. To date, approximately 200 students worldwide have achieved this recognition. Beyond basic authorization is a higher level of “certified” teacher which requires that one has made more than eight annual trips to KPJAYI, had over 10 years of *āsana* experience, and is proficient in at least the first three series. There are approximately 40 of these highly advanced Ashtanga Yoga teachers globally. This formal process of authorization and certification serves a gatekeeping function for Ashtanga Yoga and represents an effort to enforce a level of quality control on who can officially teach the practice and precisely how they do so.¹⁸ This is becoming increasingly challenging as one finds Ashtanga Yoga (or Ashtanga-based) teaching training courses advertised on the internet by various teachers. The branding of particular types of yoga has become a contentious debate as does what constitutes adequate or appropriate training for various systems of yoga.¹⁹

My observation about the activities of “professional yogis” outside of the *śālā* is that many are actively engaged with serious study related to yoga. As frequent travelers to Mysore, some study individually or in small group settings with a Sanskrit scholar in order to better understand the *Yogasūtra* and to learn to chant verses from key texts. The important distinction to be posited is that these highly dedicated students are involved in long term study activities in Mysore.

Outside the *śālā* Gates

Indian entrepreneurs and cultural brokers have embraced the opportunity to provide an array of activities for Western yoga enthusiasts. As yoga students have their days free after about 10 a.m., they have much time to participate in seemingly Indian or at least “yogic” experiences for the body and mind. There is a dizzying array of possibilities offered by the local community: Hindu philosophy; past life healing therapy; ayurvedic, Swedish, and Thai massage; reiki; chanting; Sanskrit classes; classical dance; Indian style painting, cooking, etc. While some of these activities (i.e., reiki, Swedish massage) were not Indian in origin, they had been Indianized. With all these offerings, over-scheduling was a common problem among students with several complaining of exhaustion from taking rickshaws from one activity to

¹⁸ One advanced practitioner suggested that this pattern of level one and two certification mirrors the type of teacher training offered in the Iyengar Yoga tradition, which maintains a very strict control over their teachers.

¹⁹ See Fish (2006).

the next. For students who had little travel experience in India, these activities provided safe interactional spaces in which to connect with “Indian culture”; meeting spaces for imagined worlds. Below I describe two activities which were discussed commonly by informants and are offered as examples of popular adventures.

Studying Indian Philosophy

One French yoga beginner was surprised by the type of teaching he found at the Ashtanga Yoga *śālā*. He questioned “Where is the philosophy, the meditation, the explanations about *āsana* practice?” Similarly, other students who wanted to increase their understanding of Indian philosophy as it related to yoga attended informal lectures at the home of a retired philosophy professor. This Indian scholar had spent extensive time with Western students and was able to skillfully decode complex concepts from Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* in ways that were comprehensible to foreigners. For example, in one lecture he analogized the path to *samādhi* to the desire to drink coffee at Starbucks, explaining three of the eight limbs of *aṣṭāṅgayoga*—*dhāraṇā* (concentration of mind), *dhyāna* (focusing on a single point), and finally *samādhi* (blending and becoming one with the object of concentration) in terms of thinking about, having intense desire for, and finally obtaining and consuming a cappuccino. At the end of the session, students actively engaged in asking questions about the lecture as well as other topics which ranged from the mundane (How much sleep does a yoga student need?) to the more esoteric (How do I know who is my guru?; How will I know when I have reached self-actualization?), to which he responded with culturally appropriate answers.

Ayurveda

Yoga has become a conduit for ayurveda, as many foreigners have gained awareness of the Indian system of medicine only after beginning their practice. Appealing to yoga tourists, some Indian tour companies suggest that “traditional ayurvedic oil massage, *sirodhara* [sic], be on the agenda of everyone visiting India, as it is helpful in curing and restoring the physique.” In Mysore, many yoga students embrace ayurvedic massage as a before and after treatment to their practice and a health-promoting practice in its own right. While several KPJAYI students who received ayurvedic massage from local therapists appreciated the restorative care, others who went to ayurvedic spas were troubled by their commercialization.

The interaction between a foreigner and an ayurvedic practitioner typically began with an in-depth consultation where the individual was asked a multitude of questions on topics such as digestion, defecation, and sleep cycle. Kevin, a Canadian yoga student, explained that despite the fact that when he consulted the

practitioner he was feeling very well and only wanted to cleanse his body of toxins and have a massage, he was prescribed ten days of varying massage treatments, several ayurvedic rejuvenation medicines, and a suggestion that he should move into their residential facility so he could be more closely observed and obtain more treatments (“for full benefit”), as necessary. Amused by this interaction, he successfully negotiated for fewer and less costly services. However, he expressed surprise that there had been no discussion of his *doṣa*, which he thought was central to ayurvedic diagnosis. I heard similar stories about “being sold ayurveda” from several yoga students, and some were particularly disheartened when they were advised to sign up for an ayurvedic course “as if you could learn all about it in a few sessions.” One man commented:

I’m a little down on all the commercialism. . . I want to find places where real Indians go when they want to get fixed. I’m tired of all these places which just want to sell you their products. . . I thought ayurveda was a serious medical practice where they analyzed your body type and talked about your *doṣa*. That’s not what I find here.

Several women who had sought treatment at ayurvedic spas remarked that in addition to being sold herbal medicine, they were also recommended an array of herbal beauty products for skin purification and enhancement.

Reiki Treatments

While there were several reiki teachers in Mysore, a husband-wife team who worked out of their home was particularly popular. Their poster, visible in several restaurants and shops where yoga students visited, advertised their treatments: “Reiki, Realize your potential; cure your chronic diseases, overcome relationship problems; achieve your goals; become positive.” The husband served as the gatekeeper for his wife’s hands-on treatments, conducting an initial intake interview with the continual stream of clients. His diagnosis often referred to the concept of *chakra* (*akṣara*), i.e. whirls of energy and their blockage (“your throat chakra is blocked”; “your solar plexus is misaligned”) which could be rectified through reiki.²⁰ This technique, first developed in Japan, was linked to Indian culture, in part through a visual presentation of the Indian pantheon of deities visible on the altar in the treatment room. As observed by Thomas, an American yoga student who had been getting daily treatments:

²⁰ The conjoining of the Indian *chakra* concept (energy centers) with some modern forms of the system of reiki has been going on for many years. When the *chakras* are diagnosed as blocked, the reiki master can work on moving the energy and removing the blockage. Reiki training has been popular in South India for over a decade, and I have known ayurvedic practitioners in Karnataka who have taken short courses in reiki and incorporated it into their practice.

Here in India it seems like reiki is a catchall for everything New Age. It has crystals, pyramids, incense. . . there's Ramakrishna, Shiva, Ganesh and lots of other Indian gods too. In the U.S., I probably wouldn't do this, but here it's cheap and available.

Like practicing yoga, local treatments also required daily body work. Joanna, a British woman who was having regular reiki treatments explained how this practitioner had "been working to realign all her chakras." She explained "I have time here so I can spend it on myself. The treatment is affordable. Other people I know liked this practitioner so I came. Because of my yoga, I'm more open to something happening in my body. . . I have more faith that it will work." Joanna expressed fear in going to an astrologer who might tell her about her future, or to take part in a past life regression treatment; she preferred to work "in the present moment."

Indians Practicing Yoga

Yoga is enjoying increased popularity in urban areas in India, particularly among middle- and upper-class women. It has become normative to take yoga classes, which can now be found in gyms, yoga schools, spas, and in storefronts where yoga is part of a package of other modern "hobbies" for women including cooking classes, astrology, beauty classes, and dance. In Mysore, estimates are that there are over 500 yoga teachers, some of whom teach foreign students, and many who serve the Indian population.²¹ Several factors contribute to the growing popularity of yoga including (1) the increasing flow of foreigners who come regularly to study yoga heightening local interest in the tradition; (2) rising health and beauty consciousness among Indians; and (3) increased stressors of daily life.

An Indian male yoga instructor whom I interviewed in Mysore estimated that over 50% of his students (all of whom were women) practiced yoga to lose weight. Many Indian women believe that yoga is helpful for a range of physical complaints including poor digestion, menstrual problems, hormonal imbalances, low back pain, and diabetes, a disease which is particularly prevalent among the middle and upper classes. Yoga may also serve as an antidote to boredom for married women who otherwise have limited access to activities outside the home. Attending yoga classes was seen as an acceptable behavior for women particularly in conservative cities such as Mysore. In her research on Sivananada Yoga, Sarah Strauss found that all of the women who practiced yoga in Rishikesh, "whether practicing at home or taking classes, felt that yoga was primarily beneficial as a way of losing weight or staying fit, but with the added benefit of relaxing the mind, and being slower and gentler than some of the all-women aerobic classes available."²² Strauss contends that the spiritual component of Sivananda Yoga was less important to women than the physical benefits, a factor she attributes to the availability of

²¹ See Sugata Srinivasaraju's article on "Sandalwood Simhasana" in the Indian popular weekly magazine *Outlook India*, 16 January 2006.

²² Strauss (2005, 77).

spiritual activities in other arenas of their lives. Based on my research in Mysore, I would concur with her observations. One of the “yoga professionals” I interviewed had been asked by several of her Indian women friends in Mysore if she could teach them yoga postures. She commented that their main motivation for learning was that they had “become fatty” and hoped that yoga would help them reduce weight.

Unlike the KPJAYI where foreign students practiced a fixed sequence of poses for 1–2 h, Chandra, a Hatha Yoga instructor explained that he eased his Indian students (mostly housewives) into a practice: For the first month, they did easy stretches, followed by 2 months of sun salutations (*sūryanamaskār*). Classes, which met five times a week, were typically 45 min in length, and were offered for a reasonable fee of Rs. 500, about US \$10 per month). Chandra believed that one first needed to plant the seed for a yoga practice; once this had been accomplished, other poses could be taught based on the body type and needs of the student. This teacher did not adopt a “one size fits all” approach and the *āsana* practice that one learned was not rigidly sequenced (as compared, for example, to Ashtanga Yoga). Beyond teaching postures, Chandra prescribed yogic diets based on timely eating, eating specific raw and cooked foods based on season, and avoidance of junk food and cold drinks which permeate the Indian landscape.

One of his students, a 35-year-old Indian school teacher and wife of a software engineer, had recently begun studying yoga. She was encouraged to do so by her husband who had participated in corporate yoga classes designed to reduce stress among employees at his worksite. Several of her colleagues were studying yoga, and her in-laws supported her interest in what they perceived to be a traditional Indian practice. She had read about the positive attributes of yoga, including weight loss and stress relief, in popular Indian women’s magazines. “I feel like it’s relaxing my mind. I notice I’m not as short tempered with my son as I used to be, so I think something is working.” She was also interested in taking off the weight she had put on during her pregnancy.

A 45-year-old Indian woman who was taking Hatha Yoga classes elsewhere had initially been attracted to yoga because she experienced frequent headaches. She expressed concern over possible side effects she might have as a result of taking “heating” allopathic pills regularly to suppress her headaches.²³ A dedicated mother, she was under a lot of stress because her 16-year-old son was taking tutorials and facing his school examinations which would determine his college placement and ultimately his future. Taking yoga class was a culturally acceptable practice and was one of the only times of the day she could carve out for herself. Her yoga teacher had told her that “yoga had no side effects” and the near daily practice was already helping her to de-stress enough so she no longer needed to rely on pills.

²³ Classification of foods and medicines as hot, cold, and neutral is commonplace in South Asia. Allopathic medicine is widely believed to be heating the body resulting in conditions linked to overheat such as diarrhea, burning of the hands and feet, among other symptoms. For a discussion of indigenous beliefs about the hot and cold qualities of medicine, see Nichter (2001).

Another Mysore yoga teacher believed that within a few years yoga would be taught to all school children in Mysore. While I was unable to assess the veracity of his statement, it is clear that yoga has a growing presence in India today. On the national level, Swami Ramdev, a North Indian guru credited with reintroducing yoga to the middle classes of India, has a daily television program viewed by over 20 million people each morning, focusing primarily on the art of breathing. Wildly popular, his “yoga made easy” approach promises to yield health benefits with minimal effort.²⁴ His message is that yoga can clear blocked arteries, lower blood pressure, and provide a cure “for all illnesses” including diabetes, cancer, asthma, and kidney failure. “Diseases are nothing but imbalances of the body and yoga corrects those imbalances,” he asserts. A portion of his daily program features ayurvedic practitioners discussing Ramdev’s brand of natural foods and herbal medicines, specifically targeted at a wide array of conditions. In 2007, Swami Ramdev was listed among “India’s Top 50 Power People.”²⁵ His plan is to create a political party that will field candidates for each of the parliamentary seats in India stating that “we clean up our bodies, then we will clean up our democracy!”²⁶ Through popular leaders such as Swami Ramdev, yoga is being reintegrated and revitalized in contemporary Indian culture.

Conclusions: Unpacking the Social Life of Yoga

In this paper, the desires, expectations, and social imaginaries of global health tourists have been explored in relation to yoga practice in a small South Indian city. Numerous global flows circulate into and within India in the arena of health and wellness tourism and myriad factors shape these flows. These flows of ideas, people, products, and ideologies are not “. . . convergent, isomorphic, or spatially consistent,” but marked by asymmetries, instability, and fluidity.²⁷ Through a close examination of the complex social life of yoga, I consider social imaginaries, confluences, tensions, and frictions.

I have categorized the stream of foreigners traveling to Mysore to study yoga into four broad categories ranging from the “yoga lites” to the “yoga professionals.” This categorization has allowed me to unpack the practice of postural yoga in relation to a range of issues from the commodification and certification of yoga, to yoga as a personal journey of self-transformation involving the centrality of place

²⁴ See the *New York Times* (1 February 2005) article “New Delhi Journal; India’s Harried Elite Now Turns, and Twists, to Yoga Lite,” written by Hari Kumar.

²⁵ See S. Prasannarajan’s ranking of “India’s Top 50 Power People” in the magazine *India Today*, March 2009.

²⁶ See Lydia Pol Green’s article in the *New York Times* (18 April 2010): “Indian Who Built Yoga Empire Works on Politics.”

²⁷ Appadurai (1990, 5).

and a quest for authenticity. Those in the first category, the “yoga lites,” journey to India to participate in a yoga workshop with a non-Indian teacher for pleasure. Their yoga practice in India was often situated in a protected, isolated, and stress-free environment where the style of teaching was similar to what they experienced at home. Among those categorized as “yoga travelers,” the imaginary of India was formed and re-formed through experiences garnered on the road outside of the context of yoga. Stopping in Mysore for a prolonged period surrounded by other travelers, the expectation was to find a peaceful retreat from the challenge of Indian travel. Because their study of yoga was not their sole reason for visiting India, these travelers sometimes struggled to learn the practice in classes that provided no verbal instruction. The nature of the *guru-śiṣyā* relationship was unfamiliar to yoga travelers as was the idea of being given poses at a slow rate under the watchful gaze of a teacher. Self-transformation and search for authenticity appeared less important in their narratives than finding a convivial place which afforded immediate social connectivity. Yoga travelers were a fluid and heterogeneous collection of individuals, many of whom were seeking new directions in their life through travel and adventure. After some time in Mysore, several of these travelers transitioned to become more serious students of yoga extending their stay to allow for further study.

A third group of yoga students (“going to the source”) were primarily involved with the search for an authentic yoga experience. While a detailed discussion of the broader concept of authenticity is beyond the scope of this paper, the notion of “internalized authenticity” has been defined by Regina Bendix as primarily an emotional and moral quest which “arises out of a profoundly human longing” and a desire to compensate for the lack of authenticity in everyday life. Bendix and others suggest that this search for recovery of a lost essence has taken on heightened significance in connection to the routinization and over-predictability of modern life.²⁸ Interviews with dedicated yoga students revealed that practice at the source was believed to enhance one’s connection to their inner self, with yoga seen as a conduit between the outer and inner worlds. Regular practice in the *śālā* with time afterward for digesting the experience allowed the yoga to be internalized and more fully integrated into one’s being. Such experiences were described as getting closer to one’s “true self” and were seen as central to the creation and fulfillment of living an authentic and meaningful life. Of particular importance in the quest for authenticity was the embodiment of place associated with practice in the Mysore *śālā*. Within this almost sacred space, where the spirit of Pattabhi Jois lives on in photographs which surround the room, and where his daughter and grandson (the lineage holders) provide occasional bodily adjustments, one could experience heightened awareness of the subtleties of the inner body or experience a transformational shift. The *śālā* is a space where one can be completely absorbed and attentive to such shifts in bodily experiences. Embodying the sense of place fully was an important component of this self-transformation. Through the lens of

²⁸ Bendix (1997, 17).

sensorial anthropology, one could argue that to some extent, one's identity is environmentally constituted.²⁹ Strengthened by this community of practice, where serious students are informally bound together by shared passion and experience, one is able to transcend or step outside of one's usual identity into a new more "authentic" and spontaneous sense of self.

Having made numerous journeys to Mysore, the goal of many "yoga professionals" was to receive the required authorization to teach Ashtanga Yoga in their own country. In contrast to previous times when one received this credential in the form of a blessing from the guru, aspiring teachers today are informed on the official KPJAYI website that obtaining credentials remains at the discretion of the director. This shift in nomenclature from "Guruji" to "director" is notable as it formally marks a transition from a *guru-śiṣyā* teaching style to the formation of a corporate enterprise. It also speaks to the felt need of the family to protect the legacy and intellectual property rights of Ashtanga Yoga given the reality and unpredictability of transnational yoga flows.

Previous research on Ashtanga Yoga students has characterized them as being on a devotional "Jois pilgrimage."³⁰ A more nuanced analysis of the evolving flow of yoga students to Mysore reveals that while this characterization is appropriate for those who have "gone to the source" or are "yoga professionals," it does not aptly capture the motivations of those students who are "yoga lites" or "yoga travelers." The individuals within these latter groups do not appear to be on pilgrimage (which would entail purposeful travel in search of a spiritual experience) but rather are drawn to Mysore primarily for purposes of self-care, self-healing, or as a "time-out" from travel. The pilgrimage metaphor, albeit a modern one which includes the internet, cappuccinos, and spa treatments, is perhaps a more apt characterization for those who were more serious students. From their devotional pilgrimage to Mysore, they obtained cultural capital which would be recognized and admired upon their return home to their respective yoga studios.

As Appadurai articulates, flows are often marked by relations of disjuncture and friction, and such frictions were apparent in Mysore within and across groups. In the context of transnational yoga, the friction metaphor draws attention to the actual contact and asymmetry between people, and offers a way to appreciate the complexity of cultural interaction. In relation to Kriya Yoga, Kathinka Froystad has discussed the utility of the friction metaphor as it invites an analysis of concrete encounters as "an emergent and uncertain process" that emphasizes individual agency, action, and interpretation.³¹ Some of the yoga students "going to the source" described such frictions as they talked about being disturbed by other students' inappropriate behavior, which included partying, drugs, and frequent hookups. They also expressed dismay at fellow students who demonstrated a lack of care for their bodies (i.e., inappropriate fasting), and lack of focus on their

²⁹ Brennan (2002).

³⁰ Burger (2006).

³¹ Froystad (2009).

practice. Frictions and different cultural styles were also evident within the delineated categories. While some students who viewed themselves as “going to the source” were eager to embrace and talk about the spiritual components of the practice, others were reluctant to do so, focusing instead on the more secular aspects, namely proper bodily positioning. Similarly, while some students in this category showed deep reverence for the guru, other equally serious Asthanga Yoga students felt uncomfortable doing so themselves and were dismayed at seeing others bowing at the door or to photos of Jois. Another point of friction among more advanced students was a perception that the yoga *śālā* was thick with egos and competition, with some students posturing to be noticed by the teacher. A close examination inside these broad categories of students allows us to more fully appreciate the richness, heterogeneity, and complexities of the social life of yoga. The work of Ana Tsing highlights how cultures are continually co-produced in their interactions, particularly at the point of frictions where uncomfortable or unstable qualities of interconnections become pronounced.³² Frictions of this type are evident in Mysore in interactions of Ashtanga Yoga students and Indian entrepreneurs as a result of the commodification and commercialization of traditional Indian therapies such as ayurvedic treatment and massage. This was particularly disquieting for those Westerners who were seeking authenticity in Mysore and were troubled by what they perceived to be inauthentic and unethical forms of treatment where they were encouraged to buy expensive treatments for putative symptoms.

There is an increasing flow of yoga students to Mysore, and a notable shift in their reasons for coming when compared to earlier years. In the 1960s and 1970s, when traveling and living in India was more difficult, those who came to study with Pattabhi Jois were devotees of the tradition who embraced the *guru-śiṣyā* relationship. Travel today is no longer the arduous journey it once was: one can leave from most European cities in the early morning and reach Mysore by midafternoon, with direct transportation from the Bangalore airport and accommodation prebooked on the internet. For some, the journey to Mysore is relatively seamless. More of today’s younger students, I was told, are on a “me-oriented” spiritual quest, marked by a discourse of “nailing” poses and pushing through to practice higher series of *āsana* practice. This is distinct from the ethos of *bhakti* and surrender which characterized earlier yoga devotees. There are also more people traveling to study yoga as a means of healing from traumatic life experiences (drug addiction, marriage and love breakups, eating disorders, etc.) because they have heard and read in best sellers like *Eat Pray Love* that yoga might be able to fix them.³³ As one local Indian practitioner observed “Today’s students are different than they were in

³² Tsing (2004).

³³ Gilbert (2006), and the recent feature film of this book portraying a woman who travels to India to an ashram following divorce. Asha Persson (2010) also notes that many of the students she studied in Australia had been drawn to Satyananda Yoga after a crisis in their life world including depression, illness, injury, or addiction.

previous days. The young students, those who are in their 20s, their sincerity and patience to evolve is not there. . . . Their efforts to grow are not as sincere.” Notions of what constitutes a *guru-śiṣyā* relationship in the modern world of yoga remains to be studied more closely.

What attracts increasing numbers of people to Mysore is not just the practice of yoga but the activities that surround this yoga destination. A host of after-class activities are available for the yoga practitioner eager to learn more about Indian culture, including traditional and New Age healing services. A hybrid world is emerging characterized by innovative combinations of transcultural teachings such as reiki, and other practices which are advertised in popular meeting places (e.g., Tai Chi Yoga, ayurvedic-Swedish massage). Such evolving new age practices have been specifically developed for foreigners coming to Mysore. Indian entrepreneurs have emerged to cater to the myriad desires, needs and fantasies of international yoga students. Shopkeepers have flocked to sell everything Indian, and New Age healers and ayurvedic spas have sprung up to provide goods and services to foreigners with time on their hands and money in their pockets. Yoga has itself expanded as a market in a country where all business opportunities are explored aggressively. I was told that the growing number of yoga teachers in Mysore is not so much a reflection of a growing interest in yoga but rather a matter of economics. “There is big money to be made in the yoga business,” one shop vendor told me. Yoga is currently one of India’s best sellers.

Over the past decades, the popularity of yoga in Western countries has contributed to its revitalization in India. The Brahmin scholar who provided lectures to yoga students quoted Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s observation: “Although the sun rises in the East, it is only when we see it reflected in the West that we Indians take notice of it.” He drew this analogy to point out that many Indians did not recognize the treasure they had in yoga until Westerners became interested in the practice. He did not believe, however, that the current interest of middle-class Indians in yoga reflected its use as a deep source of spirituality. “People practice now because it serves their needs, either to improve how they look or to help with physical body problems from sitting too long, working at a desk, or simply to get relief from being stressed.” My research in Mysore in the Indian community revealed that yoga is not practiced so much for its spiritual value but rather as a culturally acceptable form of physical activity. This is particularly noteworthy as there are relatively few acceptable or available forms of exercise in cosmopolitan India, particularly for women.

Just as there are many flows in India of foreign yoga students, so there are divergent forms of yoga being practiced by Indians within the country (Alter 2004). Clearly the place of yoga in religious ashrams and in holy centers such as Rishikesh where one is totally immersed in the practice as a way of life has a different meaning than it does in cosmopolitan India. At present, yoga practices in cosmopolitan India can be characterized as hobby yoga; gym and slim yoga; corporate de-stress yoga; televised yoga with Swami Ramdev; spa yoga, etc. Increased interest in the reshaping of the body to fit a new beauty ideal has enhanced Indian women’s desire to learn yoga, which is being promoted in yoga videos made by

Bollywood stars and in popular women's magazines as an effective weight loss strategy. While housewives in small cities like Mysore practice Hatha Yoga to lose weight and to relieve stress (from their children's examinations), in nearby cosmopolitan cities like Bangalore, affluent yuppies take hybrid yoga classes in gyms with such offerings as Power Yoga or Hot Yoga among the menu options. As one young woman explained, "Yes I'm taking yoga classes, but it's not the yoga that my grandfather did!" Among young urban elite Indian women, yoga has become a part of the modernity project and has itself been shaped to fit new conceptions of self. Notably, there were no Indian students (or NRIs) studying at KPJAYI during the time I was there, reinforcing the notion that the yoga that is valued by so many foreigners (i.e. the vigorous Ashtanga Yoga style), is not what is preferred by Indians.³⁴

One might argue that the rising global popularity of yoga reflects the value placed on flexibility in a world characterized by flexible accumulation.³⁵ Clearly, the transnational yoga movement has shown great flexibility in adapting to changing ideas of self-improvement, cultural constructions of yoga, and market forces. As Geoffrey Samuel has argued, modern yoga is an important part of "contemporary Western bodily cultivation" and the process for both Indians and Westerners "is one of creative adaptation rather than of literal transmission."³⁶ To this end, he notes that "yoga. . . in the forms that we know it today in Asia and the West, is largely a product of modernity." Ethnographic studies which explore and document the social life of yoga and the contexts in which it is being taught and practiced have much to tell us about how the East and West influence each other's identity projects in planned and unplanned ways.

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³⁴ Saraswati Jois did teach a few Indian women in the afternoon but these classes were for Indians only. The cost of classes for the month at the *śālā* with foreign students may have been prohibitive for most Indians.

³⁵ Martin (1997).

³⁶ Samuel (2007, 78).

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