

AN INTRODUCTION TO

Yoga Philosophy

THE ROOTS OF YOGA LIE IN YOGA PHILOSOPHY, AND ALTHOUGH THERE ARE COUNTLESS BOOKS AND VIDEOS EXPLORING THESE CONCEPTS, THE IDEAS CAN BE DIFFICULT TO NAVIGATE, ESPECIALLY FOR A NEW YOGI. IN THIS ARTICLE WE BEGIN EXPLAINING SOME OF THE KEY IDEAS AND LEARNINGS IN A YOGA PRACTICE THAT EXTEND BEYOND THE PHYSICAL BENEFITS...



WHAT IS YOGA?

Modern yoga has evolved vastly from its early days in India, when the practice focused heavily on consciousness and spiritual awakening more than the physical benefits. Nowadays, yoga means different things for different people. Some people practice to increase flexibility or build strength, whilst others use the practice as an escape from reality or for stress relief. Being surrounded by modern societal marketing of high-end yoga clothing, impressive yoga poses and promises of achieving supermodel bodies, it's difficult not to lose sight of the original purpose of the practice.

The word 'yoga' itself comes from the Sanskrit root 'yuj', which is related to the English word 'yoke'. The core of the practice focused on this 'yoke' – union. Union between body, mind and spirit. Union between individuals who practiced together. Union between individuals and their community. It was all about connection.

The practice focused heavily on meditation and pranayama (yogic breathing techniques) to turn the awareness inwards and to heighten consciousness. The aim was to maintain a state of focus and clear thinking (and not fall asleep!). The asanas (yoga poses) were simply an extension of this practice, moving the body into foundational then more challenging poses, whilst still maintaining clear focus and breath. For this reason, yoga is sometimes also called 'moving meditation'.

YOGA IN THE MODERN WORLD

Nowadays, we often ignore the spiritual practice of yoga and focus more on the physical benefits like increased flexibility, strength, better posture and pain relief. With the rise of social media, yoga has also been promoted as a series of challenging poses, and many first approach the practice with the aim of mastering these poses. However, as much as some may want to avoid yoga philosophy or think it is only for 'hippies', the philosophies underpin every pose and every aspect of the practice.

At the beginning of class, we start by finding a foundational pose (such as a seated pose or lying down) and finding our breath. We are cued to create an awareness of our bodies, noticing which parts of the body feel tension, and noticing any emotions or tensions in the mind. By following these simple cues, we are

already beginning the spiritual practice of yoga. Then throughout the class, we continue to connect our breath to our movements, to feel into every pose in our body, to find our drishti (point of focus) in balance poses, to find our edge in advanced poses, and learn our body's limits when we can't yet do the advanced poses. Even if your sole purpose of attending a yoga class is to learn how to headstand, you are inexplicably going to be exposed to the philosophical aspects of yoga.

LETTING GO OF THE EGO

Ego is one of the biggest barriers to progress, and one of the hardest things to let go of. Have you ever felt like everyone in the class is watching you do a pose 'wrong', or frustrated when you couldn't do a certain pose, or felt pride when you finally 'mastered' an advanced pose? Having these thoughts reflects an inflated ego and self-consciousness – but as human beings is also perfectly normal. Realistically, there's probably no one watching you because everyone else is focusing on their own practice and trying to figure out the poses for themselves. Realistically, being able to do a headstand does not make you a better person off the mat. And realistically, you can never truly 'master' a pose - there will always be another option, another more advanced variation that you can work on.

Through our practice, we learn to slowly let go of our ego, and simply be an observer of the body. Instead of reacting or feeling frustrated when we can't do a certain pose, we can simply observe and learn what our bodies are capable of. This is called mindfulness. As soon as we are mindless and force our bodies into positions when it's screaming at us, "No!", we run the risk of injuring ourselves. But when we learn to be mindful and let go of the internal monologue, we often find more and faster progress in our physical and spiritual practice of yoga.

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YOGA AND WING CHUN

Yoga is increasingly being integrated into other fitness programs, such as gyms, sporting clubs, and even martial arts. Primarily used as a tool to increase flexibility and mobility, students often don't realise that the underlying principles behind the practices also align.

Take Wing Chun for instance. The practice of Wing Chun is a practice of balance. Physical balance, yes, but also a balance of body awareness, softness and strength. Similarly, yogis also practice this balance. Throughout more challenging or stronger poses, we are encouraged to maintain a softness in our gaze, in our focus, in our shoulders, making sure we don't subconsciously hold tension in other parts of the body or mind. In both Wing Chun and yoga, strength without softness can cause injury, and softness without strength can also cause injury. One cannot live without the other. This is why we practice a range of poses that increase both flexibility and strength, in body and mind.

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Physically, a yoga practice can also enhance one's Wing Chun practice. Yoga focuses heavily on the bandhas (body locks), which are like the power banks of the body. By engaging these locks, we are able to release more prana (life force energy) and fuel our spiritual and physical bodies. Therefore, yoga classes may often involve poses that train our uddiyana bandha or mula bandha (abdominal and pelvic lock), two of the most commonly used locks surrounding our core. With increased core strength, Wing Chun techniques such as kicks, punches and overall balance, can be greatly improved.

YOGA FOR EVERYBODY

Ask any yoga teacher and most will genuinely believe that everybody should be practicing yoga. The philosophies we learn throughout the classes not only apply when we're practicing on our mats, but are usually more applicable off the mat – in the real world. We learn to observe our bodies and choose our reactions. We learn to maintain focus, keep breathing and to persevere even in more challenging poses, and I believe these are some of the most important

lessons we can learn. In life, there will be numerous obstacles that we have to face. What matters most is how you choose to react. Will you run away from the problems, or choose to maintain your focus and calm, persevere and face them head on?

It's easy to be disheartened or feel disappointed when you can't grasp the concepts or poses straight away, but that's why it's called a yoga PRACTICE. We are all (teachers included) continuously learning and practicing – students of yoga, and students of life.

It doesn't matter whether you come to the practice for the physical or the spiritual benefits. The two are intertwined and you will often find one after the other. It also doesn't matter what background, culture or religion you come from. One of the biggest misconceptions about yoga is that the spiritual or mental practice will interfere with religious beliefs. Particularly in our modern multicultural societies where there are such vast mixtures of races, cultures

and genders, it's important to focus on yoga philosophy as a way of life to create balance, both physically and mentally, rather than a religion. We use the values to guide our behaviours and way of thinking, but it does not dictate believing in a 'God'. Yogis can be Christian, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish or from any other religion or belief system. Part of the practice of yoga is learning acceptance of all living things, and acknowledging that despite our differences, we are all ultimately connected in the universe. Hence, we finish all our classes by embodying this belief and saying, "Namaste".

Whether you focus on the physical, mental or spiritual side, there is something for everyone and you will undoubtedly still find a connection between body and mind, no matter which style of yoga practice. And that is more important than any number of mindless headstands.

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All Practical Wing Chun members can attend a FREE weekly yoga class at our Underwood studio.

Check for updated class times and dates.

