

## Individual Exploratory Term Paper On Yoga

For my mind/body technique, I selected yoga. I have been practicing yoga for approximately a year or two prior to this assignment, though since beginning school, I had not been finding the time to practice as often as I like. I was very excited to have an 'excuse' to reinvigorate its presence in my life and also to expand my practice. I still consider myself a novice at the technique because I often employ it more for its physical benefits, for the workout, rather than for its more meditative, mind and body, use. Yoga can be very difficult, and I was glad to have a fundamental background as it left me free to concentrate on shifting my perspective rather than struggling to learn the movements of the technique.

My schedule was not conducive to attending classes, which I enjoy because there is an entirely different energy. Though for the purposes of this study, it was more logical to practice alone, anyhow; and so I did, usually early in the morning in an empty room in my apartment for about 25-45 minutes. I chose to simply perform a series of poses, with some daily variation, in the Vinyasa style. Vinyasa is a form of yoga in which poses flow from one to another in conjunction with the breath. Essentially, you are supposed to let your breath dictate your movement, the length of time held in each posture and the flow between them. This is an aspect of my practice that I chose to focus on improving, since it is extremely difficult but the benefits are enormous. When a pose is very difficult, you learn to focus your breath calmly and steadily, breathing through the pain, effectively calming your mind and allowing you to find comfort and peace in unpleasant or distressing situations.

This can be directly related to the course themes of Stress and Coping. Our daily lives and environments cause us to experience stress as much of our existence can take place in non-

preferred environments with elements and events and people demanding our attention constantly, whether we are aware of these stress sources or not. Sources of stress can be either external, from physical or social interactions, or internally-based, stresses that we perceive within our cognitive mind. We must find ways of coping with life that enhance our wellness and maintain our mental effectiveness and attentional vitality. Specifically with acute (time-limited) stress, your mind interprets stressful events as emergency threats, causing a response in the autonomic nervous system. This triggers the fight-or-flight response, an activation of the sympathetic nervous system which floods the body with hormones such as cortisol and norepinephrine, heightening the senses, raising heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension and focusing brain activity, plus and other physiological responses. The body is hyper-aroused which is beneficial in certain situations but too intense of a state to incur for many of the daily conflicts and challenges we face or to maintain for longer periods of time. It is much healthier to learn to temper our perceptions of hassles or difficult situations and see them as a challenge you can handle. Even if the stressor is a perception of your mind, a threat to your feelings, it can still trigger this stress cycle and over time chronic stress will take its toll on the body and can lead to health problems such as insomnia, depression, chronic pain or cardiovascular disease. By learning to focus your breathing during difficult yoga poses you can actually control your physiological responses to return yourself to a state of equanimity. You are teaching your mind and body to cope with these internally stressful situations, learning lessons which can then be applied to other life experiences.

To sync your breathing with your movement you must be incredibly attuned to the very present motion of the inhale and exhale of your breath. This almost hypnotic rhythm forces you to become mindful of the present moment, bringing attention to your moment by moment

experience. It can allow you to expand your self-awareness. You can feel a clearing of the mind, but not really an emptiness. As you experience the moment you listen to your mind and body and experience a connection to your thoughts and muscles simultaneously, effectively building a more extensive cognitive map or mental model of yourself.

One day after my practice I wrote the following in my journal: “We operate on a physical autopilot so much of the time. We use our bodies, sometimes abuse them, to run here and there, letting them shuttle us from place to place, forcing them into chairs for hours on end, dash them to class, make them operate a car/bike, expecting them always to bear both our physical and mental burdens. How often do we engage in something purely for the sake of our bodies’ satisfaction? Yoga, as a mind/body modality, is almost a chance to jump out of your mind and into your body and let it feel and move how it wants in the moment, on its terms. Of course, the mind is needed to control this but in order to fully invest your thoughts in your body, it’s almost as if you have to escape the constraints of your ‘mind’ and let your thoughts be infused into every muscle, every bone and fiber and heartbeat of your actual physical self. Only then can they truly work as one.” This observation seems very relevant in developing self-awareness and allowing my mind and body to function together to build a better mental model of myself.

In looking at my quantitative survey data I can happily say that my mental vitality increased over the course of the exploratory. My attention functioning increased but then appeared to go back to its original state. However, one observation I can make from my journals and survey comments is that I tend to attribute my attentional and mental functioning to outside stressors occurring simultaneously in my life, such as “But this week was midterms, so it’s difficult to measure,” or “But I stayed up too late last night, so I can’t say exactly”. What’s important to take away from this is that there will always be some extenuating circumstance of

life causing stress on my mind and body. On the days when I did practice yoga, I felt calmer and energized at least for some portion of the day, particularly if I slept poorly or awoke in a panic from the multitude of tasks to be completed. Practicing yoga would legitimately calm the panic or eliminate crankiness, as opposed to days when I didn't have time or energy, my comments tended to be along the lines of feeling distracted, unproductive, or overwhelmed all day. One day I said I felt like my life was in an out-of-control downward spiral. Even on days when I did practice I usually still felt fairly mentally depleted by the end of the day. This is why the yoga is so important. As difficult as it can be to get out of bed earlier, and it can be slightly physically and mentally draining, there wasn't a day that my body didn't thank me the moment it stretched into the first pose or that my mind didn't feel at least a little clearer and calmer. It is an investment of my time, energy, and directed attention in order to maintain my capacity for attention, and my ability to focus and function as a calm, sane person while being bombarded by daily stresses.

Upon personal reflection I wouldn't say that my feelings have changed necessarily during the past few weeks. I have great respect for the need for mind/body techniques. Though thinking back over the entire growth of my yoga practice, my feelings definitely have evolved since I began. I used to think that yoga wasn't enough of a workout. Later, as I embraced it more fully, I realized how physically demanding it can be. Now, perhaps finally I am truly learning to appreciate how intricately the mind/body modality is linked. To give one specific example, I'd been working on trying to conquer a particular pose, a handstand up against the wall. As adults we carry a lot of fear of inverting our whole self, even if the wall is there. Essentially, it's terrifying to throw your world upside down and face that loss of control. I personally, for some reason, refused to trust that the wall would catch me or that my body would know how to adjust

to it. In the process of taking the time to think about the mental aspects of yoga and not focusing as much on the physical, all of a sudden on a day during week two of this exploration, I stood up, said to myself, “You’re not afraid, the wall is there, you will still be in control,” took a deep calming breath and did the handstand. It may not seem like anything, but for me it was a tremendous breakthrough. It has since become such a daily practice for me it seems almost laughable to think of the months spent struggling. I also have come to use these inversions as micro-restorative breaks while studying. It takes me ‘away’ from my computer or work for a moment, provides a rush of blood to the head and a bit of adrenaline to reinvigorate my whole mind and body.

On an ironic note, performing yoga for class forced me to have my journals, surveys and term paper in the back of my mind. Sometimes it seemed contrary to have it be this extra thing I needed to squeeze into my day and then having to remember to record and analyze my thoughts seemed to sort of negate the relaxation. Also the analysis can get into a somewhat circular thinking pattern of “Am I experiencing this because it is how I’m supposed to be feeling or because it’s what I’m actually feeling?” But overall, I can attribute this positive investment of a bit of directed attention to getting me back into the habit of practicing, the effects of which are almost addictive. I suppose it is a wonderful thing to be addicted to, though, and I will absolutely be continuing to expand my practice, focus my breathing, and work through the challenges of yoga.

