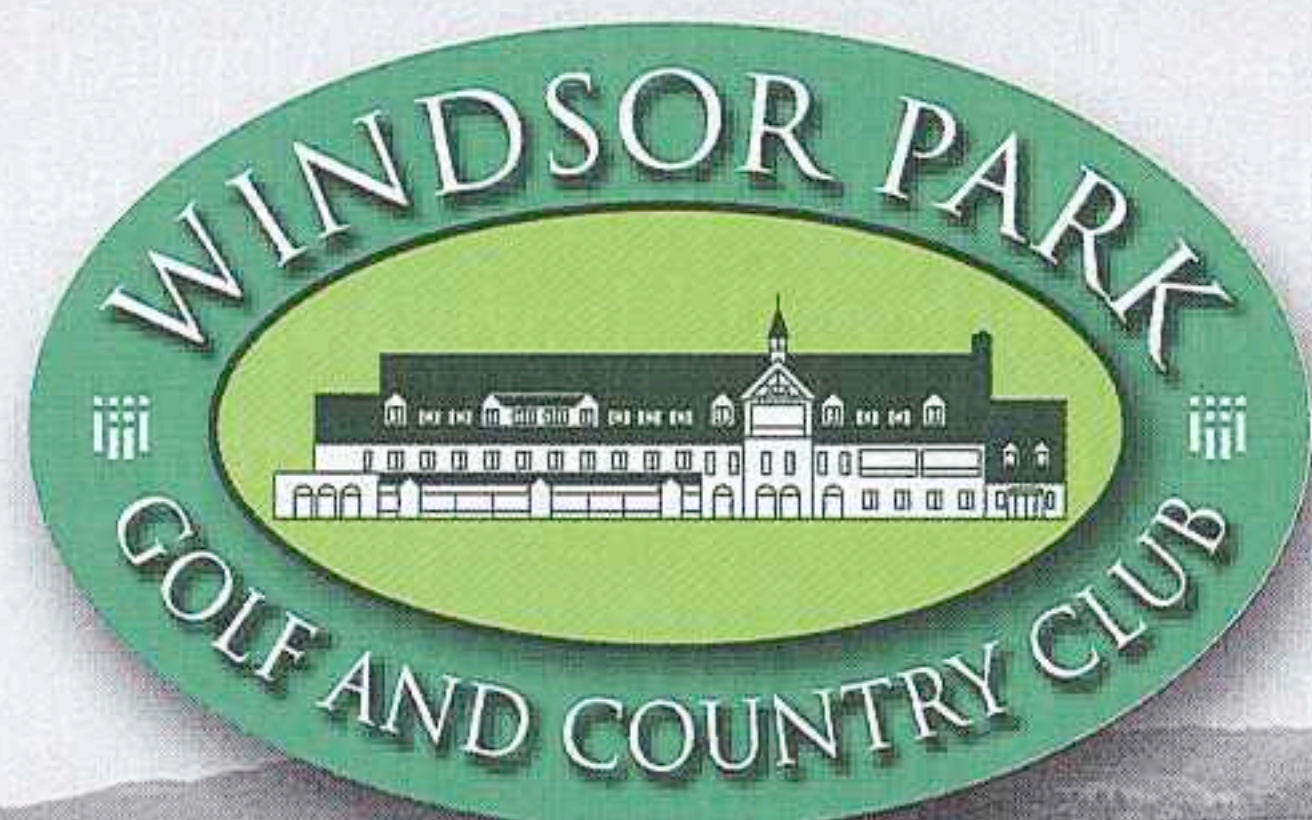


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SPORTS

Yoga Goes Home

Why the absence of yoga in India? by Dani Rippingale

 f the ancient Indian practices and traditions that have become popular in the West in recent years, yoga is the most well known. Yoga was born in India over 3,000 years ago and is described in the Indian scriptures, the *Upanishads*, dating from 800-400 BC.

First introduced to the West about 100 years ago, early observations of yoga often astonished spectators with the extreme physical 'contortions' and perhaps set the stage for how the practice of yoga became viewed in the West. Later, during the 70s, many who were disillusioned with the Western focus on materialism traveled to India and returned inspired by the discipline—a combination of physical practice and Eastern spiritual thinking.

More recently, yoga is being practiced throughout the world and has many turning to it for the strength, flexibility, and life balance it offers. With India being the birthplace of yoga, why then is yoga not a routine practice for all Indians?

It all depends on how you define yoga. In the West, yoga has become synonymous with physical exercise. In fact, if you speak to someone about yoga they immediately tell you about the nature of their flexibility or lack thereof. Some may speak of the blissful feeling they have after a class; however few will speak about yoga's spiritual aspects. Far from its roots, where the intention of yoga was to prepare the body and mind for the lengthy meditation that ultimately led the practitioner to self-realization; yoga has been marketed and embraced by the fitness and health-obsessed West as a great way to get fit and toned through physically challenging postures (or *asanas*).

Not unlike the West, a growing number of urban Indians have become interested in yoga, not for spiritual reasons, but for the health benefits that come along with it. Ironically, given its origins, the Indian government has made recent efforts to introduce yoga in schools in response to the growing health problems amongst its citizens. The economic growth in India has brought changes in diet and an increasingly sedentary lifestyle to urban India. So, despite 60 percent of Indian children under the age of three being malnourished, the rise in clinical obesity and diabetes has India looking at yoga with new eyes. Furthermore, India is not a country immune to global trends. Many urban Indians are lycra-clad and yoga-mad, influenced by the growing popularity of 'celebrity yoga' in the US and India's own celebrities taking to the mat.

Traditional

In its traditional form, yoga is described by four main branches: Karma Yoga (the Path of Selfless Action); Bhakti Yoga (the Path of Devotion); Jnana Yoga (the Path of Wisdom/Knowledge); and Raja Yoga (the Royal and eight-fold—*ashtanga*—Path of Classical Yoga). Yoga *asanas* (the positions) are only one of the eight limbs of Classical Yoga.

India is steeped in practices of devotion and ritual and perhaps true to its origins, yoga as a practical life system, intended to support and encourage the spirituality and transformative possibilities, is being practiced in India. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (100-200 BCE), are a composition of principal writings on yoga and yet the only reference to asana practice is that it should be 'steady and comfortable'. Perhaps this could be interpreted to mean 'still body, still mind'. Unfortunately, for the fitness-mad and 'lose five inches off your waist' crowd this isn't the yoga they signed up for. Not to be dismissed are the Western and Indian yoga practitioners who have sought and found resonance in yoga's broader teachings and lifestyle, beyond the *asanas*.

If you are traveling to India and expecting to see locals doing a rigorous *asana* practice that rivals

Madonna and Sting, you will be disappointed. However, if you take a closer look, you stand to witness yoga as a living practice as seen in many Indian's practice of vegetarianism (*ahimsa* or 'non-harm'); *pranayama* (control of vital energy through breathing exercises); *dhyana* (meditation); *mantra* (use of sound to control mind); and devotion (*bhakti* yoga).

W



If you are curious about trying yoga in Tokyo, the following studios will give you a balanced yoga experience: **Sun and Moon**, Meguro. www.sunandmoon.jp. **Pema Gallery Studio**, Kamiyama. www.thatgirl-dani.com. **Yogajaya**, Ebisu. www.yogajaya.com.