

Indian Religion and Western Yoga Practice

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ABSTRACT

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Yoga has become a very recognizable feature of Western culture. Almost every person who has taken a yoga class can tell you that yoga originated in India. However, contemporary North American yoga – focused on postures and physical practice – departs considerably from “classical” yoga in India. The various yoga styles and yoga studios in North America differ with respect to their relationship to the history and tradition of yoga. My thesis seeks to understand the different ways that Indian religion – “Indian-ness” and religiosity – are expressed in yoga classes and among yoga practitioners. This thesis is a case study conducted in Montreal carried out at three studios representing three styles that one could find in almost every major North American city: Sattva Yoga Shala (Ashtanga-Vinyasa Yoga), Moksha Yoga Montreal (hot yoga) and Centre de Yoga Iyengar de Montréal (Iyengar Yoga).

At each studio I interviewed teachers and students to discover their experiences with yoga, their beliefs about benefits from practicing yoga, as well as their knowledge and relation to the tradition of yoga. Indian religious elements are present to varying degrees in North American yoga classes but both teachers and students appreciate these aspects as pleasant exoticisms that are basically inessential to their yoga practice. At the same time, students and teachers may be prone to projecting non-Indian spiritual ideas onto their yoga practice, which enhances its significance for them.

For My Beloved Parents

Mr. George Mathew & Alice Therratil
Kanjooparamban

"Speak the truth. Practice virtue. Do not neglect to study every day. Do not neglect Truth, virtue, studying or teaching...Be one to whom your mother is God, your father is God, your teacher is God, a guest is like God...Give with Faith...give freely, give with humility... give with compassion...This is the command. This is the teaching. This is the secret of the Veda..."

Taittiriya Upanisad I.11:1-6

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Introduction

These days everywhere you look you see yoga, from advertisements about yogurt to interactive videogames. Over the past twenty-five years yoga has been transformed from a sub-culture undercurrent to a staple of North American popular culture. Yoga has become something of a big business of late, amid ever-growing claims of the benefits of yoga from practitioners of all ages and like any product, yoga offers a variety of brands each promoting various images and attracting different consumers. I became interested in finding out what kinds of yoga people are practicing and why, and about their attitudes toward and views on yoga. My aim in this thesis is to explore how different practitioners relate to yoga and particularly to examine their sense of connection to yoga as a traditional Indian religious practice.

As a yoga practitioner and teacher myself, I have had the good fortune to meet a large variety of yoga practitioners with a wide range of views over the last many years. While from my perspective, there were a number of religious elements reflected in the milieu of the yoga class, most of the people I met did not feel that they were doing anything particularly religious when taking a class. In 2005, a friend and fellow yoga teacher invited me to join him for a class at the newly opened Moksha Yoga studio in Montreal. My impressions of that class are what inspired me to undertake this study. The room was hot, it had mirrors, and it was filled with near naked people sweating profusely. At the very end of the class, after the teacher told us to lie down for final relaxation, she uttered the Indian salutation “*Namaste*” and students responded likewise. Lying there in relaxation my mind began to turn over the idea of “Indian-ness”. There was nothing particularly Indian, Hindu or “traditional” about the class and yet the teacher found it

necessary or significant to end with “*namaste*”, which evoked the class’ response. Why? This thesis aims to answer this question, and, more broadly, the question of how practitioners of modern Western yoga relate to its “traditional” roots.

My primary research methods included both participant observation and interviews. It was obvious to me that each of the various styles of yoga oriented itself differently in relation to India and Hinduism. As this case study was to be conducted in Montreal, I purposefully chose three distinct styles that one could find in most major North American cities: Sattva Yoga Shala (Ashtanga-Vinyasa Yoga), Moksha Yoga Montreal (hot yoga) and Centre de Yoga Iyengar de Montréal (Iyengar Yoga). In each of these studios I attended numerous classes before introducing myself to any staff or students. After some weeks of participant observation in the classes I sought out participants for my interviews (see Appendix 1 for interview questions). The interviews were all held in a public place, often the studio itself, and had an average duration of fifty minutes. As I had been expecting a large difference between the opinions of students and teachers, I interviewed three of each at each studio. I chose teachers whose class I had attended and, if possible, also interviewed the studio’s owner and/or manager. I selected the students based on familiar faces; if I had seen a student a few times at the studio, I would then approach them to introduce myself and ask for an interview. As such, the mix of students was not directly determined by me. For example, the three Moksha students did not turn out to represent the typical Moksha student. For the purpose of this thesis I have given all the participants pseudonyms. These are coded pseudonyms based on which style a participant practices and if they are a teacher or student; for example AT2 is the second Ashtanga Yoga teacher and MS1 is the first Moksha Yoga student. I examined the

data by themes according to responses to my interview questions and looked for patterns in responses among teachers and students respectively.

In each studio participants ranged in ages and were of both sexes. Six out of the eighteen participants were male. While outnumbered by women, the proportion of one-third reflects the increasing number of male practitioners in recent years. The ages of the participants ranged from twenty-six to sixty-three years old and they had a wide range of experience in duration of practice or of teaching. As for myself, I am a Sivananda trained yoga teacher who has been practicing yoga for the past seven years. If a participant asked me, I would share a little about myself with respect to yoga. It was obvious that I practiced yoga because I had met all participants in relation to a yoga class. I must acknowledge one factor that may have had some influence on participants' responses that is I am visibly South Indian. Participants largely enjoyed the interviews and for most it was the first time they had reflected on any aspect of their practice.

Despite the many myths shrouding yoga's origins, there is no question as to the importance of the seminal work the *Yogasutras* of Patanjali. Dating the text is problematic, due in part to the debate concerning whether the Patanjali of the *Yogasutras* is the identical to the author of the *Mahabhasya* commentary on Panini's grammar. S. Dasgupta proposes an origin date in the second century BCE (Dasgupta 1969, p.212), while other reasoned estimates span even to the fourth century CE (Larson 2009, p.488). Even if we could pinpoint the date of the *Yogasutras*, we must account for a long history of development of thought leading up to Patanjali. This early development is "marked by the fertile speculations expressed in" the *Upanisads* (Bryant 2009, p.xxi). One of the central sections of the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita*, which expounds the

disciplines it names as *Karma-yoga*, *Jnana-yoga* and *Bhakti-yoga*. The *Bhagavad Gita* remains an important text in modern Hindu devotionalism and also plays a role in modern Western yoga, as we shall see. The *Yogasutras* presents four chapters consisting of one hundred and ninety-six aphorisms whose ultimate goal is *Samadhi* (liberation). According to Patanjali, liberation through yoga means the “cessation of mental fluctuations” (YS 1:2) and that is achieved through the eight steps he lays out in his treatise. Those eight limbs are: *Yamas* (restraints), *Niyamas* (observances), *Asana* (posture), *Pranayama* (breath control), *Pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses), *Dharana* (concentration), *Dhyana* (meditation) and *Samadhi* (superconscious state)). Interest in Patanjali’s *Yogasutras* was renewed with Swami Vivekananda’s 1896 English publication of *Raja-Yoga* (De Michelis 2005, p.3). It was inspirational for modern Hindu reform societies and also breathed new life into interest in yoga. Vivekananda himself was interested in *Vedanta* and God-realization and discouraged the practice of *asanas* – yoga postures (De Michelis 2005, p.164). Hatha-yoga is a sub-category of the larger yoga system that employs practical methods to aid the journey toward the same goal. Hatha-yoga developed the use of *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breath control) and *kriya* (purification) to prepare the body for later rungs of Patanjali’s eight step ladder.

In 1918 a dynamic and scholarly yogi began giving yoga demonstrations in India. He was Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888-1989) and between 1926 and 1946, he ran a yoga school in the Mysore palace under the patronage of the Maharaja (Mohan 2010, p.6-7). During this time he toured South India, often accompanied by accomplished young students, demonstrating great physical feats of yoga (including stopping his pulse for two minutes). He taught many students during his long life, many of whom have become

world renowned teachers themselves. It is largely thanks to his students that the physical practice of yoga – postural yoga - came to the West. Another important figure was Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh (1887-1963) who taught a mixture of neo-Vedanta, devotion and yoga in what he called the “Synthesis of Yoga”. His many students, most notably Swami Vishnudevananda and Swami Satchidananda, spread this polyvalent yoga throughout the world. Both of these masters never left India but produced a well trained second generation of international teachers who spread yoga all over the world.

Yoga was born in a Hindu context. Although some early texts are available in English translations, they do not exert a strong influence on the postural yoga practiced today. Apart from the previously mentioned *Yogasutras* and *Bhagavad Gita*, three texts concerned specifically with Hatha-yoga retain some prominence: the *Hathayoga Pradipika* of Svamarama, the *Gheranda Samhita* and the *Siva Samhita*. These three texts borrow heavily from one another; the oldest is the *Hathayoga Pradipika* from the fourteenth or fifteenth century, predating the other two by two or three hundred years (Eliade 1973, p.229). It should be noted that these texts are not given much attention by modern practitioners of yoga despite offering relevant advice on postural yoga, unlike the theistic *Bhagavad Gita* and the philosophical *Yogasutras*. Instead, the chief sources for contemporary yoga practitioners in the West are the modern training manuals that have been continuously published since the 1960’s.

Before presenting the findings of my research, it is best to define a few key Sanskrit terms used in my thesis. The most commonly used word is *asana*, which translates as posture. It is the third of the eight steps of yoga practice set out by Patanjali. It also serves as a suffix to all Sanskrit names for postures, example: *Garudasana* or

Mayurasana. *Vinyasa* refers to movements coordinated with one's breathing pattern. The practice of *Pranayama* refers specifically to manipulation of *prana* (vital energy), more practically it means breath control or breathing exercises. A question I was concerned with in this project is related to the Indian method of transmitting knowledge from master (*guru*) to disciple (*shishya*). The system that acts as an unbroken chain over generations is called *parampara* (lineage) and implies the veneration not only of one's own *guru* but also the *gurus* whose succession led to him. Lineage is also sometimes referred to as *sampradaya*, which often traces its line to a mythological sage or deity as founder.

There has always been some interest in the history of yoga as sub-category in the study of Indian religion. One of the earliest comprehensive studies of yoga is Mircea Eliade's Le Yoga. Immortalité et Liberté (1954), which offered a wider scholarly lens with which to examine yoga. More recently, the work of Elizabeth De Michelis and her student Mark Singleton have started to deal more directly with postural yoga. Most scholarship on the subject preceding these texts have been historical in nature and since modern postural yoga is a relatively recent arrival on the scene, it has received little attention as yet. De Michelis bridges this gulf with her book A History of Modern Yoga (2005) by introducing the revival of modern yoga with Vivekananda's Raja-Yoga (1896) and then jumping sixty years forward to the publication of Iyengar's Light on Yoga in 1966. It is within those sixty years that the practice of postures comes not only to the forefront but nearly replaces other *yogic* practices. Singleton (2010) addresses the question of how that change happened, and astutely points out that postural yoga developed in relation to international trends in health culture. While De Michelis focuses on North America, Joseph Alter (2004) examines the development of postural yoga

through this same period in India. These studies are starting to examine more carefully postural practice rather than yoga as philosophy, which reflects contemporary understandings and practice of yoga. It is in this context that my study may add to scholarship on the subject. My central concern has been with what yoga teachers and students have expressed to me about yoga. I believe that this focus gives a vivid picture of the play between yoga and religion in a contemporary setting. It is interesting to consider these dynamics against the backdrop of recent reports in the American media about Hindu organizations wanting to “take back yoga” and in a society where religion is less and less overt. This study hopes to discover what people actually feel about what they are doing and what meanings yoga has for them.

The first chapter of this thesis describes each of the three Montreal yoga studios I studied: Moksha Yoga Montreal, Sattva Yoga Shala (Ashtanga) and the Centre de Yoga Iyengar de Montréal. The two main components of the data presented are the environment of the studios themselves and the character of the classes. Chapters two and three are structured in the same way as each other with chapter two relating to the teachers’ responses and chapter three to the students’. Each of these two chapters is divided into three sections. The first deals with participants’ background, experience and attitude towards yoga. The second section explores responses about the benefits enjoyed by participants as a result of their yoga practice. The third section discusses participants’ knowledge of and interest in yoga’s history and tradition. The fourth chapter offers my analysis of the patterns and trends that have arisen from the participants’ responses. Although many other interesting observations were made, I have focused my concluding

analysis on the ways that practitioners' engagement with yoga reflect aspects of "Indian-ness" and religion.

Chapter 1 Yoga Studios and their Styles

This chapter will describe the three Montreal yoga studios in detail, introducing the three styles and giving an idea of the physical appearance of the studios. In addition, this chapter will discuss the methods used in the classes and the general tone of the classes. Not only do these two elements mark the differences among the studios and styles but more importantly indicates their Indian and/or spiritual orientation.

Moksha Yoga Montreal (Moksha Yoga)

Despite its relatively new arrival on the yoga scene, Moksha Yoga is among the most successful yoga styles. It was founded by Ted Grand and Jessica Robertson in 2005. Grand was originally a student and associate of Bikram Choudhury, the famous guru of hot yoga based in California. Having decided to go his own way, Grand developed the Moksha sequence of postures and began opening franchise studio locations. The Montreal Moksha studio is owned by the manager and Ted Grand. The influence of his former teacher is evident in the class and in his business model. Like Bikram Yoga, Moksha is practiced in a heated room. However, whereas Bikram was strict on postures, sequencing and teaching, Grand designed his system with greater freedom for both teachers and students. Interestingly, the Sanskrit term *moksha* means freedom from the cycle of birth and death. However, Moksha Yoga offers a more modern and practical freedom; “freedom from letting work get to you, freedom from the frustration of traffic, or an argument, or from a need to fit a certain body image before accepting oneself [...] we share this term... because we see freedom in its varied shades as a worthy goal” (Grand and Robertson 2005, p.4).

What is most particular is Grand's community focus through his studios. All Moksha Yoga studios are required to offer a minimum of two "Karma classes" a week. These classes are given for a minimum donation of five dollars and the proceeds go to benefit a local charity. The other significant focus of Moksha is its environmental outlook: "The studios are built with sustainable and non-toxic supplies, lights and heating systems are low consumption and all studios are cleaned with environmentally-friendly cleaning products" (<http://www.mokshayoga.ca/au-philosophy.htm>).

There are two Moksha Yoga studios in Montreal; I attended classes at the St-Laurent boulevard location. The studio itself is quite modern and chic looking. When entering, students are greeted at a small reception table with a little adjoining boutique. Students may rent any of the accessories necessary class including water bottle, towel or yoga mat. The changing rooms are fully equipped with showers and supplies. The decor of the studio is not overly eastern but it should be noted that several busts of the Buddha are to be found in the reception area. Also, a framed map of ancient India is hung on the wall. The entire studio is quite clean, largely thanks to the trade program; students may volunteer three to four hours a week in exchange for free classes. It is worth noting that many yoga studios employ this sort of program under the name of "Karma-yoga" or selfless service; Moksha intentionally avoids the use of the term in favour of "trade", which refers to a direct barter of service (unpaid work) for service (yoga classes). By changing the use of the term, the personal intention in the program changes from selfless service ("Karma-yoga") to selfish service ("trade"). The spiritual dimension of service is replaced by more practical motivation. As previously mentioned, Moksha does use the term "karma" but to designate their five dollar classes that aid local charities.

The practice hall can fit approximately 50 students and is often at capacity. In fact, students often line up outside the studio awaiting the next class. This is particularly the case with the two Karma classes on Friday evenings. The hallway was usually filled with upward of 40 people, mostly university students, some sitting on the floor and some standing but all talking excitedly. It was obvious that it was an activity to be done with friends, not a solitary and contemplative practice. For many of the students, the Friday night class is a cheap and healthy way to feel great at the end of the week. Most forget about their week and after hitting the showers are ready for a night on the town, for which the studio is ideally located.

The practice hall's front wall is entirely a full length mirror but without any other decoration or wall hangings inside. It is heated by overhead radiant heaters and the rooms' temperature varies between 34° and 38° depending on the humidity and the number of bodies in the room. The manager also told me that it is hotter in the middle of the room and so often suggests newcomers stay closer to the outer part of the hall. Moksha offers 9 classes daily, more than any other studio in Montreal, and Moksha is open 365 days a year without fail. The manager mentioned to me that they are in the process of expanding and are building an additional practice hall for even more classes, some of which will be taught French.

The Moksha sequence has been published by the Montreal Moksha studio as The Little Moksha Yoga Book. It contains illustrations and explanations of 42 postures but it also notes that the “sequence is a set foundation that varies from teacher to teacher” (Grand and Robertson 2005, p.4). The general teaching style found at Moksha is fairly standardized. The teachers do not follow an exact script but they often use similar

language, always in a very soft tone. All the instructors adjust students' postures in the same manner that is more like a massage than a correction. The basic structure of a Moksha class is a short initial relaxation, deep breathing, standing series, floor series and final relaxation. The aim of the sequence is to "stretch, strengthen and tone the muscles while detoxifying the body and calming the mind" (<http://www.mokshayoga.ca/hy-what.htm>). Another distinct aspect of the class is what is called "intention setting"; early in the class the teacher will ask students to take a moment to mentally find their own personal intention for their practice. The teacher will often suggest the intention directed toward oneself, a family member or a loved one who is suffering or needs some positive energy. All classes are taught in English and Sanskrit names for postures are used infrequently.

I took a number of classes at the studio, all of which were Moksha style. I mostly attended the community classes, which are classes that allow newer teachers a chance for teaching experience. However, the class was often taught by more experienced teachers. Taking this class allowed me to experience a variety of teachers. In my experience the classes generally start with students on their mats, all facing the mirrors. While some students do little warm-up stretches, some lie down on their back and others in child pose (sitting on their heels with their forehead on the ground and arms outstretched). It is usually quiet at this time before the class begins. The teacher enters and asks all students to take the child pose and "start connecting to your breath" through deep breathing. Students then come to stand at the front of their mats and are asked to set their intention for their practice. While standing, the class starts with six to eight Bikram style breaths: reaching your arms above your head while inhaling through the nostrils and lowering

your arms in front of your body while exhaling through the mouth making a “Ha” sound. Moksha Yoga calls this breathing method by Patanjali’s term “pranayama” but it is not one of the breathing exercises described in any of the classical Sanskrit Hatha-yoga texts.

The early part of the class may be viewed as an introduction to the practice of postures. Following the first breathing exercise are the standing postures. Depending on the teacher, the class would sometimes first do a few slow half sun salutations to move the body a little before starting. The standing postures consist mostly of various lunges, squats, and side stretches punctuated by some standing forward bends. The standing series gives a great deal of muscular work to the legs and hips. A few balancing postures (tree and eagle) are also added. From here a few seated postures are practiced; usually forward bends and twisting postures. The class then comes to lie on their mats facing the ceiling. At this point, the teacher leads the class through several abdominal exercises. Here, no yogic postures are practiced only Pilates style core strength building. Then onto the belly for a few back bends; the students turn again to face the mirrors. According to The Little Moksha Yoga Book, the class ends (like a Bikram class) with *kapalabhati*, practiced while kneeling and sitting on the heels. *kapalabhati* is a *kriya* (cleansing) technique that consists of rhythmic forced exhalations by pumping the abdominal muscles. It was not practiced in all the classes I attended and the method of how to practice it was never explained. The teachers simply called it “fire breath” or “cleansing breath”. At the very end of the class the final relaxation is quite rushed. Students lie down again on their backs, arms and legs apart, with eyes closed and try to rest and relax. The teacher soon announces that “when it’s your time to go, please do so quietly” and as soon as the teacher has given the word the race for the shower is on. Immediately the noise of

people peeling their mats off the floor and rushing to the door washes over the few students that remain on their backs. Within less than five minute only a handful of students remain and they too are shooed away by the entrance of a volunteer pushing a mop and bucket ready to prepare for the following class. The situation in the men's changing room is quite different from the experience of the female students. There are only two showers for the men but seeing as there are never that many men in the classes they won't be waiting too long. For the ladies however, there are three showers serving a lot of women. I was told that tensions sometimes rise when dealing with the queue for the shower and if you take too long in the shower you may become the victim of some verbal abuse. Such was the case, as it was reported to me, for two young female students who were taking their time, chatting and trading hair products, who were scolded by an enraged woman awaiting her turn for the shower.

The majority of the classes are well attended and the studio seems to have a young student base. On the whole, Moksha's popularity is based on the fact that they offer a very contemporary style. The classes are fairly dynamic and postures are held only for an average of thirty seconds. Apart from Moksha style yoga, the studio also offers one Ashtanga class per week and a few Power Flow classes, which place more emphasis on muscular training. The classes are all either an hour or an hour and a half. The convenience of the schedule is hard to beat; everyday classes follow one after the other from 7am till 10:30pm. Students come in, sweat for an hour with other almost naked students, shower and then run off to continue their day. This is illustrated by the fact that the relaxation is right at end of the class, and most students head for the showers immediately: Moksha Yoga is a busy studio for busy people.

Sattva Yoga Shala (Ashtanga Yoga)

Unlike Moksha Yoga, Ashtanga-Vinyasa Yoga (commonly known as Ashtanga Yoga) claims a long history rooted in ancient Indian practices. This dynamic and physical style was founded by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois (1915-2009) of Karnataka state, in Southern India. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when the Ashtanga Yoga we find today was crafted, two dates are of significance. First, in 1948 Jois founded in his Mysore home the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute “with the aim of experimenting with the curative aspect of yoga” (Jois, xviii). An extension, including a practice hall, was only added to the house in 1964 (Jois, xviii). The second is 1962, which saw the Indian publication of Jois’ treatise Yoga Mala, written in the Indian language of Kannada. This is the only book published by Jois and outlines the philosophy and practice of Ashtanga Yoga. The organization of the book reflects Jois’ focus on practice. The book contains a short introduction which defines and describes yoga. Most of the book is a detailed account of the sequence and postures of Ashtanga Yoga.

Jois’ use of the term “*ashtanga*” refers to the eight-fold yoga system of Patanjali. The use of term suggests a connection between Jois’ *asana* (posture) based yoga practice and the ancient the yoga system of India. This is in many ways a continuation of Jois’ master’s mission of reviving the practice of *asanas* in the light of the Patanjali tradition. T. Krishnamacharya (1888-1989) trained Jois while the latter was studying at the Maharaja’s Sanskrit College in Mysore. Krishnamacharya was an orthodox scholar and champion for the revival cause of *yogasanas* (postures). His particular style of teaching was said to be based on the mysterious text *Yoga Karunta*. The text, taught to Krishnamacharya during his seven years in Nepal by his master there, has never been

seen, read or translated. Even Jois has sometimes expressed doubt about its existence. Krishnamacharya makes no reference to it in his two books Yoga Makaranda (1935) and Yogasanalagu (1941), nor has it been transcribed by any of his students (Singleton 2010, p.184). The official story is that the text was composed by the mythical sage Vamana, and then taught by Rammohan Bhramacari to Krishnamacharya, who then transmitted the method to Jois. Jois has maintained the claim that all the details regarding postures, sequence, *vinyasas* and counting are provided in the *Yoga Karunta* (Jois 2002, p. xvii). It should be noted that Krishnamacharya did not use the term “Ashtanga” to describe the style taught to Jois. The name “was applied to the system only after the arrival of the first American students... Prior to this, Jois had simply referred to his teaching as “*asana*”” (Singleton 2010, p.186).

Montreal has two Ashtanga studios and the one in which I did my field work was founded by direct disciples of Pattabhi Jois. The studio is called Sattva Yoga Shala (“purity yoga hall”) and was established around 2003. The founding couple, AT1 and his wife, first met Jois in Mysore in 1979; since then they have made several return trips and kept in contact with Jois until his death in 2009. The studio consists of two equally large halls. Upon entering the studio, students find a large square hall with a high ceiling. This hall is an all-purpose room that functions as reception, boutique and lounge (there is a coffee table with books and two couches). The boutique offers a selection of books on various yogic subjects. The walls are decorated with modern paintings of Hindu deities made by one of the teachers. AT1 allows the artist/teacher to showcase his artwork in the studio and the paintings are available for purchase. Above the reception desk there is a framed portrait of Pattabhi Jois. The changing rooms are located on the floor above and

the stairwell is adorned with typical Indian scenes (featuring people wearing bright-coloured saris and unique moustaches), as well as photos of Jois and his grandson, Sharat Rangaswami (current director of the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute, Mysore). For a glimpse of her time with Jois, a photo montage is displayed of AT1's wife practicing difficult postures under Jois' supervision while seven months pregnant. A large *Nataraj* (Siva as Lord of Dance) statue is prominently placed near the door of the practice hall.

The second room, equally large with a high ceiling, is the practice hall. It can hold twenty-five to thirty students. There are some straps and blocks at the back of the class for students' use during the class. Again we find a small *Nataraj* in the corner of the room. All along the window ledge that covers one side of the hall are placed little statues of Hindu deities. Another portrait of Jois hangs at the front of the hall and a large *yantra* (sacred geometric diagram) mural covers the wall opposite the windows.

The studio offers three Hatha-yoga classes per week in addition to their standard one and a half hour Ashtanga classes. All classes are taught in English with the exception of one class in Mandarin. The Ashtanga classes all follow the same format regardless of level. They begin with a Sanskrit prayer to Patanjali, however the prayer was never explained to students. The body is heated by five *Surya Namaskara* (Sun Salutations) A and B before starting the standing poses. This is followed by the primary series and concludes with finishing postures and a little relaxation. The primary series is a set sequence of postures set by Pattabhi Jois; all the postures are held for five breaths and linked together with *vinyasas* (the jump-back method). I attended several classes with different teachers. The teachers always followed the same order but sometimes altered which variations the class practiced. Although Jois mentions several finishing postures

and fifteen are on the list, in every class I attended only the shoulder-stand was performed. A short relaxation ended the class, sometimes with legs supported on the wall. To conclude the entire class chanted *Om* (Hindu sacred syllable) three times.

The use of the *vinyasas* to link postures gives the class its dynamic and aerobic characteristic. This element helps to attract students who are generally quite athletic. Even though the room is not heated, students tend to sweat a great deal on account of the repeated *vinyasas*. No specific moment is allotted to *pranayama*, however *ujjayi* breathing is encouraged throughout the class. This technique is explained as making an ocean like sound in back on the throat when breathing. Straps and blocks are used to help students fit the posture; they are used so that students can get into a posture which their bodily flexibility would not necessarily allow. As such, the teachers' adjustments tend to be a little forced. Teachers always use Sanskrit names for the postures. I found that the teachers' personalities really came through in their method. They used similar language but had different ways of explaining how to do something. The studio encourages individual development by having "Mysore" classes every morning during the week. These classes allow students to come and practice under the supervision of the founders without the contours of a led class. It is designed to simulate Jois' own teaching style. The look of the studio and method of the classes is representative of the founders' relationship with India and their master. The style is very attractive to people who appreciate movement and strength. Despite its older origin, Ashtanga started to gain popularity in North America only after the late 1980's. The Ashtanga style is important because many of the more muscular and dynamic styles currently practiced all over North America are inspired by Jois' style.

Centre de Yoga Iyengar de Montréal (Iyengar Yoga)

The Iyengar style of yoga is named for B. K. S. Iyengar (b. 1918) who, like Pattabhi Jois, originally hailed from Karnataka and was the student of T. Krishnamacharya. Iyengar eventually settle in Pune in 1937 but opened Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute only in 1975. He became popular in the West through the influence of the famous musician Yehudi Menuhin. He published one of the seminal works of modern Hatha-yoga practice in 1966: Light on Yoga. It should also be noted that this and all his subsequent publications have been in English, making his work easily accessible to Western audiences. Iyengar was Krishnamacharya's brother-in-law and was sent to Krishnamacharya on account of his own physical infirmity. Iyengar summarizes his time with Krishnamacharya as follows: "I studied with him for two years when I was fourteen, fifteen years old... during that two year period, he only taught me for about ten or fifteen days... he only taught me a few asanas" (Summerbell 2004, p.9). Iyengar, who suffered from poor health in his early years, developed his own style of yoga focusing on health through bodily precision aided by the use of support props (straps, block, bolsters, blankets and chairs). What is most interesting about this school of yoga is its organizational structure and hierarchy. Each country (and often state or province) has an Iyengar governing board. Every Iyengar studio must keep its official status with the national governing body. In addition, all Iyengar teacher must remain attached to one of these Iyengar recognized studios. The teachers also follow a strict hierarchy. They are divided into 6 levels and a teacher must remain continually attached to a teacher of a higher level to keep their Iyengar approval.

The Montreal Iyengar studio is unusual compared to most yoga studios. The overall impression is that it is a very plain and simple space. The changing rooms and bathroom are both very small and cramped. There is no boutique, nor a much of a reception area apart from a desk. They only teach Iyengar style classes. Drop-in classes are discouraged with their twenty-five dollar price; this is meant to support registration for the courses. However, courses are thirty-three weeks in duration and demand a great deal of commitment from students. The practice hall can fit twelve to fifteen students but their classes are very poorly attended. The walls of the practice hall are painted a dull white colour and around the room, a foot from the ceiling, are photos of Iyengar performing difficult postures. Along the walls are two rows of strong white rope each about two and a half feet in length. The first row is two feet from the floor and the second about six feet from the floor and gives a slight impression of a torture chamber. A small room adjoining the practice hall is filled with props: belts, blankets, blocks and chairs. In the corner of the practice hall, on a little shelf, is a small Vishnu statue. Students also find a Ganesha on the reception desk and a little *Nataraj* above the coat rack. Two other framed collages of Iyengar photos are prominently displayed in the studio.

The studio's classes are almost entirely taught in French with one weekly English class. The Iyengar class is very focused on bodily alignment. The style attracts people who are inflexible, who have suffered an injury or who are afraid of being injured. All students must take an assortment of props by their side in preparation for the class. There is no prayer or chant to start or end the class but Sanskrit names for postures are used throughout (chanting is introduced in level three classes). There is no specific warm-up as the class immediately begins with a short series of standing postures, each held for only

thirty seconds. Following the standing series, students only practice two to four postures in any given class. All of these are demonstrated by the teacher beforehand and all are heavily supported by props. Students would then step away from the mat, come to the centre of the room and stand around listening and watching the teacher's demonstration. Then they would return to their mats and try the posture. After that they would have to stop again and wait for another long and detailed explanation. This made the class seem very broken up; it was like a baseball game, with a lot of waiting around interrupted by a little action. The teachers spoke non-stop during the class in a very strict and serious tone. The teachers gave the impression of being impatient with the students and were almost aggressive with their instructions. The teacher who taught the English class was somewhat friendly with students before and after the class, during the class however, her tone was cold and serious. In one case, I witnessed a teacher grab the foot of a student and forcefully turn it outward because the student did not respond to verbal instruction. The teachers tend to treat students as though they are helpless and sometimes they themselves adjust props for the students, or run to your side if you are not using them correctly. The teaching style does not encourage students to feel self-confident and capable of practicing on their own.

The postures were described in detail in terms of anatomical precision and health benefits. The class ended with a short relaxation with students' legs supported by the wall. The combination of the studio's decor and ambiance with the teacher's approach, voice and attitude make the experience at the Iyengar centre very serious. This is definitely a contributing factor to why the formal Iyengar style is not so popular today. However, Iyengar did help to popularize postural yoga in the West and his physiological

understanding of postures has influenced how most students practice. Despite similar origins to Ashtanga, the way the studio is set up and the style itself convey the message that the style is based not so much on the classical yoga tradition of India as it is on Mr. Iyengar himself.

What the three studios share in common is the attempt to give students a sanctuary from their daily troubles. All three studios are located on the second floor, above store fronts, on very busy commercial streets. Students have the common experience of walking in from the sights, sounds and smells of a busy urban street to a place that has another kind of atmosphere. The senses are led in a new direction with the smell of incense, accompanied by the gentle sights and sounds of a yoga studio. Students are asked to remove their shoes at the door, again giving the impression of sanctity. They come to the practice hall barefoot and in changed clothes. This separation between daily life and time spent in the studio contributes to what students refer to somewhat vaguely as feelings of “goodness” and “wellness”.

The three studios differ in a few ways in terms of style and presentation. The Iyengar studio is especially distinctive but at the same time it is not very popular. Unlike the other two studios, the space is plain and bare: there is no boutique and not much of a community surrounding the studio. With respect to the class, Iyengar does not have any warm-up for the body. However, it is not really necessary as students don't seem to do that much during their classes. All three styles have different relations to their perceived tradition and origin. Moksha is a new manifestation, whereas Ashtanga claims an ancient heritage. Iyengar yoga seems to be the project of one man. The authenticity of Iyengar Yoga is represented through the international governing system and Mr. Iyengar himself,

whereas Ashtanga Yoga's is through the lineage of Pattabhi Jois, while Moksha Yoga doesn't seem to feel the need to represent itself as springing from an old tradition.

Chapter 2 Yoga Teachers

The second chapter will explore the teachers' responses with relation to their attitudes toward yoga. The teachers from the respective studios will be discussed together. First, the teachers' personal background and yoga experience is presented (A). This is followed by the teachers' beliefs about the benefits of practicing yoga (B) and finally their relationship to the tradition of yoga (C).

Moksha Yoga Teachers

(A) Moksha Yoga teachers' backgrounds and experience

The experiences of the three Moksha teachers vary but they do offer some points in common. MT1, who is the manager and co-owner of the Montreal studio, has been with Moksha since it began five years ago. She has been practicing for the past twelve years and teaching for the past eight. Her story is similar to that of her friend, the co-founder of Moksha yoga and co-owner of the Montreal studio, Ted Grand. She was a Bikram yoga teacher but found it too rigid for teachers and students. MT1 was immediately attracted to Moksha due to the greater freedom given to teachers of the Moksha sequence, which allowed her flexibility with respect to the script and posture modifications. She has an active lifestyle and claims that yoga's relaxing effect hooked her from the start.

MT2 and MT3 are both newer teachers. MT2 has only been teaching two months and MT3 eight months. MT2 has a contemporary dance background and it was that milieu that introduced him to yoga. As a dancer, yoga helped develop flexibility and soothe his sore knees. He has practiced yoga regularly for the past three years. MT3 has

been practicing for thirteen years and used yoga to help recover from a spinal injury suffered in a car accident when she was young. Her background is in music and urban planning. MT2 and MT3 began with Ashtanga yoga. Both found Ashtanga frustrating and too challenging in terms of flexibility and strength.

All three teachers highlighted Moksha yoga's philosophy as the principal reasons they were attracted to Moksha. MT3 described it best as a threefold mandate: 1) environmental or green, 2) social and 3) continuing education. The environmental mandate refers to Moksha yoga's commitment to sustainability by waste and energy reduction. The social mandate refers to the karma classes and Moksha's support of both local charities and the New Leaf foundation, their in-house charity that supports yoga programs in youth correctional facilities. The third mandate refers to Moksha's encouragement of its teachers to take classes at other studios and to continue studying yoga in one form or another. All three teachers also enjoy the heat and talk about it in terms of detoxification and "opening the body". MT3 did not enjoy the heat when she started and still practices often in a non-heated room.

The Moksha yoga teacher training is a month-long residential program. MT2 and MT3, who had done their training quite recently, described their experience to me. MT1, having been an original staff member, teaches at the teacher training program. The course was held at an ayurvedic resort in Kerala, India. The daily schedule began with a silent walk and meditation followed by the practice yoga class. The afternoon classes covered a range of topics, including anatomy, the philosophy of Moksha yoga, the Hindu religious text the *Bhagavad Gita*, Patanjali's *Yogasutras*, and Buddhist meditation. The second yoga class of the day was theory, about how to teach and adjust in a yoga class. All meals

served were vegetarian. On Fridays, other styles of yoga were taught. Although both MT2 and MT3 claimed to have covered the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yogasutras* in the course content, neither one could tell me anything about either one of these texts nor why it was relevant to their training. When speaking of the training the element that both teachers claimed made the strongest impression was the meditation teacher. He taught them Buddhist meditation techniques and imbued the course with a touch of North American style Buddhism. That is to say, the content of the Buddhist teachings were about “awareness” and “loving kindness”. The Buddhist flavour present in the training was significant for teachers. I asked MT3 about the connection of yoga and Buddhism and she responded that she felt strongly that a connection existed although she could not describe what it was. She felt that the relationship between the two was interesting and worth exploring. MT3 seems to have been most influenced by the Buddhist flavour of her training. She used the Buddhist term “sangha” at numerous times to describe the Moksha yoga community of teachers. She feels very much a part of a living community of teachers that mutually support each other, at least through the internet.

(B) Moksha Yoga teachers’ belief about yoga practice and its benefits

All three teachers started practicing yoga because they enjoyed or required some physical benefit. MT1 kept with it because of the complete physical relaxation that comes after her practice. She also points to the effect of yoga on improving digestion. MT2 began by using yoga to increase his strength and flexibility for contemporary dance; also to help soothe his aching joints from rigorous dance practices. He mentions that the focus on controlling the breath has a calming effect on the nervous system. MT3 used it for regaining mobility after a car accident. She highlights that yoga, and Moksha yoga in

particular, helps to develop core strength. MT2 explained that the body's profuse perspiration is how the body detoxifies; the heat also opens the pores leading to nicer skin. MT3 also mentioned that the heat relaxes the muscles, allowing for greater flexibility without the necessity of warm-up exercises. Each teacher's personal understanding of health was a motivation for practicing. MT1 understood general health as being directly related to the health of the spine; thus she practiced to have a strong and supple spine. MT3, on the other hand, felt that health should be seen holistically and that the absence of tension or stress was as important to health as strength or flexibility.

The Moksha teachers also spoke of the non-physical benefits of practicing yoga. MT1 was most descriptive in naming the qualities that the practice helps to develop: humility, being less judgmental, having less attachment, greater confidence and improved acceptance of oneself and death. MT2 spoke of breath focus as an aid to deeper self-awareness and concentration, which he said could be carried outside the studio. MT3 used the same expression several times during her interview to describe her general feeling and understanding of yoga: "cultivating inner peace". She used this expression to describe the benefit, aim and purpose of yoga. It was her all-purpose expression and she used it so many times that she became self-conscious about this usage. Near the end of the interview she would let out a small giggle whenever she said it. MT1's aim in practicing yoga is "to get rid of the garbage" and "be a better person, so as to help others". MT2 offered a very interesting comment when asked about his aim, responding that he "was still on the physical level" and "was trying to stay focused". When asked about what other levels he might be referring to he could only say that other levels existed but that he did not know anything about them.

When asked about what they felt made for a good class the Moksha teachers responded in two different ways. MT1 and MT3 gave abstract answers about how they experienced their ideal class. MT1 said an ideal class for her is if she forgets everything. MT3 felt a good class for her is when she can remain with her breath and stay present. MT2, who earlier said that he “was still on the physical level”, answered by describing the sequence of his ideal practice: soothing pranayama, a few flows, standing postures, balancing postures, short relaxation, floor postures, a little pranayama again and a 10-15 minute relaxation. It is clear that each teacher’s personal understanding, motivation and aim dictate their opinion about a class.

(C) Moksha Yoga teachers’ relationship with yoga tradition

This section will explore the Moksha teachers’ relationship to yoga’s history and tradition. As each teacher’s ideas of yoga are different, it is best to treat the teachers individually. When questioned about the origins of yoga, each teacher spoke about different parts of yoga’s history. MT1 said that it was a practice for Indian males and was dwindling under British rule. She named Krishnamacharya as a scholar who popularized yoga and trained women such as Indra Devi. MT2 said yoga began “a few thousand years ago” by combining the search for knowledge with pure living. He claims that at first only pranayama and meditation were practiced and that posture yoga came up in the last century. He describes it as an evolution with the same goal: “to clear the mind”. MT3 also believes yoga to have ancient roots and that asana practice “came out of wanting peace”. She acknowledges that the greater focus on *asana* has taken precedence over the past hundred years and adds that it is *asana* practice that has made yoga popular. She

strongly believes that there is great value for yoga practitioners in knowing about yoga's history.

Like their understanding of its history, each defines yoga differently. MT1 describes yoga as a union of body, mind, breath and community. MT2 defined yoga as a philosophy of breath and movement coupled with lifestyle choices. MT3 described yoga as an "integration between posture, health and meditation". She said yoga opens and detoxifies the body, stills the mind and, of course, cultivates peace. Indian roots are acknowledged as part of the origins but do not necessarily have any bearing on the definitions of yoga given by the Moksha teachers. MT3 is a member of a kirtan group that sings Hindu devotional songs, but admits that she doesn't "know much about gods or Hinduism".

The use of Sanskrit terms in yoga and yoga classes is a clear indication of yoga's Indian ancestry. The Moksha teachers all appreciated Sanskrit use in class. MT3 likes the use of Sanskrit but does not find it important. She admits that "old words carry power" and finds it educative. MT2 said that pronunciation needs to be good to get proper sound vibrations. He offered an interesting perspective by adding that using Sanskrit has an equalizing effect, meaning that you could take a class in any country, in any modern language and still follow the postures. He also seemed to suggest that it was more professional to use what he called "the proper terms". MT1 felt that, not only does the use of Sanskrit give respect to the roots of yoga, but also helps to understand the posture: the Sanskrit "name gives meaning to the pose".

Reflecting the fact that Moksha yoga is a newer style of practice, none of the teachers felt that it was important how, where and by whom a yoga teacher was trained. This is quite different from the Hindu idea of *parampara* (lineage) where the unbroken line of master and student (*guru/shishya*) is considered to confer authority and maintain the integrity of the tradition. Only MT3 commented on this aspect of yoga, saying that there existed a long chain of information and education, but that she emphatically rejected the hierarchy of teacher over student seen in the classic model.

Moksha is a practice that focuses on the body. It aims at developing physical strength and flexibility. Considering that it has also become very popular due its claims to bring about detoxification and weight loss, Moksha's primary orientation seems overwhelmingly physical. With this in mind, I was curious about what the teachers would have to say about non-physical yoga practices or styles. When asked if they were aware of non-physical styles and interested in them, only MT3 had any previous experience with them. Although she didn't specify what exactly she had practiced she found that her experience with non-physical yoga was "entirely unexpected" and "mind-blowing". I also asked each teacher about their own practice of other techniques such as *pranayama* (breath control) and meditation. The most experienced teacher, MT1, reported she did a little seated meditation every morning. She claimed to practice "nostril breathing" and "other such practices". What was interesting was that she could neither name nor explain the methods she used in *pranayama* nor could she describe her meditation technique. The only *pranayama* practiced by MT2 and MT3 are the portions that are included in the Moksha series. As mentioned earlier, these two techniques do not follow the classic definition of *pranayama* and are not consistently practiced in all the classes. Both

teachers also said that their meditation comes during the relaxation at the end of their practice but not in a formal or habitual pattern. These teachers seem to be in accord with Moksha Yoga's orientation in general and naturally, whatever is not prioritized by the Moksha style is also not prioritized by the teachers in their personal practices.

In keeping with Moksha's formal commitment to furthering the experience of their yoga teachers, they encourage their teachers to seek education and visit other studios/styles. The teachers did visit other places but seemed more interested in expanding their knowledge of yoga through reading. Each teacher was asked if they read yoga books out of their own interest and if any of these books had influenced their practice or teaching. As MT1 was starting to become interested in the history of yoga, she recently read a book about T. Krishnamacharya, the grand-father of modern postural yoga. She had also read a few books on the practice of pranayama. MT2 mentioned two titles that are somewhat on the opposite ends of the yoga spectrum: Iyengar's Light on Yoga, a book on the precision of physical postures and their health benefits, and Yogananda's Autobiography of a Yogi, the famous account of Yogananda's life as an introduction to the non-physical side of yoga. As for MT3, keeping in mind that she was strongly influenced by Buddhist ideas, she claimed one author as having the greatest influence on her life: the popular Zen Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh. Each teacher sincerely felt that yoga was important in their lives and this was best said by MT2: "yoga is a blessing in my life."

Ashtanga Yoga Teachers

(A) Ashtanga Yoga teachers' backgrounds and experience

The three Ashtanga teachers I interviewed are the principal teachers at Sattva Yoga Shala; combined they teach 85% of the studio's classes. The teachers share an interesting relationship in that both AT2 and AT3 are students of AT1, the sixty year old internationally famous teacher and owner of the studio. He is famous because he is one among a small handful of fully certified Ashtanga teachers in North America. He narrated the to story of his long and interesting experience with Ashtanga Yoga, which he has practiced exclusively since he began thirty years ago. He first explored India as a young traveller in 1974 and immediately fell in love with the country. He claims to have been a "disenchanted Catholic but spiritual person" and felt India helped to bring out the spiritual element in his life. While in India, someone had given him Iyengar's Light on Yoga, which interested him greatly. He returned to India in 1979 with the intention to study yoga without any clear idea of what it was and where he would go. He decided against going to Iyengar in Pune, believing that because Iyengar had a book published and was starting to become famous he would be expensive. He was in Mysore when an American traveller suggested that he meet his teacher, K. Pattabhi Jois. Jois did not speak very much English but began teaching Westerners in the early 1970's. AT1 spent the next five years, on and off, in Mysore training under Jois' watchful eye. AT1 amusingly recounted how, in English, Jois could not understand his Australian accent nor could he understand Jois' Indian accent. After his time with Jois, AT1 came to Canada and began teaching. He then took a break from yoga teaching between 1985 and 1998, during which time he was practicing much less. In 1998 he opened Sattva Yoga Shala (previously

Ashtanga Yoga School) and even brought Jois as a guest teacher to Montreal in 2002. He finds that Ashtanga Yoga is not as popular now as it was when he opened. He felt that because Ashtanga is a very challenging practice, other teachers have taken certain bits and pieces to make yoga styles that are easier and more accessible. He said that due to the mushrooming of yoga studios, “ten years ago less people were doing yoga but those that were, were much more committed”. He felt that it was “a little disappointing” that yoga has become fashionable and consequently he believes standards have been lowered.

AT2 also has a long history with yoga, having practiced for the past twenty years. She is thirty-three years old and has a BA in Religious Studies. Her mother was interested in yoga and her mother practiced a soft form of Hatha-yoga, some of her mother’s friends were yoga teachers. She recalled that her first yoga class was an Iyengar style class that she took when she was eleven years old. Due to the fact that yoga was a part of her household she practiced as a teenager and found it to be a very good complement to her activities in dance and sports. In her early twenties she travelled in India and stayed several months in a Sivananda ashram. She enjoyed the spiritual aspect but she was not challenged by the *asana* practice of the Sivananda style. She said it took years to find a form of yoga that was a good match for her. AT2 was attracted by the strong physical practice of Ashtanga; she has been practicing this it for the past eight years and has been teaching Ashtanga Yoga for five. She was introduced to Ashtanga at the Sattva studio and then trained under AT1. She enjoys the community feel of Sattva and the benefit of working consistently with a single teacher. She has visited the Ashtanga Research Institute in Mysore, now under the direction of Jois’ grandson Sharath Rangaswamy, and maintains a relationship with the Institute to this day.

AT3 is thirty-seven years old and comes from a strong athletic background. Beginning with swimming, he has been involved in competitive sports since an early age. This led him to become a triathlon and ironman competitor. During his BSc studies in Kinesiology he took a twelve week yoga course. It was gentle and had lots of relaxation and to no surprise our athlete was bored stiff; this really turned him off yoga. When he became less involved in competing, he began coaching high level athletes. Due to his rigorous training and the physically demanding sports he was engaged in, he suffered from numerous injuries. He started doing yoga style stretches but remained wary of yoga. One day, an Ashtanga demonstration by David Swenson, one of Jois' American students, was playing on a screen in a Lululemon Athletica stores. AT3 was so impressed with what Swenson was physically able to do that he found his previous idea of yoga transformed. He immediately bought the DVD and began following along at home as best he could. After meeting AT1 and giving up professional athleticism, he moved to Montreal to participate at the Sattva studio. He has been practicing Ashtanga for fifteen years and teaching for seven.

The training of teachers in Ashtanga is a very interesting phenomenon. As mentioned above, there are only fifty teachers in North America with full certification. What this means is that the teacher was either granted authority to teach the primary series by Pattabhi Jois or, more recently, by the Ashtanga Research Institute. The training process is lengthy and requires numerous trips to Mysore for extended periods of stay. AT1 and his wife both have certification based on their time spent with Jois. AT2 has made four trips to Mysore and told me that with one more trip she hopes to be awarded certification. She also told me that the awarding of certification is a subjective decision

by the Institute, based on your yogic education, practice, attitude, number and frequency of visits and general relationship to the Institute. If there are so few certified teachers the question that arises is then, how are there so many Ashtanga teachers? AT2 and AT3 do not have certification and neither do the majority of most Ashtanga teachers. Both teachers have followed several training sessions and workshops under a fully certified teacher. In addition, they both had the opportunity to apprentice under AT1 at his Sattva studio.

(B) Ashtanga Yoga teachers' belief about yoga practice and its benefits

Given that Ashtanga is very physical practice it is clear that the teachers all enjoy the exercise but all three also spoke about other benefits. AT1 started the practice because “it was hard but felt good”. He spoke about cleansing and purifying the body through dedicated asana practice, specifically the internal organs and nervous system. In this regard, he said that twisting postures have the greatest effect on the internal organs. He likened the organs to a dirty sponge and repeated twists was like squeezing the water out of the sponge; eventually the sponge and the water that is pressed out will be clean. AT1 explained that Ashtanga’s use of the same fixed series forces students to concentrate. Ashtanga also offers a three-fold focus during the class by asking students to remain aware of *bandha* (body locks), *vinyasa* (moving with breath) and *dristi* (gaze).

In addition to the physical benefits, AT2 described the practice as “emotional therapy”. She gave me as an example of this in something that happens from time to time, when a tough and physical man comes to her sobbing after a class. All three teachers spoke about the transformative effects of the practice. AT3 found this to be a priority; he

said that self-transformation was part of his job in being human. AT1 explained that through *ujjayi* breathing the body is heated internally which brings toxins out of the body and blood. AT2 described the practice as personal alchemy: the heat purifies and transforms the body as base metal to gold.

All three teachers spoke about the benefits of the “Mysore class” held every morning at the studio. This class allows for more personal and gradual instruction, meant to re-create Jois’s teaching style during his early period in Mysore. This requires a great amount of dedication but the teachers indicated that they will have between twenty and thirty students on a typical morning. Although AT3 did say that the lofty official aim of Ashtanga practice is “to sit in lotus [posture] for three hours”, his aims are more practical. He wants to stay healthy and sees his role as a teacher as helping others stay healthy and “being a positive force for the evolution of others”. AT2 finds she most enjoys a class that surprises her in some respect so that her expectations might be challenged a little.

(C) Ashtanga Yoga teachers’ relationship with yoga tradition

The fact that this style was developed in India by an Indian has an impact on the teachers’ attitudes regarding yoga’s history. AT1 personally experienced the Indian training system by spending five years in total with Pattabhi Jois. Having had an Indian teacher, whose first profession was as a Sanskrit scholar, naturally AT1 absorbed many aspects of Indian religion and culture, which he holds dear. He told me that “Siva is the name I use for God”, clearly demonstrating his identification with the Hindu tradition. When asked about the origins of yoga, AT1 began talking about his *paramguru* (his teacher’s teacher), T. Krishnamacharya. In addition to Krishnamacharya, he also names

Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh as the other father of modern yoga. He described Krishnamacharya as developing a strong physical practice as well as therapeutic applications of yoga. He briefly discussed the issue of memory management amongst Krishnamacharya's foremost students. AT1 felt that much of the conflict among these students about the nature of Krishnamacharya's legacy is due to not taking into account the fact that Krishnamacharya had various styles of teaching and practice throughout his life. AT2 on the other hand, began her yoga story with the four thousand year old "Pashupati" seal found at Mohenjo-daro/Harappa (Indus valley civilization). She acknowledges that the yoga that we recognize today has only been around for a hundred years or so and she credits Krishnamacharya and his famous students for its current prominence. AT3 also began his narrative with the ancient seals of the Indus valley but then describes the change in Indian religion from ritual/sacrifice toward internal methods of worship. He said that yoga originated in India due its geographic position, based on the gravitational pull at the time. He said that Krishnamacharya had passed on the knowledge of *bandhas*, *dristi* and asana sequences to Pattabhi Jois.

These teachers all gave different, yet equally interesting definitions of yoga. AT1 said simply "take a class and find out", explaining his statement with reference to the old adage about describing "sweetness" to someone who has never tasted sugar. AT2 described yoga as a "spiritual practice that is accessible through asanas". AT3 mentioned that there are so many ways to define yoga but he prefers to think of it as "the path and the end, that and everything in between".

In the Ashtanga style, teachers use Sanskrit for all postures during a class. The class also begins with a Sanskrit hymn in praise of Patanjali. AT1 explained the purpose

of the hymn as “putting the class in the proper space” before starting the practice. The two other teachers perform the chant when at the Sattva Yoga Shala but not when teaching in other locales. All three agreed that it is good to say the posture’s name in English immediately following the Sanskrit to help familiarize students with the terminology. In part, it helps to distinguish Ashtanga as a style that is rooted in India. AT2 proudly mentioned that during the full-vinyasa class on Sunday mornings, the Sun Salutations are performed while the teacher does the counting in Sanskrit. AT3 said that during his teacher’s training, they learnt the Sanskrit script but he found it “a waste of time” because the Sanskrit alphabet did not hold any practical value. He was disappointed that the opening chant was not explained, even during his teacher training.

The three Ashtanga teachers place themselves differently in relation to yoga as a tradition. AT1 described Pattabhi Jois as his *guru*. He said he thought of him more as “a fatherly guru rather than a spiritual teacher”. His sessions with Jois began as 15 minutes a day, which eventually expanded to 3½ hours of asana practice daily. He felt strongly that he is a part of Jois’ lineage and considered his status as one of the few North Americans to have full certification as proof of his membership. Although AT2 labelled herself as “not very traditional”, her attitudes put her very much in line with the Ashtanga tradition. She has continued a relation with the Ashtanga Research Institute in Mysore and even studies Sanskrit under a tutor while she is there. She met Pattabhi Jois in 2002 and very affectionately calls him “Guruji”. She feels connected to the lineage and stressed how important it was to have a personal connection for the passing of knowledge from teacher to student. AT3 claims that he “doesn’t care for tradition but keeps the transformative aspects”. He doesn’t feel any connection to Mysore or Jois and instead he feels AT1 to be

his mentor and teacher. He added that he is somewhat connected to that lineage because of his relationship with AT1 but that this extended connection is not important to him. AT3 is an interesting case in that he offers many non-traditional perspectives, yet his art, which he views as the creative part of his practice, is entirely centred on the Hindu pantheon.

When it came to yoga techniques other than postures, these did not hold much interest for the three teachers. AT2 said that *asana* practice needs to be the priority for yoga to “work in the West” because it needs to be approached “through the body”. All three were involved with meditation element but each practices it differently. AT1 said it was found in the Ashtanga practice itself, which was “meditation in motion”. AT2 said she does thirty minutes per day of seated meditation. AT3’s meditation practice is thirty minutes of breath observation in the late afternoon, three or four times a week.

With respect to further study on the various aspects of yoga we see that each teacher’s curiosity led them to different places. AT1, having spent most of his life practicing yoga, has read numerous books on the subject. When asked which of these were of particular interest, he mentioned the written works of T. Krishnamacharya. His books, as well as any other of Krishnamacharya’s personal writings, are unavailable anywhere in the world (due to the previously mentioned memory management issues and the handling of his legacy by Krishnamacharya’s son and grandson). AT1 said that he has, on at least three occasions, been fortunate enough to read a secret copy of Krishnamacharya’s Yoga Makaranda (1935). AT2 said she likes to constantly re-visit the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Yogasutras*; it was her interest in these Indian spiritual texts that led her to pursue a BA in Religious Studies. Both AT2 and AT3 feel that the series of books

published by the Bihar School of Yoga (BYS) are excellent resources. The series is published in India by the school founded by Swami Satyananda (student of Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh). AT3 also mentioned that he really enjoyed the Aghora trilogy by Robert Svoboda. This series follows various *tantric* sects of *sadhus*, many of whom have unusual practices. AT3 credits the books for opening his eyes to “all the yoga that happens off the mat”.

Iyengar Yoga Teachers

(A) Iyengar Yoga teachers’ backgrounds and experience

All three Iyengar teachers have been practicing for many years. IT1 started practicing yoga twenty years ago and has been teaching for the past fourteen years. The forty-nine year old narrated his story as a path inevitably heading toward yoga. He began with meditation practice in the late 1980’s. This led him to start taking Tai Chi classes, which he continued for a year. His first yoga class and even the first yoga book he read was in the Iyengar tradition. He followed the training course in the back of Iyengar’s Light on Yoga. In the early days of his practice he used to frequently visit the Sivananda Ashram in Val-Morin, Quebec, and also underwent a Sivananda teacher training course. However, he did not begin teaching until after he completed the Iyengar training program. He mentioned that he has tried many other styles (Bikram, Ashtanga, Kripalu) but “didn’t like any of them”. In fact, he displayed considerable disdain and condescension toward other styles of yoga. This is particularly the case for him and

Ashtanga Yoga, which he mentioned on several instances as representing the antithesis of Iyengar Yoga.

Forty-two year old IT2 has been practicing yoga for fourteen years and she began teaching within her first year of practice. She holds an MA degree and works as a psychotherapist. She does not have a physical background and told me that she “doesn’t particularly like the physical challenge”. In 1996, IT2 had just moved to a small community in northern British Columbia and joined the yoga class at the local YMCA to be able to meet people. She says she walked into her first yoga class there without any idea of what yoga was. That first class was in the style of Integral Yoga (of Swami Satchidananda). She attended the class regularly and when the teacher was absent the YMCA asked her to fill in. This is how she started teaching. The YMCA, wanting to develop a yoga program, sponsored her to take *Vinyasa* style training in Idaho with Erich Schiffmann. The YMCA then associated itself with the Victoria Iyengar centre and supported distance training. She said she really hated the Iyengar style at first but thankfully really liked the senior Iyengar teacher in Victoria. She appreciated the focus on bodily alignment and the therapeutic use of Iyengar Yoga. However she explained that she has struggled with certain aspects of the style over time and after her first Iyengar training went to Ashtanga. She still practices a little Anusara style (founded by John Friend in 1997) in addition to her regular Iyengar practice, but she did mention that she understands that a “commitment to one style allows you to go deeper” into the practice.

IT3 has a BFA in painting and has been practicing yoga for thirty years, sixteen of those years practicing the Iyengar style. She practiced at the Sivananda centre in Toronto before moving to Montreal twenty years ago. The sixty-three year old began this practice

while studying at the University of Toronto because the Sivananda Centre was located a few steps from the campus. She credits her teacher at the Toronto Sivananda Centre for inspiring her to continue. She also claimed The Beatles' Indian influences as having had an effect on her as well. When she first arrived in Montreal she visited the Sivananda Centre but found it "small and stuffy with bad lighting". Her friend suggested she try the Montreal Iyengar Centre and she hasn't missed a class in fifteen years. She has been teaching for the past eight years. Despite her obvious commitment to her practice, she claims have been quite inactive before starting yoga. She stays with Iyengar because she says she likes the gradual introduction of postures with "lots of adjustments, corrections, directions and details". She admitted that "Iyengar Yoga is not for everybody" on account of its very strict method and style; she also added that Iyengar Yoga does not have classes for children or teenagers.

The Iyengar teacher training is distinctive when compared with any other system of yoga training, especially when one considers that the Iyengar system is very structured and hierarchical. The training takes three years and can be completed at a distance. IT1 and IT3 went to California to study at the Iyengar centre in San Francisco whereas IT2 took the course in Victoria and finished while in Montreal. IT1 explained to me the classification of teachers. There are six levels of teacher and the sixth and highest level has never been awarded to anyone. Only two people in North America have completed the fifth level. Each level is then sub-divided into two or three stages. At each level a teacher must qualify for practical and written examinations. I was told by IT3 that regardless of whether you have completed the course, you are not guaranteed to be permitted to write the examination. During the course, every aspect of your own practice

is dictated by the course curriculum. During the teaching period you must qualify by working for an assigned number of hours under a teacher of a high level. What and how you teach is also strictly outlined in the course curriculum. To be able to continue training, you must remain associated with a higher level teacher, awaiting that teacher's approval to start the next level. This means that you must continue to take classes regularly with that teacher to keep your standing in the Iyengar ranks. If there is no higher ranked teacher in your area, you must spend one month in Pune, in India, every two years. Moreover, successful completion of the examinations does not sanction you to teach. After the course a teacher is awarded a diploma but must apply to their national Iyengar board to receive certification (which could also be denied). The Iyengar council prefers that all Iyengar teachers teach and practice the Iyengar method exclusively.

(B) Yoga teachers' belief about yoga practice and its benefits

The Iyengar teachers seemed a little more interested in the non-physical benefits of their practice than the teachers of the other two schools whom I interviewed. IT1 called the physical benefits "a bonus". He enjoys most the mental effects of what he described as being "not scatter-brained". IT2 said she had a better awareness of her emotional self and better balance in her life. She told me very definitely that she "does not handle life as well" without her practice. She also mentioned that she is stronger and healthier than when she trained with weights. IT3 claimed that her practice gave her more freedom in her own life. She used to be very shy and self-conscious; yoga aided her to be confident and "feel good inside". In addition, she said her physical health is good and her mind has become more relaxed as a result of practicing yoga. Each teacher felt that maintaining the mental benefits was part of their purpose and motivation to practice yoga.

IT2 placed her goal in a larger social frame: to be the “best person I can be in the world, a better participant in the world”. This ideal is very familiar in the context of religious communities and is expressed here through her yoga practice.

(C) Iyengar Yoga teachers’ relationship with yoga tradition

Like Ashtanga Yoga, Iyengar Yoga was also developed by an Indian. B. K. S. Iyengar was also a student of the famous T. Krishnamacharya. All three Iyengar teachers I interviewed have a connection to India and to the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune. IT1 has been there four times and IT3 twice. IT2 has planned her first trip this year. Of the three teachers, only IT3 referred to Patanjali with respect to yoga’s origins. Both IT1 and IT3 felt that tradition was important but IT3 admitted that she “struggles with its place in the modern world”. She also said that she was “worried about where yoga is going in North America”. IT1’s quick definition of yoga is “meditation in motion”. He said that it only seems like exercise but its real purpose is focusing the mind. He continued by describing yoga in religious language: “being kind to your neighbour, self-study, seeing God all around and reading the scriptures”. IT2 found yoga to be a process toward “union or connection to God or the universe”; in other words, physical exercises to aid in finding the true self. IT3 called it a union of body and mind that also maintains your health. She added that its “not just a physical exercise, it can lead to a spiritual path”.

With respect to Sanskrit use in classes, IT1 mentioned that Iyengar Yoga also uses an invocation to Patanjali at the start of every class though he was quick to add that it was not the same as that chanted in Ashtanga classes. Iyengar classes require teachers to use

the Sanskrit names for postures. All three teachers felt that this was helpful in adding to their knowledge.

Regarding lineage, the teachers' focus is directed toward Mr. Iyengar himself. It is important to note that amongst the three styles I have examined in this thesis, only Iyengar takes its name from its founder; the studio is decorated exclusively with his photographs. IT1 called Iyengar “*Guruji*” but said he did not have any personal connection to him. Mr. Iyengar has retired from teaching; his children, Geeta and Prashant, and his niece, Sunita, continue his work in Pune and internationally. IT1 was taught by Geeta and Prashant while in Pune and IT3 was taught by Geeta and Sunita on her visits. Both told me exactly the same anecdote about Iyengar during their stay there. During the practice period, Iyengar himself (presently ninety-three years old) would set up his mat and props in a little corner and do his practice like anyone else. IT3 said she did not have much of a connection to Iyengar but she does have his photo on her refrigerator. She said that her teacher was the senior teacher at the Montreal Iyengar Centre, under whom she has studied for sixteen years. IT3 called herself “culturally inappropriate for yoga” and said that “Iyengar Yoga connects [her] to India, to a lineage and to a living person”. She met Iyengar and his daughter Geeta in Boston and was very impressed by him. She found him to be “brilliant in many ways, very human but a rather forceful fellow”; adding that Iyengar is considerably less harsh than Krishnamacharya.

When it comes to meditation and *pranayama*, the three teachers have a variety of methods. Due to the fact that all three gave different answers with respect to meditation, it seems that this aspect of practice is a matter of personal choice whereas the *asana* practice is determined by the Iyengar council. IT3, who does not claim to have any

meditation practice, said that “it is not talked of much in Iyengar Yoga”. IT1 however, does one hour of seated meditation daily. We should recall here that IT1 began a regular meditation practice before yoga. His practice consists of four to six *malas* of *japa* meditation (with repetition of *mantras*) followed by silent meditation. IT2 has a ten minute meditation practice but admits that it often suffers from inconsistency. Her techniques vary though she mentioned that she predominantly uses breath observation and a personal adaptation of Buddhist “loving-kindness”. IT1’s personal yoga practice has four week cycles and the focus of the final week is *pranayama*, otherwise he does not practice it much. IT2 tries to practice *pranayama* three to four times a week but finds it very difficult. IT3 practices thirty minutes every day as determined by the training course in which she is presently enrolled.

All three teachers practice *asanas* quite regularly but each has a different routine. IT1 follows the program set by the Canadian Iyengar council for his level of student. This works on four week cycles and each week has a particular focus: week one is standing poses, week two is forward bends and twists, week three is back bends and the final week is *pranayama*. He practices six days per week. IT3 is currently following the “Junior 1” training, which demands a high level of commitment (minimum five days weekly practice). While following any of the Iyengar teacher training programs, what you teach is regulated and also what you practice. The system is setup so that teachers do not have any choice or freedom if they wish to remain under the Iyengar umbrella. As we have seen, IT2 has in the past and continues to participate in different yoga styles and has trouble swallowing Iyengar’s exclusivity. As such, she practices what and how she wants, although still consistently five days a week. In fact, each Iyengar teacher practises a

minimum of five days weekly; demonstrating their level of commitment and the high priority that yoga has in their lives.

Naturally all three have read Iyengar's books, Light on Yoga in particular. IT1 said that the works of Indian spiritual teacher J. Krishnamurti have influenced his spirituality and his teaching. He also frequently returns to the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Yogasutras*. When asked what IT2 had read, she responded with a smile "everything". She explained that her curiosity led her to always be searching for information about yoga in books, magazines and online. She mentioned three authors in particular; Erich Schiffmann, Judith Lasater and Donna Farhi, all of whom are famous American yoga teachers. She also said she has read the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Yogasutras* and *Hathayoga Pradipika*. IT3 has read all of Iyengar's books as well as Swami Vishnudevananda's Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga (1960) and Kausthub Desikachar's book about his grandfather (Krishnamacharya) entitled The Yoga of the Yogi: the legacy of T. Krishnamacharya (2005). She felt that no book or author had any particular influence on her practice or teaching.

After examining the teachers' responses we begin to see spiritual language and ideas. Each teacher's greatest influence is their particular teacher training program. The orientation of the style and its training program strongly mold teachers' attitudes about yoga and tradition.

Chapter 3 Yoga Students

Chapter three follows exactly the same structure as the previous chapter. Here, the students' responses are discussed first considering their personal experience (A), then their notions of benefits of yoga practice (B) and lastly, with relation to their relationship with tradition (C).

Moksha Yoga Students

(A) Moksha Yoga students' backgrounds and experience

All three of the Moksha students I interviewed have been practicing yoga for longer than fifteen years and have a background in some form of performing arts. MS1 has a BFA in modern dance. She is forty two years old and works as a massage and Reiki therapist. She has been practicing yoga for fifteen years and is a Sivananda style trained yoga teacher. MS1 has an athletic mentality as she also competes in triathlons and marathons. She said that Madonna first helped to attract her to yoga. She had started with a home practice VHS cassette. MS1 has been attending regularly at Moksha yoga for the past six months. In the past she has tried all types of yoga. She liked Ashtanga but found it quite difficult. She still attends classes at the Montreal Sivananda Centre. When it comes to hot yoga, she liked Bikram's sequence but prefers Moksha's atmosphere. She said the studio has a "chi-chi look, like walking into a spa". On the positive side, she said that Moksha had plenty of natural light through big windows in the practice hall. She also said the environmental initiative at Moksha was nice and that the studio smelled great (a common remark, on account of Moksha's cleaning products). The main negative point about Moksha, according to her, is the full length mirror on the front wall in the practice hall.

She continues to attend classes at Moksha because she finds that with the heat, the after effect of the class is a little more lasting. Additionally, the convenience of available classes, the location and the five dollar “community class” ensure her return. Between the Sivananda Centre and the Moksha studio, MS1 attends two or three classes every week.

MS2 has a BFA in painting and also works as a painter. She is forty-six years old and has been practicing yoga consistently for six years. Her first introduction to yoga was in a class in CEGEP at age nineteen; she has practiced off and on since then. She has been attending classes at Moksha for the past four years. She also tried Bikram but complained of the carpets in the practice hall and found it too rigid and always the same. Moksha offered more freedom in their classes. She told me that Moksha was not spiritually focused but she also felt that this was one of the reasons it was so popular; students were not scared away by spirituality. She has tried Sivananda, Ashtanga and Anusara yoga styles but only attends classes at Moksha at present. She likes the studio and particularly the cork floor (as opposed to Bikram’s carpets). If it were up to her she would change two things about the studio: install more showers and remove the mirrors in the practice hall. She appreciates Moksha’s community involvement through sustainability and the New Leaf charity. Again, Moksha’s convenience in terms of availability of classes, its location and the five dollar “community class” has MS2 taking two or three classes per week. In addition to her class attendance, MS2 practices yoga every morning for twenty minutes or so.

MS3 has a BA in Theatre and is thirty seven years old. She is a stay at home mother but also works part-time as a yoga teacher. She claims to have always been active with swimming and jogging since an early age. She has been practicing yoga regularly

for the past ten years and teaching for the past seven. She was introduced to yoga by one of the teachers in her theatre program twenty years ago. She said it started as simple stretching and warm-ups, which slowly brought her to yoga. She was first attracted by the intensity of yoga; she said it could be equally intense “both in movement or to sit quiet on the mat”. Before coming to Moksha, MS3 had tried pre-natal, Kripalu and Iyengar classes. She found Iyengar teachers very knowledgeable but said it was no fun, “too much like the army”, without any smiles or laughs. She discovered Moksha Yoga because she regularly walked in front of the studio, however she resisted for some time fearing the heat and intensity. She credits the heat for helping her finally overcome a hip restriction after eight years. She likes the intensity of the sequence and finds it to be a rather cardiovascular style of yoga. The strength of the workout, according to MS3, accounts for there being more men in the classes than any other style she has seen. She surprised herself at how much she enjoyed sweating! She also loves the smell of the studio and even the soap in the shower. She appreciates the environmental philosophy but she quickly pointed out the sustainability contradiction of overheating a room. She finds the overall atmosphere a little rushed and she misses the little lounge area found in most studios. She was also impressed with the concept of “karma classes”, but asked “where does that money go?” She would also remove the mirrors from the practice hall. She practices four or five times per week and two or three of those are classes at Moksha.

(B) Moksha Yoga students’ belief about yoga practice and its benefits

Moksha Yoga students continue to practice yoga because of its perceived benefits on their lives. MS1 found that her practice helps her with flexibility, concentration, and inner and outer strength. She also told me that it has helped her develop more patience

and peace in her life. She said that yoga was a “tool for inner strength and a support for my achievement”. Her more general goal is to maintain peace and happiness in her daily life. She said that she enjoys all sorts of classes and approaches but admits that she does not particularly enjoy Iyengar style “military precision”. For her a good class is one that responds to the needs of the whole class as well as the individual students. MS1 prefers a competent and experienced teacher who gives good explanations and adjustments. She added that she does not like the “rub-down” massage style adjustments employed at Moksha.

MS2 found that yoga helped her in a variety of ways in her life; it helps her focus, aided her insomnia trouble, and greatly reduced her stress level. Most importantly for her, it helped her recently to rebound quickly from a complicated surgery. Her aim for every time she returns to her mat is to be in the present moment and to “quiet the chatter of the mind”. This being her goal, it is no surprise to hear that she does not like a teacher who talks too much; she prefers quiet to search for inner focus. Also, MS2 is “not happy if it becomes just a Pilates class, lacking the spiritual dimension”.

MS3 explained that yoga helped her recover from physical injuries in her hips and knees. The greater benefit lay in the general effect of her practice: “it gives me happiness in my body, in my heart and my head” and “if I lose it, I find it again and again on my mat”. During a class she seeks to stay focused and for her a good class is one when she can “let go of everything” and leave feeling calm and refreshed. She likes to count breaths while she practices and said she would prefer to hold postures a little longer than in the Moksha style because she said deeper benefits could be derived by holding

postures for one minute. She also prefers quiet for her practice and prefers that music is not played during a class.

(C) Moksha Yoga students' relationship with yoga tradition

MS1 reported to me that yoga was developed in India around five thousand years ago and was passed down from teacher to disciple. She said yoga gave “tools to know our true nature”. She also said that it was an encompassing way of life mentioning vegetarianism as an example. She explained that yoga was different from regular exercise because of its concentration on breathing. MS1 felt that using Sanskrit in class helps make a connection but she could not specify with what. She wants a teacher who takes the class seriously and who is knowledgeable about the body. Ideally the teacher should be connected to a tradition. This student has a strong meditation practice and almost as regular *pranayama* practice. She told me that yoga has become “all my life now” and that she uses the *yamas* and *niyamas* (restraints and observances, the first two steps of Patanjali's Yoga) as guidelines for living. She has read a number of books by Swami Sivananda and Osho (Rajneesh). She also read Swami Vishnudevananda's Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga, the *Yogasutras*, and *Bhagavad Gita*.

MS2 said that yoga came from a combination of the wisdom of sages, martial arts and acupuncture practiced in India. She told me she was not sure why but “the ‘Indian-ness’ is important” and she likes it. She described yoga as “moving meditation” of physical and spiritual exercises and bringing into balance your mind, body and spirit. She thinks that the Sanskrit usage is important because it is how we remember the tradition. She added that she does not like it when a teacher refers to an *asana* as a pose rather than

a posture. Her only concern about the teachers at Moksha Yoga is that they themselves need more knowledge. She related a story of a Moksha teacher who, after putting the class into final relaxation, announced “I don’t know why we do this”. MS2 combines her breathing work and meditation into a short period of quiet deep breathing before bed. She hasn’t read any books about yoga since her CEGEP class and she told me with a smile what she remembers from that book: a photograph of “a skinny, bearded Indian sticking a cloth up his nose”.

MS3 told me that yoga began in India some four thousand years ago when a group of sages got together to “solve humanity’s problems, then taught [it] to [the] people”. She defined yoga as “alignment of head, heart and body”. She explained to me that she’s not part of any lineage and that she has a teacher in Montreal whom she finds very inspiring but that teacher is not from a lineage either. She added: “yoga is not a religion”. She is really interested in the Sanskrit in classes but it is not used regularly at Moksha and she complimented the Iyengar style for its consistent use of Sanskrit. She finds that what is most important in a teacher is his or her intention, which should be to help people. She does not like or practice *pranayama* much but tries to do fifteen minutes daily of “quiet sitting with breath awareness”. MS3 often searches the internet for various articles on yoga but other does not read any books on yoga. She explained that she does not like the yoga manuals and that she resists “the teachings”, finding that they are not “great truths”.

Ashtanga Yoga Students

(A) Ashtanga Yoga students' backgrounds and experience

AS1 is twenty-six years old and has a MSc. She was first introduced to yoga through a CEGEP course. She explained that one of the class assignments was to create your own posture sequence. She used her own sequence at home for a little while after. She hurt her back and decided that she was better off getting some proper instruction. She stopped her practice during her university studies and started going to Sattva Yoga Shala five months ago. AS1 claims she was attracted to yoga because “it’s beautiful, peaceful; sure better than lifting weights!” She admits she did not know anything about Ashtanga Yoga before going to the studio. She picked Sattva for two reasons: first, it was the closest studio to her apartment and second, it offered the best dollar value. She feels Sattva to be the “perfect studio, adorable”. She finds that the Hindu statues and the chant “fit with yoga” but wishes the instructors would explain it. She added that without knowing its meaning, the chant was useless. As to the practice, she finds Ashtanga very challenging but like the movement and finds it very graceful. She does not practice at home and tries her best to attend four classes a week at Sattva. She hasn’t tried any other styles of yoga but said she was curious about Moksha Yoga after reading an article about it in the Montreal weekly newspaper ‘The Mirror’.

AS2 is a sixty year old ballet dancer (BFA) and said she had also worked in numerous other professions. She has been practicing seriously for the past year and a half although she has attended classes occasionally since her thirties. She said she wanted to like yoga but couldn’t because she found it too static. She had practiced Tai Chi but had given it up for the same reason. She was looking to try yoga again and Sattva was a short

walk from her residence. She likes Ashtanga because of the much more dynamic and physical approach; she likened it to a dance. She appreciates that the classes teach the exact same series every time; it allows her to move forward and see her progress. She had tried the “Mysore” style class but prefers a led class as she feels she was “not quite ready yet”. She had tried Hatha-yoga and found it boring due to its static practice. Yoga in gyms was very aerobic but she said something was missing. That is why she said she likes the Indian decor of the studio because the “cultural part is not found in gyms”. She does not practice at home and her class attendance has varied. At first, she went three times a week then increased to four. She quickly found that “going on two consecutive days was hard on the body”. Presently, she attends a minimum of three and maximum of five classes every week.

AS3 is a twenty-nine year old graphic artist. He was always quite active in sports as a young man and more recently with jogging and a little weight training. He started practicing yoga three years ago. He was attracted to yoga by the physical challenge as well as for attaining increased flexibility and relaxation. He knew it was about stretching but he was interested in the self-improvement side of yoga, “kind of like karate but not aggressive”. His first yoga experience was a men’s yoga class but after a year of attending classes, he did not find it challenging anymore. He started going to Sattva because it was two blocks from his apartment. When he started he found it extremely challenging and he sweat a great deal. He said he grew to like the pace and flow of the sequence and appreciated that one always knew what was coming up in Ashtanga. He also found it helped him gauge his progress. AS3 said he knew about the “Mysore” class but had no interest in attending. He said he was “not a spiritual guy” and that he was not

comfortable with the decor at Sattva. At first he wasn't sure if it was the place for him but he enjoyed the pace of the class. He found that the teachers at Sattva were great but felt that the other students were "a little snooty; so serious". He does not usually practice at home but if he is between studio memberships/passes, he occasionally practices with a DVD. On a good week he attends three classes.

(B) Ashtanga Yoga students' belief about yoga practice and its benefits

Seeing as AS1 was not an active person, she said that practicing Ashtanga Yoga helps her feel "less guilt about being inactive". As do many students, she claimed the greatest benefit was the feeling after practicing; she usually feels "fantastic, rested, and accomplished" after a class and she sleeps wonderfully that night. Her short term goal is to be "able to do everything easily in class", and the long term goal, she said with a giggle, is to be able practice like AT1. She aims to increase her concentration in class and hopes to "grow in the practice". She enjoys all the classes and teachers at Sattva Yoga Shala but she said the only classes she does not like is when she feels "on the spot" or "under a harsh eye" by the teacher.

On the whole, AS2 reflected that she is benefiting more the longer and the more yoga she practices. Physically, she had increased strength and flexibility as well as much more awareness of her body. She also said all the aches and pains of age are gone due to her practice. What she called the mental and spiritual benefits were that she felt more in control of herself, more accepting of herself and generally more calm. She got laid-off from her job recently and credits yoga for helping manage that personal crisis with ease. She hopes to work herself up to the third series. She would also like to be able one day to

be physically capable of doing a class every day. The reminder of the feeling after class helps her go back as much as she can. She enjoys a good teacher who can motivate the students. Personally she regards a good class when her focus is maintained enough that she does not know what's going on next to her.

AS3 also experienced mental and physical benefits from his practice. He finds that the breathing has helped him relax and also helps him to fall asleep quicker. He added that the breathing also helps him get “through challenging moments in the day”. Physically he found Ashtanga Yoga helped him improve his physique, shed some pounds and increase his strength. What he tries to maintain during his practice is being cut-off from anything else, the sense of personal time. He described it as being “untouchable, in a bubble for an hour and a half, just you and the mat”. When asked about what he found to be a good class he responded by describing the Ashtanga sequence. He felt that if sun salutations, standing postures, balancing postures and seated postures were covered, he's pretty satisfied.

(C) Ashtanga Yoga students' relationship with yoga tradition

AS1 could not tell me much about yoga's origins but it was enough for her to know that a tradition existed. In fact, the “tradition makes it important, unlike the gym, it's rooted in something”. She felt that yoga is a means of “getting in touch with yourself”, a “spiritual exercise that is challenging and beautiful”. She finds the use of Sanskrit in class makes for a fuller experience, she just wishes she knew what it all meant. She said she mostly attends classes taught by AT3 but that it is mostly coincidence. AS1 tried a little meditation during her CEGEP yoga class but not since and

it is the same for *pranayama*. She gave the same response about books on the subject of yoga, saying she hasn't picked one up since CEGEP.

When I asked AS2 about the origins of yoga she began by talking about Ashtanga's founder Pattabhi Jois. She felt that the tradition made it authentic and time tested. She gave a very succinct definition of yoga: "a pathway to a lifestyle that incorporates physical fitness, mental alertness and spiritual awareness". She added that yoga was "good for all" but that it was "a good way to be but not the only way to be". She appreciates the Sanskrit use in class and finds she really misses the opening chant if it is occasionally skipped. She doesn't think that how the teacher was trained is so important, it is rather a question whether you like the teacher or not. At the same time, she said she is happy that she finds herself in line as a student of AT3, who was taught by AT1, who was taught by Pattabhi Jois. She does not currently have a meditation practice but was a member of a meditation group in the past. She feels it's important although she doesn't practice herself. She doesn't practice any *pranayama* as she finds it quite difficult and likened it to her experience with *Tai Chi Quan* breathing techniques. She hasn't read any books about yoga but she feels that she is about ready to start, "little by little", as she said.

AS3 admits that he isn't that curious about the history of yoga. He mentioned that Pattabhi Jois' photo is in the practice hall but he did not know how he knew that, as no one had ever told him. He explained yoga as an exercise system with the grace of ballet and unlike other physical exercise, yoga encourages mental focus. He told me he doesn't mind the chant but he doesn't know what it means as it is not explained in a class. As to the names of the postures, he likes the Sanskrit because it is "rooted in Indian culture" but

requires the name in English as well so he can further his knowledge. He does not feel that a teacher's training is as very important so long as you like how the teacher speaks in class. He does not have any meditation or *pranayama* practice as part of his practice. As he said he was not too curious about yoga, it is not surprising that he has not read any book on the subject.

Iyengar Yoga Students

(A) Iyengar Yoga students' backgrounds and experience

IS1 is thirty years old, did her graduate studies in journalism and works as an English second language teacher. She has been practicing yoga for twelve years. While living in Halifax she used to walk by a yoga studio daily and one day went inside. This was an Iyengar studio and her first class was Iyengar style. She remembers being overwhelmed by the amount of information given during the class. She was surprised at how misaligned she was, even during relaxation. Since that time she has been practicing Iyengar but tried an Ashtanga class once out of curiosity. Regarding Iyengar Yoga, she loves the didactic nature of the class; "the teacher is always talking and I'm always learning". It is because the teachers are constantly giving instructions and physically adjusting students that IS1 said she has learned so much. She knows that many Iyengar teachers are very strict but said there should balance. She suggested that all students find the right Iyengar teacher for them. She related to me her experience with an Iyengar teacher in Toronto who was "super strict and harsh". The teacher would embarrass students in class; she would draw attention to them and then simply say to the class

“that’s not the pose!” IS1 reflected that Iyengar teachers can be “a little boxed in” because of their thorough training and she finds it shame that some teachers “stay in the box”. She likes the safety of the Iyengar classes; she never feels that she will injure herself in class. She compared it to her Ashtanga experience wherein she was worried about the risk of injury. Her attraction is to the style and not the studio. In fact, of the two or three classes she takes per week, she mostly attends Iyengar classes elsewhere. She also practices a little every day at home, anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour and a half. It varies from day today but might consist of only a few sun salutations or a few bends.

IS2 is forty-two years old and described herself as “a little all over the place”. She has degrees in Economics and Philosophy. She has had many jobs but the most recent was as a Pilates teacher. She always enjoyed sports but was never very competitive. She took her first yoga class 17 years ago with a friend and “giggled the whole way through it”. She came to yoga through the body; Pilates was interesting for body awareness but she found it incomplete. She also said that yoga was more accessible than Pilates. Her mother practiced yoga and had always encouraged her to practice for the mental benefits. IS2’s brother practiced a lot of Ashtanga earlier and even lived in Mysore with his wife. IS2 has been practicing more regularly for the past three years after a visit to the Sivananda ashram in Val-Morin with her family. She started going to the Iyengar centre in Paris but had mixed feelings at first. She explained that the teacher was rather militant and aggressive but she loved the detail and it was clear the teachers knew what they were talking about. Also, she felt better after the class than she had with any other yoga style, so she “just had to go back”. Many of the features she did not like at the beginning came

to be the enjoyable aspects: the precision, detail and rigour. She says she appreciates the studio because it is less commercial: no bright colours, no chit-chat, no candles or incense. She respects that the studio is “raw and dry” and will not change for others. She said she understands why most “people don’t want to come back” after a visit to the Iyengar centre. IS2 also mentioned that only older people can be found in the classes at the Iyengar centre. She said she had practiced Bikram Yoga for nearly a year but found it pushy. She wasn’t convinced the Bikram teachers knew what they were talking about, especially after she had asked a question about a shoulder injury and was told to “just push through it”. She did not feel that this was correct and quickly lost interest in that style. For now, she does not have a home practice and attends two classes a week at the studio. She is curious about the training and has started a pre-training course. She would like to pursue it but doubts she can give the commitment the Iyengar training demands.

IS3 is a forty seven year old graphic designer. He has been practicing yoga for five years and all of that at the Iyengar centre. He is overweight and a friend had suggested trying yoga. Many yoga styles seemed inaccessible to him on account of their physical demands in the practice. The same friend suggested Iyengar and he has been enjoying it ever since. He was not an active person but Iyengar Yoga offered him a physical activity that he enjoys. IS3 found the style rather strict but does not mind it as he says the details are really good. What he likes most about the style is the use of props to support the body while performing postures. He thanks this feature for making yoga accessible and enjoyable for him. He tries to attend three classes a week at the Iyengar centre.

(B) Iyengar Yoga students' belief about yoga practice and its benefits

IS1 found yoga to physically benefit her in her everyday activities; walking, sitting or lying. She also found that it has helped to increase her mental awareness. She also mentioned bringing the patience she finds on her mat into her daily life. She added other physical benefits that she thought were the real attractive ones in North America: strength, flexibility and stress relief. Through her practice she seeks a connection to the earth and to herself as well as to build more non-physical strength and flexibility in her life. IS1's idea of a remarkable class is if "a teacher awakens one thing or something really sinks in".

IS2 knows that yoga offers many benefits but she thinks she does not practice enough to get them. She feels confident that the benefits are coming. She declared in the future tense: "Yoga will change my life". Still, she finds she gets temporary calmness and the discipline is good for her on account of her personality. She assured me that yoga is beneficial for people and one of these benefits is "helping clear the clutter in their lives". On the other hand, she felt there was a problem with yoga practitioners who become obsessive about their practice. She used two of her own acquaintances as examples of fanatical yogis who became self-absorbed, alienated and isolated as result of their strong commitment to their yoga practice. Her goal during her practice is to focus on the physical details (as Iyengar Yoga offers many), which replaces her mental clutter. IS2 feels that Iyengar teachers have what it takes to give good classes, in as much as they are "clear, knowledgeable and precise".

IS3 finds that because of his own physical condition, yoga has helped him become a little more active and feel better and more confident about himself. He uses yoga as a physical tool that has brought him better health and flexibility. His goal through practicing yoga is to become healthy and he feels that “with health comes happiness”. He finds the best classes are when he is really enjoying what he’s doing and he does not notice the time passing. This is important to him as a person who does not particularly relish physical exercise.

(C) Iyengar Yoga students’ relationship with yoga tradition

IS1 summarized the history of yoga as a “physical practice that developed in conjunction with a spiritual – meditation practice in India thousands of years ago”. Interestingly, she added that sometimes too much knowledge can be a bad thing. She used the example of knowing about Christianity’s violent past to say that she does not want to become disenchanted with yoga. IS1 defined yoga beginning “as a physical practice of balancing your body, later to be balancing your mind and emotions”. She feels that the Sanskrit in class gives the practice history, grounding and a connection to the original practice. She also finds it adds another level of learning to be absorbed during class time. She thinks it is important how a teacher is trained because “your body is in their hands”. She is comforted by knowing that Iyengar yoga has a rigorous teacher training process. She feels that because Iyengar teachers talk so much during their classes they know more. She feels some limited connection to Mr. Iyengar because she practices his style, which is a reflection of him. She enjoys reading about him but not his books as she finds them “too heavy”. She told me that Iyengar developed his style through his own childhood illness and is now in his early 90’s. IS1 practices exclusively Iyengar style

without any meditation or *pranayama*. She's read a little about yoga but could not remember any titles and said that she has recently found interest in yoga psychology. She places her practice at a fairly high priority in her life; she said she "thinks about it a lot" because she practices for various lengths of time seven days a week. She tries to "bring things off the mat into everyday life by taking extra breaths".

IS2 told me that yoga was ancient and came from India but was unclear about its religious significance. She said that "many of the doctrines/philosophies are Hindu maybe because the main practitioners were Hindus". She also called the *Bhagavad Gita* the "Bible of yoga" then asked me if that was a Hindu text. She defined yoga as "initially fitness [but] more than just a substitute for fitness class, [then] working on yourself". With regard to the use of Sanskrit, she said she didn't care about this at first but she has come to respect it. She added that she's catching on very slowly. IS2 feels safe that she will not be injured and trust Iyengar teachers because of their training. She doesn't have much trust in other yoga teachers and she added that a teacher's individual personality does not come out much in an Iyengar class as compared to other yoga styles. She narrated to me the same two particulars about Mr. Iyengar (his present age and how he made his style) as did IS1 but added the detail that he was introduced to yoga by his brother-in-law (unnamed). IS2 does not have a meditation practice at present but is planning it for the future. This is the same for *pranayama* but this she felt was somehow more difficult and important. She also mentioned the *pranayama* is not much talked of in Iyengar Yoga and comes much later in the practice. She has not done any personal research on the subject of yoga.

IS3 knew that yoga came from ancient India and felt that it was a “physical focused exercise/stretching”. He does not think that Sanskrit in class is that important “but it’s cool to hear”. He is comfortable in an Iyengar class because of the training of the teachers; he is sure they know what to do with him and his body. IS3 does not have any interest in meditation. He said yoga has helped his breathing and he practices deep breathing but that’s all the *pranayama* he needs. He has not read any books on yoga. He feels that yoga has helped him feel better in numerous ways and he “would like more of the same in the future”.

As with the teachers, we see spiritual language and ideas expressed by the students. The greatest difference between the teachers and students springs from what the former have been taught during their training program. We also see how students’ personal temperament has some influence on their yoga practice and choice of style, as seen most clearly with the Iyengar students.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

Lineage & Transmission of yoga

The traditional yogic education as seen practiced in India up until the twentieth century was passed from *guru* (master) to *shishya* (disciple) forming a long line of transmission. Previously, being a link on that long chain is what gave credibility and authenticity to a teacher. One's *parampara* may also be a source of pride and a mark of distinction; the more famous the *guru*, the higher the honour. Before I explore the topic of lineage, I would like to discuss briefly a few distinct details about the Iyengar style that are truly the marks of B. K. S. Iyengar. Overall, the practice of his style is, as IS1 said, a reflection of himself and no consideration is given to his forebears. The style is named for him and Iyengar maintains the highest certification without awarding it to anyone else. The studios are all decorated with photos of him performing difficult *asanas*. The story of him overcoming his own physical frailty, known by all the participants, is as an attraction and inspiration to students. It appeals to those students who have a fear of being injured. The teachers also conveyed professional superiority over other styles of yoga teachers. This attitude is reflected in the students who don't trust or think much of other yoga teachers. These attitudes are transmitted through the teacher training and then passed to students in the class. An example can be found in students' attitudes that Ashtanga Yoga is somehow the opposite of Iyengar Yoga, despite the fact that both come from the same lineage, even if they have not tried Ashtanga Yoga.

Indian notions of *parampara* or lineage are still circulating among some modern Western practitioners but they are not central to any of the participants I interviewed. The Iyengar and Ashtanga teachers generally have a slightly larger connection than their

students due to their teacher training, but neither of the training programs involves an initiation into lineage. Participants know, to some degree, of the lineage of their style of yoga, but like their views of the use of Sanskrit, they find it “nice” and “interesting” but not essential. Within the Ashtanga and Iyengar studios, the titular *guru* of the style is not explicitly spoken of during the class time. However, we can see that the *guru* is evoked in other ways. The Ashtanga and Iyengar students’ ideas about lineage reflect the perspective of their respective *gurus*. We must recall here that *parampara* represents the long chain of unbroken transmission of knowledge, thus honouring all the previous *gurus* of one’s lineage and not only one’s own *guru*. Pattabhi Jois relied on the simple Indian teaching technique of justifying everything he taught by saying that it is what his master had taught him. Reflecting Jois’ attitude toward his own master, the Ashtanga teachers all spoke of Jois’ *guru*, T. Krishnamacharya. On the other hand, all the Iyengar participants spoke only about Mr. Iyengar himself and how his yoga was self-made, and this orientation is mirrored by the pictorial tribute found on the walls of the Iyengar studio. Again, this reflects Mr. Iyengar’s own attitude toward his *guru*: Krishnamacharya “only taught me a few *asanas*, and then my evolution came from my own practice” (Summerbell 2004, p. 9). What of Moksha Yoga? The fairly recent and North American born style has no direct links to India or to a *guru* of any kind. It is clear that this doesn’t matter in the least to the teachers and the countless students who pass through their doors every week. Moksha Yoga does not feel any need to create or to attach itself to another lineage. On the contrary, not having a lineage allows for greater freedom in the practice. Ashtanga and Iyengar classes try to remain faithful to the style’s method whereas Moksha Yoga is free from any limitations.

Many of the differences between teachers and students are a result of the training undergone by the teachers. Likewise the differences among teachers are also determined by the differences in their respective trainings. If we look at the content of the three styles I have studied and at their training programs, we can see that most subjects are shared among all three. What differentiates them is which topics are most emphasized. These yoga teacher trainings programs have replaced the old model of *guru* (master) – *shishya* (disciple) for passing on knowledge of yoga. The teachers who are giving the training and those receiving it have not and are most likely not going to have a yoga *guru*. The *parampara* system has been superseded by large teacher training programs, DVD classes, online videos and best-selling books. The old model is no longer applicable in today's world of yoga.

“Indian-ness” in Western yoga

One of things that separates teachers and students is their curiosity about and research into the subject of yoga. Apart from MS1 and IS2, the other students (of all three styles examined) had not read any books about yoga, traditional or contemporary, nor did they display any interest in doing so in the future. The texts that came up most often and that were usually connected with a teachers' training were the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yogasutras* of Patanjali. Both are specifically Hindu Sanskrit texts. Among the students only MS1 had read both texts but we must remember that she is also a Sivananda trained teacher; AS2 also said she recently “picked up the *Yogasutras*”. Many of the teachers mentioned these texts in connection with their training. However, they could not reveal to me anything about the texts. Many of the teachers listed contemporary yoga and spirituality titles when asked about their own reading interests in connection with their

yoga practice. Even here, teachers often struggled to remember titles or authors of books that they claimed had a significant influence on the way they practice or teach. With regard to the books they mentioned, they did not explain to me what was useful or inspirational about the book. This generally indicates that students and teachers are not attracted to yoga as a form of intellectual pursuit, even to complement their physical practice, specifically *asanas*. The contemporary focus on the physical practice is reinforced by the fact that only a small percentage of teachers and students practice *pranayama*, meditation or both.

The uses and attitudes toward Sanskrit among teachers are largely due to the particular style's training. In both Iyengar and Ashtanga styles, the use of Sanskrit is prescribed for the names of postures and the class' opening chant. Moksha, which does not have any direct connection to India or an Indian teacher, does not place much emphasis on Sanskrit. The Moksha teachers felt that Sanskrit was nice but unnecessary. However, even with the other two styles, the use of Sanskrit by teachers does not necessarily reflect their personal views. We give the example of AT3 who found that learning Sanskrit in his teacher training "was a waste of time". The teachers generally felt it was important but were not sure why. Usually it was explained as informative and respectful to yoga's origin. All the students enjoyed hearing Sanskrit in class but like the teachers, their interest ends there. The opening chant is never explained in class and only one among the Iyengar and Ashtanga students did an internet search to find an English translation.

The knowledge that teachers and students have about yoga is quite general. Among students, the two stock bits of information were that yoga was ancient (five

thousand years old according to many) and that it started in India. I suspect that this is common knowledge even among people who do not practice yoga. The teachers added to these items of information an acknowledgement that yoga was not always about postures. The Ashtanga teachers spoke about Pattabhi Jois and a little about T. Krishnamacharya. Likewise, the Iyengar teachers talked about Mr. Iyengar's significance to the development of yoga. When speaking of yoga's history, only one teacher mentioned Patanjali. Like the teachers, but to a lesser extent, the students' theoretical knowledge is determined by the style they practice. The Ashtanga students mentioned Pattabhi Jois but they did not know anything about him, whereas the Iyengar students all spoke about Mr. Iyengar and narrated how he had developed his style through his own physical infirmities. This, in addition to the fact that Iyengar is still practicing in his early nineties, are the two standard Iyengar anecdotes. Neither teachers nor students expressed much curiosity in learning more about yoga's history and development. Their interest lies in their practice of *asanas* and its effect on their bodies and lives.

With respect with how and what people practice, there is not much of a distance between students and teachers. All the teachers explained to me that yoga was more than just the physical practice but very few among them practiced anything other than *asanas*. Again we can see that emphasis is placed on the physical practice, and even knowledge of other methods does not stimulate curiosity in or practice of those other methods. The students generally only practiced *asanas* in a class setting; what was surprising was that the majority of teachers' practice also relied on them taking classes given by other teachers.

The presentation of the studios and their Indian orientation is determined by the style of yoga taught. The two styles with an Indian origin, Ashtanga and Iyengar, express that origin through decor and the use of Sanskrit. However, the marked difference between the two is that Ashtanga is more generally Indo-centric whereas Iyengar Yoga is Iyengar-centric. The Ashtanga studio is decorated with various Hindu deities (statues and prints) with a handful of photos of Jois. The Iyengar studio is decorated almost entirely by photos of Mr. Iyengar, with only three small Hindu statues. Moksha Yoga, without any direct link to India, has decorated their studio in a modern but slightly Asian style; no Hindu iconography is present in the studio.

The Indian decorations in the studios certainly represent an element of exoticism. Among the students, the general feeling was that the decor was nice and fit in a yoga studio. It is important to note that at two of the studios the decorations are specifically Hindu and the other is consciously decorated in more generic pan-Asian style. Interestingly, students felt that it belonged and some thought it was even important but were not sure why. The teachers ventured a guess, saying that it created a connection and gave respect to yoga's Indian origin. Just as removing your shoes before entering, I believe the Indian decor helps to create a sense of otherness about the studio. It is also one of the features that differentiates yoga studios from gyms or other health centres. As with their interest in yoga, teachers and students who like the Hindu decorations did not know much about them. This is easily seen by examining the image of the *Nataraj* ("Dancing Siva"), which represents Hindu religion in the popular imagination. In this form, Siva is represented as the "Lord of dance" and has no direct relation to yoga, yet

both Iyengar and Ashtanga studios feature a *Nataraj* statue. The pan-Asian style I refer to at the Moksha studio demonstrates its distance from the yoga of Hinduism.

There are several reasons why I feel that the next twenty years will see an even greater decline of the Indian elements in yoga classes and studios. Looking not only at the three studios at which I conducted my field work, but at the all studios in Montreal as a whole, Moksha yoga is the busiest studio. Moksha's history is contemporary and does not have any significant links to India or to an Indian yoga teacher. Moksha does not place much emphasis on Sanskrit use in class, there is no invocation at the start of class and the studio is not decorated in an overtly Hindu fashion. It is also the most flexible in terms of sequence and the least strict in teaching style. All these elements combine to make Moksha the most accessible and popular style. Another reason why I believe we will see fewer Indian features in the future is that at present the most internationally renowned yoga teachers are not Indian, albeit some of them are students of Indian teachers. However, the next generation of yoga teachers will be Westerners taught by Westerners. The connection to India becomes ever more remote. This is already seen in the fact that teachers' and students' knowledge of yoga's Indian heritage is generally superficial. Many of the teachers do not view the Indian elements as particularly important and the Hindu associations even less so. We can view the 2010 publication of The No Om Zone: A no-chanting, no-granola, no-Sanskrit practical guide to yoga as a marker of this trend. On account of the distance that exists already between "Indian-ness" and yoga, I don't believe that the American Hindu associations will find much success in their recent endeavours to "take back yoga".

Non-Hindu Religiousness in Western yoga

Although Indian religion seems irrelevant to teachers and student, as soon as we began speaking of the benefits of yoga, apart from physical ones, they used language that I interpret as spiritual. In general, male participants hardly used spiritual language whereas female participants used it quite a bit. On the surface, the participants did not recognize yoga as fulfilling any spiritual need but they expressed the benefits in terms of various qualities that the practice has helped them to develop: self-awareness, acceptance, patience, confidence, emotional balance, self-transformation, a feeling of accomplishment, happiness, peace and inner strength. In an earlier time, we may have thought of these qualities as arising from one's faith. The other sort of language used concerns feelings of being "centered", "grounded", or "connected", although never specifying what focus or force they feel in contact with. It seems that their practice does provide some religious experience for participants. However, when asked directly about the aims that participants have with respect to their practice, the vast majority speak only in terms of physical goals. It seems that the participants feel comfortable in an environment that does not have conventional religious trappings but provides them with some vague personal spirituality. By remaining vague, this sort of soft spirituality is not only safe, it's quite attractive too. Every participant spoke about the feeling of peace, rest, balance and joy they experience at the end of a class. This in itself indicates that their practice is fulfilling something that we might term a spiritual need.

Not only does yoga evoke a quasi-religious inner experience, but the ritual aspect of religious services and ceremonies is reflected in the environment and activities at the studios. The removal of footwear at the entrance suggests an acknowledgement of the sanctity of the studio. Each class has a fixed structure. In the cases of Ashtanga and

Iyengar, there is an invocation at the start of class and often chanting at the end as well. The acceptance of the ritual aspect of class is seen in the differences between veterans and novices at a studio. The veterans know the ritual and model the behaviour for newcomers. For example, before class begins at the Moksha studio, students in the classroom assume the wide-legged child pose, although there is no explicit instruction that this should be done. Likewise at the end of class for the final relaxation, students face the opposite direction from the position they had been facing during the class. In both cases, novices are unaware of the ritual behaviour and look around to take their cues from the veterans. Another way in which behaviour in yoga studios resemble religious services is the frequency and consistency of class attendance. Once students settle into a pattern, they tend to repeat the same number and exactly the same classes week after week. The manager of a Montreal yoga studio that I did not study for this thesis, once quipped to me that his Sunday morning class was especially popular.

The social aspect of a religious community is reflected at the yoga studios. Sattva Yoga Shala has its lounge and dedicated regulars who attend the daily morning Mysore class. Although the Iyengar studio seems a little cold, due to its structured organization, a community among teachers is always active. At Moksha Yoga we can see the community amongst teachers (although mostly online) described by MT3 as the Moksha Yoga “sangha”, invoking the notion of a Buddhist religious community. The notion of a spiritual community does not need to be recognized overtly; students feel the connection on a more informal level. When asked about the benefits, AS1 said it best when she simply said, “I get to see people”. The sense of community and connection to people with

things in common who meet on a regular basis fulfills certain basic social needs, similar to that of a religious community.

I have a suspicion that due to Quebec's unique history with respect to organized religion, particularly the Catholic Church, the participants' reception of the studios' Indian features is rather secular. None of the participants expressed any kind of displeasure nor felt threatened by Hindu iconography and language. Quebec society is strongly secular and its people don't look upon religious symbols with much religious significance. The reception of yoga has been different in the United States, as recent articles in the American press have indicated. There, at least some people are concerned that yoga may be in competition with mainstream Western religions. There is a range of responses, including the adaptation of yoga by other religious faiths as indicated by the books Yoga for Christians: a Christ centred approach to physical & spiritual health (2006), Torah Yoga: Experiencing Jewish wisdom through classic postures (2004) and Aleph-Bet Yoga: Embodying the Hebrew letters for physical & spiritual well being (2002). Despite the fact that most responses fall into this category, some offer stronger critiques of yoga's Hindu roots. Dave Hunt's Yoga and the Body of Christ (2006) discourages Christians from practicing yoga under any circumstance, calling it "pagan", "heathen", "Satanic" and "Devil worship". Although some responses may represent the view of a minority of North Americans, there is a perceived religious threat on the part of some, a threat which is not expressed at all in the context of Montreal.

Students and teachers at the Montreal studios used spiritual language to describe the benefits and effects of yoga, just as they did when asked about their definition of yoga. Their benefits from yoga incorporate secularized spiritual or ethical principles.

AT3 declared his aim to be “to help myself to then help others... [and to be] a positive force for the evolution of others”. Also among the students we find them seeking peace of mind and happiness. Although only one participant mentioned the *yamas* and *niyamas*, the ethical code of yoga and the first two of the eight steps found in the *Yogasutras*, many participants used yoga not so much as an ethical guide but rather ethical inspiration. IT2 aims at being “a better participant in the world”. The definitions of yoga practitioners provided always include the physical exercises but also a type of spiritual jargon, for example the goal of “knowing yourself”. MT3 is trying to “cultivate peace” through her practice and MT1 is trying “to be a better person”. The most striking example of this sort of language is found in IT1’s definition of yoga. He has marvellously blended Christian and Eastern spirituality and religious ethics in saying that yoga is “being kind to your neighbour, self-study, seeing God in all around and reading scriptures”.

Based on my field work at three Montreal studios, I have been able to show that yoga exerts an influence on participants’ attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. That influence is by no means overt and is not necessarily linked to Indian spirituality or Hinduism. Even at Moksha Yoga, the least Indian of the three, participants speak in terms of spiritual values. The spiritual aims or ethical precepts expressed by participants are not at any time explicitly enunciated in the three studios’ classes. So one wonders how the participation in the various exercises and postures in these classes has the impact that it does. I can only venture to guess that yoga, even in its purely physical form, is approached by participants with certain preconceived ideas and is viewed as being imbued with the spirit of Indian religion. Of most interest is that this “Indian-ness” – and,

even more, this spirituality – is to a significant degree projected on the studios and the exercises by the participants themselves.

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Appendix 1

How long have you been practicing yoga?

What originally attracted you to yoga?

What benefits have you personally experienced that you attribute to your practice?

What are the possible benefits of yoga that you know?

Do you have a personal practice? Please describe it.

Are breathing exercises (pranayama) important to you?

Do you attend classes at other studios? Why or why not?

What attracted you to this particular studio? What keeps you at this studio?

What do you particularly like about this studio? What makes this studio distinct?

Have you tried other styles of yoga? Do you have a preference and why?

What can you tell me about the origins of yoga? Are the origins of yoga important to you?

Can you describe what yoga means to you?

Is it important that a teacher use Sanskrit terms in class?

Is it important to know about your instructor and how they were trained?

Can you indicate how important your practice is in your life?

Have you read any books on yoga? Which titles?

What is the aim of your yoga practice?

In your opinion, what are the markers of a good yoga class?

How do you prefer to approach your practice of postures?

Are you aware of other types of yoga that do not use postures? Are you interested in these types?

Do you have a meditation practice?

Appendix 2

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN “Indian Religion and Western Yoga Practice”

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Sacha Mathew of the Department of Religion of Concordia University.

A. PURPOSE

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is to collect data on Western yoga practices and how they intersect with Hindu religious practices and ideas.

B. PROCEDURES

The interview will be conducted in a public venue of the participant’s choice. Participants will give a recorded interview and depending on responses may last up to one hour. To preserve anonymity, no names will be made use of in the project.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

There are no personal risks involved in the interview. Participants may benefit in the form of greater clarity with regard to their own yoga practice due to the fact that discussion will vocalize answers to questions that the participant had perhaps never asked him/herself.

D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at anytime without negative consequences.
- I understand that my participation in this study is CONFIDENTIAL (i.e., the researcher will know, but will not disclose my identity)
- I understand that the data from this study may be published.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

If at any time you have questions about the proposed research, please contact the study’s Principal Investigator: Sacha Mathew, Department of Religion. sacha.mathew@gmail.com

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics and Compliance Advisor, Concordia University, Dr. Brigitte Des Rosiers, at (514) 848-2424 x7481 or by email at bdesrosi@alcor.concordia.ca