

WORLD **features**

# Yoga: Indian practice turned global phenomenon

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This handout photograph released by the Indian Army shows Indian soldiers of Trishakti corps celebrating the International Yoga Day at Gurudongmar Lake, in the Indian state of Sikkim

**AFP** | Paris

**T**he Indian discipline of yoga, involving spiritual and physical practices, is followed in myriad forms today by millions of people worldwide, with an entry in UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list. Here is some background:

**Transcending suffering**

The word "yoga" has its origins in the ancient Sanskrit language and means "to attach, join, harness, yoke".

This is the notion underpinning the discipline, according to French historian Bernard Sergent, which is to join the intellect of the one practising with the "universal soul".

Yoga first appeared in ancient texts such as the sacred Hindu epic the Bhagavad Gita, written

between the fifth and second centuries BC.

It is born of an "awareness of the unsatisfactory character of the human condition," says India specialist Tara Michael, author of the book "Yoga" published in France in 1980.

The practice emerged as a way of transcending this suffering.

However in its present-day use, yoga is often no more than a form of exercise, Michael says.

**A modern (re)invention**

Yoga became known in the West towards the end of the 19th century as it was undergoing a major revival in India under the Hindu teacher Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902).

This philosopher-monk stressed yoga's rational and scientific qualities in a bid to make the discipline compatible with the West.

His book "Raja Yoga" lays the



**Over 52,746 teachers registered with Yoga Alliance in 2016 alone, and for every yoga teacher, there are two more enrolled in a teacher training programme**

foundations for a modern and international yoga.

In the first half of the 20th century, Western texts began to detail yoga postures, also known as "asanas".

The emphasis on these pos-

tures and their sequences, such as the famous Sun Salutations, is a recent development, says India specialist Sita Reddy in "Yoga, The Art of Transformation" (2013).

Modern Western references such as the Oxford English Dictionary define yoga as a "spiritual and ascetic discipline" which includes "breath control, simple meditation, and the adoption of specific bodily postures."

Today there are many techniques popular around the world, including the classic Hatha; Ashtanga's series of sequences; Iyengar, which uses props; and Bikram, practised in a heated and humid room.

**Global phenomenon**

Indian metaphysics captured the imagination of counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as epitomised by the

relationship between The Beatles and the Indian guru Maharishi Mahesh.

Yoga as a spiritual practice was popularised at this time with the more athletic and dynamic methods developed in the 1980s and 1990s, says Mark Singleton from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

**World heritage**

Since coming to power in 2014, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken yoga as an emblem of India's flourishing in the world, pushing for the UN resolution that has since 2015 consecrated June 21 as International Yoga Day.

UNESCO added yoga to its list of intangible cultural heritage in 2016 in recognition of its influence on Indian society, "from health and medicine to education and the arts."

## Yoga practitioners therapy have yet to win over doctors

**Paris** | France

**Y**oga practitioners often tout the unique health benefits of the ancient discipline -- from relieving stress and pain to improving vascular health -- but most doctors remain sceptical in the absence of hard proof.

The International Journal of Yoga Therapy (IJYT) published last year highlighted dozens of studies purporting to show that the practice can help people with eating disorders, soon-to-be moms and women with cancer-related symptoms.

Lionel Coudron, a 60-year-old French doctor, claims he is pain-free thanks to three hours of yoga per week.

"A few years ago, people thought yoga was (essentially) good at combatting stress", said the doctor, who set up a yoga therapy institute in Paris in 1993.

But the benefits of yoga -- including meditation, breathing exercises and posture -- go much deeper, Coudron said.

Jocelyne Borel-Kuhner, former head of an emergency ward in a Paris hospital, agrees.

She set up the very first yoga therapy practice in 2012 with the specific aim of relieving pain for patients, particularly those with handicaps or arthritis.

Yoga therapy "isn't just a course of yoga adapted for people who are ill," but is individual consultation with a clinical examination followed by a care plan using yoga techniques.



Teachers indicate a pose during in a mass yoga event on the Champs de Mars in front of the Eiffel tower in Paris

The aim is to limit the therapy to between three and five consultations per patient, followed by exercises to be continued at home afterwards.

Six years and more than 2,000 consultations later, more than 800 patients have passed through Borel-Kuhner's practice, with some deciding to cease traditional treatment altogether because the yoga therapy is so successful. Nevertheless, even proponents acknowledge there is little consensus on what might constitute specifically therapeutic stretches and poses.

"The lack of standardisation of yoga practices, and the fact that many yoga tools have filtered out into the broader world, begs the important question of what constitutes yoga therapy," two

practitioners, Matthew Taylor and Timothy McCall, wrote in their lead essay for the IJYT.

A study released in January, for example, found no distinct health benefits between traditional yoga and Bikram, carried out in hot and humid rooms.

However, Taylor said that hasn't dampened his enthusiasm.

"The scepticism is vanishing quite quickly and enthusiasm is now more the response, especially in light of the worldwide epidemic of chronic pain," he said.

Most studies which have been carried out, however, including peer-reviewed findings in journals like The Lancet or JAMA, have failed to pass muster with doctors and scientists.