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Buying Breathe: A Study of the Juxtaposition of Yoga as a Commodity, a Biophysical Workout, and a Quasi-religious Experience in Yoga Teacher Trainings in Midwest America

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BUYING BREATH:
A STUDY OF THE JUXTAPOSITION OF YOGA
AS A COMMODITY, A BIOPHYSICAL WORKOUT, AND
A QUASI-RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN YOGA TEACHER
TRAININGS IN MIDWEST AMERICA

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This study explores how yoga teachers, working in an increasingly competitive market, learn to integrate the discourses of biophysical health, quasi-religious, spiritual philosophy into a lifestyle that is sold to the general public for consumption. By focusing on yoga teacher training programs as a node of information exchange and transfer, this study hopes to shed light on the mechanisms of experiential learning. The singular governing body of certification, Yoga Alliance, which in itself calls to question issues and benefits of standardization and democratization of an ancient Indian practice, requires 200-hour certification courses to teach about emotional and physical stress through a combination of anatomy, yogic philosophy, and nonviolent communication. The environment (social, political, digital) surrounding an individual is intrinsically entwined with the biophysical body, the theological body, and the body as a commodity. This study argues that individuals will consequentially teach yoga to the general public based on their individualized experience: the standardized course work, the intentionality of instructors, and the media surrounding their practice. Understanding yoga teacher trainings can tell us about attempts to handle chronic stress in contemporary American culture. I conclude that individuals are driven by aesthetic, and the means of relaxation and fostering community are shifting from organized religion to a pick-and-choose body of influences. Studies of yoga needed to further implement this health trend into mainstream public health ought to not look at the dichotomy of yoga as a physical practice versus a metaphysical experience, but rather an integrated, holistic practice that develops in a manner that is specific to time, community, and individual. Data was collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with women training to become yoga practitioners and certified teachers who train them for a total of 12 participants from three different studios in St. Louis, Missouri, from June 2017 to August 2017.