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*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

## **Purchasing the Practice: How the World of Wellness Sells Yoga as the Ultimate Self-Care**

By Serafina Blake

**Abstract:** Yoga has the potential to bring a healing paradigm into the world and re-awaken the practitioner’s infinite capacity for love and compassion. Unfortunately, Western yoga carries many stereotypes in opposition to this understanding. In the US, yoga is more closely associated with fitness, whiteness, wealth, and youth than it is connected to a deeply complex spiritual tradition that has spanned centuries. The Westernization and industrialization of yoga has the potential to be spiritually harmful to practitioners who participate in yoga as a product to be consumed, rather than a practice to be engaged in. In addition to the Western values of fitness and health that have been attached to modern yoga practice, the yoga tradition has been brought into the formal structure and cultural trend of “self-improvement” as a tangible form of self-care. For the purposes of this paper, I refer to “self-care” as the practical application of caring for oneself in multiple dimensions: physical, emotional, and spiritual. Self-care, like yoga, has been commodified and become a global multi-billion-dollar industry. In this paper, I explore the social and ethical problems associated with selling yoga as a product of consumer culture, as it pertains to the branding of yoga as a form of individually focused self-care. Through a deeper understanding of the commodification of yoga in the US, I argue that the Western appropriation of the eight-limbed path of yoga, as well as the imposition of Western ideals of beauty, thinness, and health, are harmful to both the yoga tradition and to those who practice yoga.

**Keywords:** Sociology of Religion, Yoga Ethics, Westernization of Yoga, Self-care, Fictitious Commodities

Yoga has the potential to bring a healing paradigm into the world and re-awaken the practitioner’s infinite capacity for love and compassion. Unfortunately, Western yoga carries many stereotypes in opposition to this understanding. In the US, yoga is more closely associated with fitness,

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whiteness, wealth, youth, and femininity than it is connected to a deeply complex spiritual tradition that has spanned centuries. The Westernization and industrialization of yoga has the potential to be spiritually harmful to practitioners who participate in yoga as a product to be consumed, rather than a practice to be engaged in. In addition to the Western values of fitness and health that have been attached to modern yoga practice, the yoga tradition has been brought into the formal structure and cultural trend of “self-improvement” as a tangible form of self-care and relying on oneself to solve one’s life problems. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to “self-care” as the practical application of caring for oneself in multiple dimensions: physical, emotional, and spiritual. Self-care, like yoga, has been commodified and has become a global multi-billion-dollar industry.

In this paper, I intend to explore the social and ethical problems associated with selling yoga as a product of consumer culture, as it pertains to the branding of yoga as a form of individually focused self-care. Through a deeper understanding of the commodification of yoga in the US, I argue that the Western appropriation of the eight-limbed path of yoga, as well as the imposition of Western ideals of beauty, thinness, and health, are harmful to both the yoga tradition and to those who practice yoga.

As a student and teacher of yoga practice, I care deeply that the yoga tradition and its spiritual teachings are communicated and shared in a responsible, respectful, and empowering manner. Further, I am fiercely attached to the idea of yoga as a system for change and healing on both an individual and community basis. I believe our cultural longing for change, as demonstrated through systemic fixation on self-improvement, has an intuitive wisdom to it; I believe yoga holds the potential to guide this intuitive desire for change and transformation back towards the collective good, rather than becoming exceedingly focused on fixing the self.

Like the yoga industry, the self-care industry has become heavily influenced by modern notions of self-improvement in the quest for self-discipline and self-optimization. As such, self-care has erroneously become a commodity instead of treated as an inherent aspect of being human. We all must take care of ourselves in basic ways that cannot be bought or sold. In this way, self-care has become a fictitious commodity. Economic sociologist Karl Polanyi created the concept of fictitious commodities to refer to the way that the free market will treat almost anything as a commodity, even when it was not produced or created for the purposes of being sold. Polanyi argues that the social world is negatively affected when natural resources, such as land or gold (money), or humans (for their labor) are treated as

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“products.”<sup>1</sup> In this frame, I argue that self-care too has become a fictitious commodity, sold to the masses to put forth the idea that if one wants to care for themselves – body, mind, and/or spirit – it will not only come at a cost, but it must be done with the intent to better oneself and participate in the never-ending cycle of pursuing wellness.

To understand the modern proliferation of yoga practice in the US, it is important to explore multiple popular definitions of yoga, in addition to how understandings and interpretations of these definitions have changed over time. Some scholars trace the definition of “yoga” back to the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali or to the *Bhagavad Gita*, or even earlier to the *Vedas*, but definitions of yoga have always carried varied meanings and translations. According to Patanjali, yoga can be understood as the “cessation of the fluctuations of the mind,” while the *Bhagavad Gita* translation of yoga means “balance.”<sup>2</sup> The oldest definition in the *Rigveda* refers to “yoking,” and most yoga scholars agree that “yoga” means something akin to “union” or “to yoke.” While these definitions differ slightly, they all point to a practice of yoga that is meditative and spiritual in nature, and do not directly refer to the physical body. “Union” can be understood as the union between the mind-body-spirit, but in the eight-limbed path of yoga set forth by Patanjali, physical postures (*asana*) are only referenced in the third limb. The first two limbs, the *yamas* and the *niyamas* respectively, define what it means to be in integrity in one’s relationships, with oneself and with others. Spiritual teachings such as truthfulness, nonviolence, cultivating contentment, and surrender to God/the divine are just a few of the *yamas* and *niyamas* that are foundational for the yoga practitioner who seeks to be fully engaged in their practice.

However, in the West, “yoga” typically refers primarily to a physical practice and secondarily to a meditation and/or breathwork practice. Religious studies scholar Andrea Jain defines “modern postural yoga” as the yoga practice of physical movement (*asana*) linked with breath (*pranayama*), and notes that postural yoga has become a product.<sup>3</sup> Jain, as well as many other yoga scholars, describes the history of yoga as far more complex than locating the definition to a single text, because premodern yoga traditions were not homogeneous; the nature of yoga has been to transform and evolve over time, and

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 76.

<sup>2</sup> John Philp, *Yoga, Inc.: A Journey Through the Big Business of Yoga* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

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the popularization of yoga in the West is not immune to this expression of the yoga tradition.<sup>4</sup> The trend of this evolution over time continued as the “postural yoga market became increasingly diversified and came to feature endless yoga brands constructed and marketed for immediate consumption” in the 1990s and early 2000s in the US.<sup>5</sup> With this development came the modern conception of fitness and Western ideals of beauty, stress reduction, and overall notions of wellness and well-being.<sup>6</sup> Culture and communication scholars Bhalla and Moscovitz note that in 2016, about 60 percent of the global yoga market revenue came from yoga products and accessories, such as “designer yoga wear, mats, towels, luxury retreats, yoga jewelry, paintings, juice cleanses, and expensive yoga memberships.”<sup>7</sup> Due to the increasing costs associated with the branding of yoga practice, yoga has become less accessible and more exclusive. Bhalla and Moscovitz note that consumers associate yoga with the representation of thin, white, upper-class women. Additionally, the commodification of yoga leads to the development of yoga as a “vanity-driven pursuit.”<sup>8</sup> Jain also agrees that as postural yoga came to perceive physical outer-beauty as reflective of one’s inner-transformation, “the attainment of health and beauty [became] central to the transformative and transcendent process of self-development.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the stereotype of the “yoga body” and the objectification of women’s bodies unite to advance the unrealistic beauty and body standards for all who seek to practice yoga.

While the plethora of opportunities to purchase products relating to appearance, health, and well-being may appeal to the yoga practitioner interested in self-improvement, a desire to “fix” oneself is not in line with the eight-limbed path of yoga. One of the key concepts offered by Patanjali is that future suffering can be avoided through discernment and cultivating the ability to see correctly. At the foundation of this spiritual teaching is the idea that one’s “ignorance” (lack of spiritual knowledge, or spiritual blindness) is preventing one from being fully connected and surrendered to God or the divine. Dedication, devotion, and patience are key elements in pursuing this path to self-realization. These

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<sup>4</sup> Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Jain, 73.

<sup>6</sup> Jain, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Nandini Bhalla and David Moscovitz, “Yoga and Female Objectification: Commodity and Exclusionary Identity in U.S. Women’s Magazines,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 44, No. 1 (2020): 93.

<sup>8</sup> Nandini Bhalla and David Moscovitz, “Yoga and Female Objectification,” 93.

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 105.



spiritual teachings can also be understood as some of the ethical components of the yoga practice. John Philp poses the question, can one only “selectively interpret the ethics intrinsic to yoga and still be a true yogi?”<sup>10</sup> In the *niyama* that represents one’s surrender and devotion to God, it is not just the act of worship but rather the attitude and intention behind the worship that matters. Cultivating a yoga practice that is sincere and heartfelt is more meaningful than any self-directed goal for self-development. As a result of the appropriation of this eight-limbed path, the *telos* of yoga practice is completely altered. Rather than seeking oneness with the divine, Jain notes that “self-development, with the unattainable yet ever-present goal of self-actualization, becoming perfect, is of ultimate value.”<sup>11</sup> This hunger for perfection reinforces the problematic nature of not only the commodification of yoga, but through branding yoga *as* self-care. The consumerist promise that will never be fulfilled serves to torture the seeker who continues to strive to be better.

Through examining yoga as a branded product that sells self-improvement, it becomes clear that rather than caring for oneself and one’s community, the ultimate goal is perfection and self-optimization. This achievement-oriented form of spirituality leads to this consumption of a “wellness lifestyle” and calls into question Western ideals and values of health and wellness, with a hyper-focus on thin bodies as the prime example of what it means to be beautiful. In this vein, US yoga brands are well-known for their ability to market skin-tight yoga pants and crop tops as the desirable trendy fashion, while using thin (and often white) models. One of the most popular yoga brands, Lululemon, is criticized by sociologists Lavrence and Lozanski for their branding practices that focus on “consumption of high-end yoga attire as a sort of social and spiritual activism rooted in bodily improvement and self-transformation.”<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Bhalla and Moscovitz note that Lululemon intentionally keeps women out of their stores who are above a size 12 by carrying a restricted size offering. Lululemon’s introduction of new extended sizing in late 2020 is an interesting development that has taken place since these two articles were published. In the Instagram announcement of this endeavor, the company stated: “Inclusion is a journey and we know we have work to do,” appropriating the spiritual theme of being on a transformative journey to becoming better. The message they sent suggests: “we can re-invent

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<sup>10</sup> John Philp, *Yoga, Inc.*, 223.

<sup>11</sup> Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 108.

<sup>12</sup> Christine Lavrence and Kristin Lozanski, “‘This Is Not Your Practice Life’: lululemon and the Neoliberal Governance of Self,” *Canadian Review of Sociology* 51, No. 1 (2014): 77.



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ourselves, just like you can.” In recognition of the “fat-shaming” scandal Lululemon founder Chip Wilson found himself in a few years ago, the brand is clearly not interested in inclusion. Their entire brand is founded on an exclusive, moralizing notion of health and wellness that conforms to gendered norms of fitness and weight.<sup>13</sup> Their entire brand manifesto is an appeal to “self-betterment” and focuses on the individual’s ability to continuously fine-tune and improve themselves.<sup>14</sup> In addition to the negative ramifications that fashion brands like Lululemon have on women’s body image, this aspect of selling yoga shines a light on the Western obsession with the physical body, using health as a construction to fix one’s shortcomings.

The telos of the eight-limbed yoga practice is fundamentally not about one’s health, wellness, weight, or fitness; rather, it is about engaging with the entire path - all eight limbs - in order to cultivate a connection with the divine that allows the practitioner to see clearly and attain right spiritual knowledge (vidya). Practicing yoga in this way leads to not just transcendence and liberation of the self, but transcendence and liberation for all.<sup>15</sup> Westernized notions of fitness, wellness, and beauty distract those who seek to practice yoga from the truth of the yoga practice. Commodified yoga practice is unsustainable because it keeps the practitioner continually seeking, in a state of discontentedness, for what needs to be repaired in themselves. When we are caught in the cult of the “next thing” to make us healthy or bring us peace of mind, we may be at risk of losing commitment to the practice that deeply desires our full faith and devotion.

Further study of postural yoga as a product that is commodified as a form of self-care is needed to explore the deep and complex history of how yoga practice came to the US, as well as the relationship between the secularization and the commodification of the yoga tradition. I also find it necessary to understand other genders’ experiences of yoga’s “self-improvement” culture; while women tend to dominate the yoga industry in the US, historically, yoga was predominately practiced by men. Additionally, many leading teachers and studio owners in the US today are men. Some of most prominent yoga teachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Yogi Bhañan and B.K.S. Iyengar, have been accused of sexually assaulting and physically abusing their students. The role of patriarchy and

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<sup>13</sup> Christine Lavrence and Kristin Lozanski, ““This Is Not Your Practice Life’,” 85.

<sup>14</sup> Lavrence and Lozanski, 77.

<sup>15</sup> For some practitioners, this transcendence or liberation is *moksha* from the cycle of samsara. For others, it is the eighth limb of *samadhi* or enlightenment, the final stage of peace and a profound connection with all living beings.

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misogyny have contributed to previously discussed gendered norms around beauty and appearance in the commodification of yoga; it is also important to understand the roles that male teachers have played in perpetuating these misogynistic standards and in abusing their positions of power to become perpetrators of violence. Finally, I believe it is meaningful to balance looking at the structural and economic barriers that keep certain groups out of the yoga studios, while also examining individual behavior and how the structures of commodification and consumerism affect an individual's identity construction as a spiritual or religious person.

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