

YOGA OFF THE MAT: THE BODY AND THE *YOGA* *SUTRAS* IN MODERN WARSAW

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ABSTRACT

Yoga was brought into the world around 5000 years ago, and in the late XIX century, it came to Poland. Although yoga originated as a philosophy in the contemporary Western world, it is viewed mainly as a physical practice and very often as a means of changing the appearance and abilities of the body. Despite the practice being body-oriented in this way, I argue that a modern practitioner from Warsaw can find meaning in the body similar to the meaning it had when Yoga philosophy originated. Firstly, to illustrate two definitions of the term *yoga*, this thesis contrasts the contemporary approach to the body and this practice with the approach from the Yoga Sutras. This ancient book has long been a model of Yoga philosophy. This analytical research combines literary analysis and qualitative research, meaning in-depth interviews. Those interviews show how practitioners from Warsaw view the body in the context of modern yoga. This thesis demonstrates that modern yoga can lead to seeing the body as a tool for spiritual liberation, similar to how it was seen in the Yoga Sutras.

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, modern yoga is practised by 300 million people, and at least half of them are from India. This does not come as a surprise, as this practise originated there. However, the remaining 150 million practitioners learned modern yoga somewhere else, and in many cases, in places very culturally different from India. Moreover, in areas where modern yoga is not related to the philosophy of Yoga.

In my research, I will focus on the body because it is at the centre of modern yoga for contemporary Western society. Mass media, for example, Instagram, portrays modern yoga as something that is only for people who look a certain way. Because of that, some people do not feel good enough to start this practice, while others start it, but with unhealthy and usually unrealistic goals, most often about having a thinner or more flexible body. However, I will try to prove that it is possible to get past that, and my research will try to answer the question of whether it is possible for modern yoga practitioners from Warsaw to relate their bodies to the Patañjali's *Yoga Sutras* (2011), a text that modern yoga is built upon.

Despite many studies on modern yoga in Poland, it has not yet been researched if the body can be connected to the Patañjali's *Yoga Sutras*. Most research on modern yoga in Poland has been done on the psychological and historical aspects of the practice, and the focus on the philosophy is not at all prominent. This is why I decided to dedicate my work to it, and I chose Warsaw as the place for data collection. Furthermore, Warsaw is a place where I know the most instructors and practitioners. To avoid possible confusion, I want to add that later I will talk about Western society, and I consider Warsaw as a part of it. I consider it to be a part of Western society because of its political system, economic development and social progressiveness, to name a few.

The theoretical part of my research is focused on the *Yoga Sutras* that I will summarise and explain what it says about the body. I am using a version of this book by Professor Raghavan Narasimhan Iyer, as it is not only a translation of the *Yoga Sutras* that are originally written in Sanskrit, but also a commentary of the sutras. This version gives me a better understanding of the matter of the book, which is needed for the summary. The reason the summary is in detail is that I want to show the complexity of the philosophy of Yoga and introduce the textual aspect of the body from this book. The *Yoga Sutras* is an introduction to this philosophy, to which, on one side, the body is not that important, but on the other side, it is a tool for spiritual liberation. While it seems that both of those ideas do not correspond with how modern yoga is perceived, I will showcase that they can, in fact, correspond with each other. However, I will first illustrate what modern yoga is to contemporary society to highlight the differences between the traditional philosophy of Yoga and modern yoga, and only later will I connect them and explain how the body fits into this narrative. To do so, I will share the results of in-depth interviews that will serve as the answer to my research question. The results indicate that starting modern yoga can lead to finding a deeper meaning in the body. Most interviewees admitted that with time, they began to link their bodies and the practice with ideas that, in my opinion, relate to the philosophy of Yoga from the *Yoga Sutras*.

This research sheds a different light on the practice of modern yoga, as it shows that despite many differences between modern yoga and the philosophy of Yoga, it is possible for Western contemporary society to find depth in the body and see it related to the *Yoga Sutras*.

CHAPTER 1 – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

First, I would like to start with definitions. The term *body* can be interpreted in many ways, and because of that, I must underline what I mean when I use it. In this research, body refers to the body image, meaning the appearance and capabilities. In an article about body image from 2019, it was said that body image is something that everybody has and "is a universal attribute that is subject to individual differences" (Jarry, Dignard and Driscoll, 2019, p. 222). This interpretation highlights that people can approach the body differently, which is an important consideration in my research.

Many studies I will present later show that modern yoga is centred around body image. However, I will also prove that the body can be different from this definition. Especially in the philosophy of Yoga from the *Yoga Sutras*, the looks, strength and flexibility do not matter. There, the body is only a means of liberation. Furthermore, the people I interviewed saw the body as something that exceeds its physicality and this is also something I will come back to later.

1.1 Contemporary Approach to Yoga

Now, I will address how the term *yoga* is perceived in the West and present its value. When I type *yoga* in my Google Search, what I see are pictures of people in flexible and/or strengthening postures. Nowadays, the term *yoga* itself refers mainly to physical practice and there is a different term for that, meaning "modern postural yoga" (Shearer, 2020, p. 2). This new term was coined as there is a dramatic difference between this physical practice and Yoga as a form of Hindu philosophy. With this being said, most people in Western

contemporary societies think of fitness when they hear the word *yoga* and focus on its attractiveness and functionality (Shearer 2020, p. 1).

Next, I would like to give an overview of existing literature on modern yoga, with a focus on the response to globalisation, the target group of contemporary yoga, social media's image, primary motivation and health benefits. Modern yoga has been widely studied, and some of the most reliable peer-reviewed journals include the Journal of Yoga Studies, International Journal of Yoga and International Journal of Yoga Therapy. There is also a nonprofit organisation called the Yoga Alliance that aims to regulate modern yoga standards. Though it is mainly known for approving yoga schools and registering yoga teachers, it also promotes scientific research on modern yoga, and its website is rich in peer-reviewed articles. Those are the four primary sources for reliable studies concerning modern yoga. Next, I would like to discuss a few examples of contemporary yoga in academia.

I will start by discussing the response to the globalisation of modern yoga. With its increasing popularity in the West, debates about the right approach and authenticity have emerged. Jeffery Long, a professor of religion and Asian studies, in his journal from 2018, addresses two main methods that people in the modern yoga community, as well as yoga scholars tend to take. The first is about leaving this practice to their interpretation, where people claim that there is "no core essence of yoga" (Long, 2018, para. 1). The second approach is about protecting yoga from people who are not familiar with its cultural background, and this is connected to treating modern yoga in the West as a "neocolonial act of appropriation" (Long, 2018, para. 1). These two of those ideas could not be more different from each other and that illustrates how differently modern yoga can be perceived.

Then, there is an issue of the group representing modern yoga, as many sources agree that this group is relatively narrow. A study done in 2016 examined that most modern yoga practitioners were living in the West and were female, young, ethnically white, educated, with

higher earnings and better health (Cramer, *et al.*, 2016). This shows that there are many factors that determine the likelihood of starting this practice and that despite being a globalised phenomenon, modern yoga is not common among everyone everywhere.

A study from 2021 shows how modern yoga is portrayed by the mass media (Hinz, *et al.*, 2021). Using metadata tags (hashtags) on Instagram, the researchers collected 400 videos that served them as data. It turned out that most of those videos showed white, thin and toned women in their 20s. Most of those women were presenting advanced poses, and only a few were with instructions, meaning that the main goal was performance (De Regt, *et al.*, 2021). This means that social media creates a problematic picture of modern yoga, popularising beauty standards and excluding major social groups.

Even if this image might be repulsive to someone, it also has a great power of attraction. If this is how yoga is presented, then some people who see such content might think practising modern yoga will make them look like the women from those researched videos. This is confirmed by a study from 2012 that shows that 71% of people who started modern yoga did it because they wanted to be more flexible and toned (Penman, 2012). Those two examples prove that Western societies (the studies were conducted in Australia and the UK) are very much focused on how modern yoga practitioners look. The appearance and especially the size of the body seem to matter the most. This shows that in contemporary Western circles, there is no yoga without the body, which could not be more different to Patañjali's philosophy, where the body is only a marginal part of Yoga.

Both of those studies focus only on the surface of modern yoga. It is commonly assumed that social media supports flawed images, so it is not a surprise that this practice, too, appears out of reach for the majority of people. About the second study, I think it is essential to separate the motivation from the outcome. Just because someone started a physical exercise routine because of a desire to look differently, does not mean that later they cannot find more

value and depth in it. Furthermore, the fact that people can find value through modern yoga is supported by studies, too, which I will focus on now.

Patañjali's Yoga is very much about strengthening one's mental state, and it seems that modern yoga can do that, too. To prove that, I want to introduce a study from 2023 that shows that modern yoga practitioners feel mentally better than those who do not practice (Lakshmi, Oinam and Devi, 2023). While this study does not mention expectations and motivations before starting this practice, things such as mindfulness, awareness, focus on the breath and physical exercise were all proven to improve well-being. While Patañjali did not use terms such as mental health and well-being, my interpretation of The *Yoga Sutras* connects to them very much.

The last study I will share is about improving body awareness and relationship with the body through modern yoga (Daubenmier, 2005). It turned out that women who do this practice tend to think about their bodies more positively than women who do other sports. Furthermore, modern yoga was shown to impact eating disorders positively. Even though this is connected to the previous study, I decided to include it because of the focus on the body that was not prevalent there. Especially the points about better body awareness and body acceptance, show that modern yoga can bring a lot of benefits into the lives of practitioners.

With this overview I hope to shine a light on different sides of modern yoga. On the one hand, there is the mass media approach to modern yoga and the most popular motivation to start this practice. Then, on the other hand there are benefits that this practice can have for the contemporary society. All the studies I mention illustrate what modern yoga is and how beneficial it can be, but none of them mention finding the depth in the body. This is why I would like to see if there is more to the body in modern yoga and, if yes, if it is connected to Patañjali's *Yoga Sutras*.

1.2 The *Yoga Sutras*

Not a lot is known about Patañjali, including when he lived. However, his life is dated from the 4th century B.C. to the 6th century A.C. He is said to be a *Rishi* (Iyer, 2011, p.1), which is defined as "an Indian seer or hearer and revealer of divine knowledge such as that contained in the Vedas and other sacred (...) Hindu texts. Veda means "knowledge" and the Rishis are, therefore, transmitters of divine knowledge, literally revealed to them in visions" (Leeming, 2005, p. 987). Even though it is impossible to find out who wrote the *Yoga Sutras*, they are attributed to Patañjali. Many scholars have doubts about that (Iyer, 2011, p. 1), but the *Yoga Sutras* are still believed to be written down by Patañjali, and it will be hard to change this belief in the future, as it is deeply ingrained into Hindu tradition. It is also not sure when the *Yoga Sutras* were written as it is difficult to find any specific information on early Sanskrit texts. However, most sources point to 6 century A.C. (Bhattacharya and Larson, 2014, p. 165).

The reason why I chose the *Yoga Sutras* as the reference point to the origins of Yoga is that it is the most influential book for Yoga. Patañjali, apart from being the author of this book, is also said to be the founder of Yoga as a school of philosophy. The *Yoga Sutras* is referred to as a practitioner's guidebook which for a long time was an example of modern yoga (Iyer, 2011, p. 2). I would like to clarify that despite the word *yoga*, the *Yoga Sutras* do not talk about this practice as most people nowadays know it. While my research topic is closely connected to the body, Patañjali's text does not mention the body that much. In the *Yoga Sutras*, the body is only a tool for spiritual liberation because, in there, Yoga is a philosophy. Despite that, I still decided to use this source because the modern yoga I refer to throughout this paper is built upon this philosophy. This is why I will summarise the most essential values from the *Yoga Sutras*, discuss what it says about the body and come back to that when discussing the interviews.

Patañjali's philosophy in the *Yoga Sutras* is divided into four chapters: *Samadhi Pada*, *Sadhana Pada*, *Vibhuti Pada*, and *Kaivalya Pada*, and consists of 195 aphorisms (sutras). Simply put, the book discusses spiritual growth and finding a true version of yourself. It is written in the beginning of the *Yoga Sutras* that "Yoga is the restraint of the modifications of the mind" (Patañjali, 2011, 1.2). Those modifications include correct cognition, misconception, fantasy, sleep, and memory. Hence, yoga is about controlling those five highly complex things. The movement is not directly mentioned here, which shows that yoga to Patañjali is not what yoga is to most people growing up in the West nowadays. To him, yoga is a way of living and seeking spiritual liberation.

1.2.1 The *Samadhi Pada*

The *Samadhi pada*, the First Book of the *Yoga Sutras*, talks mostly about contemplation (*samadhi*). It is said that to control the modifications mentioned above, one needs practice (*abhyasa*) and dispassionate detachment (*vairagya*). The practice here means being diligent with effort and generous with time. The dispassionate detachment means getting rid of desires, both material and intangible. Doing both things is said to bring one closer to the state of contemplation. The First Book comes back to contemplation a few times, always giving more insights and more ways of achieving it. It recognises that some people might find it easier to obtain *samadhi* and lists that things such as faith, vigour, intellectual insight, surrendering to the divine and meditation itself can be helpful too.

Furthermore, the text talks about *Ishvara*, a philosophical deity that is omniscient. It is said that repeating and meditating on the meaning of the sound "OM" is a way of connecting with *Ishvara*. That, in turn can help one to focus inward, which relates to contemplation. The First Book explains many other ways of purifying the mind, and they seem very different from one another. For example, friendliness and compassion (Patañjali, 2011, 1.33),

meditation and affirmations, expulsion and retention of breath (Patañjali, 2011, 1.34). All that I have listed here is said to make it simpler to understand conscious and unconscious states.

The title of the First Book is very self-explanatory, and I hope I illustrated that contemplation here has many sides and levels. While nowhere in this chapter are the body and the physical practice mentioned, I had many opportunities to encounter interpretations of *samadhi* through the perspective of the body. During six years of practising yoga and attending many classes with different instructors, I very often heard *samadhi* in the context of contemplation and concentration on the body. I was told to focus on the pose or the movement and to find *samadhi* doing so, and only later did I realise that the *Yoga Sutras* approaches this idea differently.

1.2.2 The *Sadhana Pada*

As for the *Sadhana Pada*, the Second Book, the main objective is widely defined practice (*sadhana*), even though it might not seem like it. This chapter starts by highlighting that there is no yoga without discipline, self-study and surrendering to the divine. Those three traits are connected to the previously defined *samadhi*. It discusses and explains obstacles behind the practice, meaning ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion and the tenacious clinging to existence (Patañjali, 2011, 2.3). All of them are said to impact our mentality, and if we have them in our lives, they affect how we interact with everything. However, deep meditation (*dhyana*) is said to help with that.

The Self is also mentioned, and it is said to be a clear sight for which the visible world exists. When the Self and the world perceived by the Self come together, one will understand the visible world. In this chapter, physical practice is mentioned for the first time, never mind that vaguely. However, here are the eight limbs of yoga are introduced. They consist of restraints (*yama*), binding observance (*niyama*), posture (*asana*), regulation of breath

(*pranayama*), abstraction and sense-withdrawal (*pratyahara*), concentration (*dharana*), contemplation (*dhyana*) and perfect meditative absorption (*samadhi*) (Patañjali, 2011, 2.28). It is said that through the practice of all of them, "impurity is gradually destroyed, the light of wisdom shines forth" (Patañjali, 2011, 2.28). Posture (*asana*) is the part about physical practice and it is added that it has the power of freeing oneself from previous experiences. Lastly, practising the eight limbs of yoga is promised to help with achieving the perfect cognition.

Despite the word *practise* in the title, it might be hard to see the practice element in this chapter. However, the eight limbs are a manifestation of the practise and here, the body is mentioned for the first time. This is the closest Patañjali came to mentioning the body through the lens of its physicality, as he wrote, "The posture must be firm and pleasant" (Patañjali, 2011, 2.46). I interpret it in a way that one should find balance in every asana, meaning the feeling of strength and stability at the same time. Although I have never heard anyone quoting this sutra, I know of teachers and practitioners who would never do something that does not feel good.

The *Sadhana Pada* highlights the complexity of Yoga and how a minor part of it is the physical practice. Minor on one hand, but also essential to achieve the higher goal. Like the First Book, many elements of the Second Book can be used as a metaphor for physical practice and especially the eight limbs of yoga are often used in modern yoga classes and discourses. This is also a part of the *Yoga Sutras* that is the easiest to connect with the body as it literally mentions postures.

1.2.3 The *Vibhuti Pada*

The Third Book is titled *Vibhuti Pada*, and it focuses on accomplishments. It starts with an introduction to the concept of constraint (*sanyama*) that is achieved by highlighting

before meditation, *samadhi* and concentration (*dharana*). Mastering them all will bring the "light of cognitive insight" (Patañjali, 2011, 3.5). With *sanyama*, it is said that one can get to know, for example the sounds produced by other living beings, the past and the future, including the time of one's death. *Sanyama* also has the power to make one's body invisible by "suspending its power of perceptibility" (Patañjali, 2011, 3.21). It can also cause the disappearance of senses, and when translated as "mastering the vital energy", it is said to bring us "blazing radiance" (Patañjali, 2011, 3.41). Furthermore, there is one sutra that connects *sanyama* with the body. Levitation is promised when *sanyama* is present between the body and the space (*akasha*). In general, *sanyama* appears very powerful; it is something that has a long list of promises.

This chapter also mentions *nirodhahaparinama*, a process of mental transformation by controlling oneself. It is said that this gets easier with time and practice. This is followed by another transformation; this time, it is a meditative one. It is defined by the ability to focus and let go of distractions. After those two transformations, it is possible for consciousness and subconsciousness to meet and balance each other. This chapter also discusses concentration and how it will bring you "the knowledge of other minds" (Patañjali, 2011, 3.19).

Another concept is *mahavideha*, which means the ability to reach a different state of consciousness beyond the intellect. This power is supposed to help achieve a perfect body, "perfection of the body consists in beauty, grace, strength and adamant hardness" (Patañjali, 2011, 3.47). This can mean many things, but I understand it in a way that beauty is more than just appearance. Furthermore, later it is mentioned that the spiritual enlightening will come only when we know how to separate the Self from the goodness. The Third Book ends by stating that the goal of Yoga can be found everywhere.

While this chapter mentions abstract things such as levitation, the sutra about the perfection of the body has its adaptation in the contemporary Western world. The *Yoga Sutras*

focuses on "beauty, grace, strength and adamant hardness", and I can see that those features are also appreciated nowadays. However, one difference between this approach and the contemporary one is that here, the perfect body does not have limits regarding size, age and colour.

1.2.4 The *Kaivalya Pada*

The *Kaivalya Pada*, the Fourth Book and the last of the *Yoga Sutras*, is focused on liberation. This chapter starts with a statement that things such as spells and herbs can evoke spiritual powers (*siddhis*) (Patañjali, 2011, 4.1). However, it is said that such tools do not cause liberation; they can only help with it. Then, the chapter starts the topic of actions and tendencies. It is said that they always existed and that one needs the right conditions to develop them. The different states that the Self is experiencing are said to be connected with how our cognition is always different.

Later, the relationship between the mind and objects is mentioned. Because of various states of mind, people perceive objects differently, even though every object has its own identity. Whether the mind truly knows the objects, depends on how attractive it is to the mind. This is contrasted with the sutra; "nor is the mind self-luminous, since it can be seen as an object (Patañjali, 2011, 4.19). Understanding the essence is possible only when the all-comprehensive consciousness becomes more stable.

By becoming a sage, you stop associating states of mind with consciousness. Only then the mind is emancipated. When emancipation is kept, *samadhi* comes and "then comes the cessation of afflictions (*kleshas*)" (Patañjali, 2011, 4.30). That ends the transformation, and the liberation comes, meaning "in this state, the Self is established in its own nature" (Patañjali, 2011, 4.34). This state is accompanied by peace, commonly referred to as nirvana.

This chapter concludes the book and explains how to reach the goal of Yoga. The body and the physical practice are not mentioned, which shows their insignificance. In general, with this summary, I aimed to prove that the philosophy of Yoga is very different from modern yoga. With this being said, I still believe that despite those differences, modern yoga has some traces of this philosophy. Furthermore, I want to prove that the body, meaning seemingly everything to modern yoga and nothing to the philosophy of Yoga, can be related to the *Yoga Sutras*.

CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY

This research aims to see if modern practitioners from Warsaw can find depth in the body through modern yoga and if it is connected to Patanjali's philosophy. To answer my research question, I conducted ten in-depth interviews with people from Warsaw who do this practice regularly. Warsaw is the place where I started practising yoga and where I know many studios, so I was able to get in touch with many teachers and practitioners.

I wanted to have the same number of interviews with modern yoga instructors and practitioners, and my criterion was at least three years of experience with the practice. I did not intend to interview only women and asked men to participate in my research, but only women were willing to talk with me. Hence, the three things my interviewees have in common are gender, place of living and a minimum of three years of experience practising modern yoga. While I wanted to include other information about the interviewees, not every interviewee permitted me to share more of their data. This is why I am sharing only those three variables.

I used two sampling methods in my research: purposive and snowball. Purposive sampling is about "identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest" (Duan et al. 2016, p. 1). As I had a very clear criterion, this method seemed the most sensible. Furthermore, studies prove that purposive sampling is recommended when one looks for rich data, especially in manageable amounts (Ames, Glenton, and Lewin, 2019, p. 8). While this research method was helpful, it was not enough, and I still missed one teacher to interview. Hence, I used snowball sampling too. In this method, "existing study subjects recruit future subjects among their acquaintances" (Naderifar, Goli and Ghaljaie, 2017, p. 2). Similar to

purposive sampling, this method is helpful when there are specific requirements interviewees have to meet.

To find instructors, I visited yoga studios in Warsaw, and if I knew them, I asked about participation in research in person. If I did not know those studios but knew that their teachers met my criteria, I would send them emails. I asked twenty studios, and three of the teachers from three different studios were willing to answer my questions. As I aimed to have more interviews with instructors, I asked five private teachers I knew, and 1 of them was willing to participate in the research. The last instructor I interviewed was recommended to me through one of those five private teachers. As for practitioners, I asked ten people who I knew practise modern yoga regularly, and 4 of them gave me their answers. One of the practitioners also put me in touch with the person who became my last interviewee.

It was vital for me to conduct the interviews in the language the interviewees knew very well. This is why nine out of ten interviews were done in Polish and later translated into English. The one person who wrote her answers in English knows this language very well and said it does not make a difference to her. I was hoping that speaking in the language one knows very well will help create a comfortable environment that will aid in honest and authentic answers.

Furthermore, when I asked them about the relationship between the body and yoga, I did not tell them about my interpretations, and I let them approach the topic the way they understood it. My questions are broad, and I did not ask them questions other than those I will share later. I also did not stop the interviewees and let them speak as long as they wanted to. The interviews were semi-structured, as I had previously planned questions. With half of the interviewees, I talked face to face, recorded their answers, and wrote them down, and the other half wrote the answers themselves and sent them to me. To translate my data, I used an

online translator, and then I reviewed the translations myself and corrected them if needed.

While I tried to ensure accuracy, the quality of the translations may vary.

I had two sets of questions, first for instructors and second for practitioners. The reason for having one question more for instructors was to find more data about a possible relationship between the body and the *Yoga Sutras* in their students' physical practice. The questions for instructors and practitioners included:

Questions for teachers	Questions for practitioners
1. What is yoga for you	1. What is yoga for you
2. How would you define the relationship between your body and your yoga practice	2. How would you define the relationship between your body and your yoga practice
3. How would you define the relationship your students have between their bodies and yoga	X

I will analyse my data by looking for commonalities among the answers to see if there are any patterns. I will present recurrent themes as well as exceptions. I will summarise my data and quote only those responses I find relevant to my research. My interviews will show if contemporary practitioners and instructors can see the body as a relationship with the *Yoga Sutras*, even though modern yoga focuses on how the body looks and what it can achieve.

CHAPTER 3 – FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Now, I will present the findings from my interviews with teachers and practitioners from Warsaw. This part of my paper will combine findings with discussion because I want to link the responses with the *Yoga Sutras* to answer my research question. First, I will analyse two ideas that were common among teachers and practitioners, meaning modern yoga being more than a physical exercise and finding a connection between the body and the mind

3.1 Surpassing Physical Exercise

The idea that was very prominent among instructors, to the extent of being mentioned by all of them, is that modern yoga is more than just a physical exercise. One teacher explained this: "From physicality to spirituality, in harmony, acceptance, respect and love for my body - only then can I say I do yoga" (Speaker 3, 2024). Among the practitioners, this theme was discussed, too, but most often, it was between the lines. To both teachers and practitioners, modern yoga is more than just a form of movement, and I will analyse what it is, if not just a form of movement.

Since it is not just a physical practice, it is detached from the narration of yoga focused on the body. In other words, the role of the body has to be more profound. The *Yoga Sutras* mention the body only a few times, but the majority of it focuses on other areas of Yoga as a spiritual practice and Yoga as a means to achieve liberation. Most interviewees also discussed the impact modern yoga has on them, and not just their bodies. This is another point that connects the body with the *Yoga Sutras*, as it means that the body becomes a tool for something more profound.

3.2 Connection Between the Body and the Mind

Another common thread was the connection between the body and the mind, or the spirit, as one teacher mentioned. Only one instructor did not discuss it, whereas the rest strongly emphasised it. One teacher explained this connection with "yoga is a combination of body, mind and soul" (Speaker 5, 2024). This theme was less prevalent among practitioners, but two of them did mention that yoga connects the body with the mind. One pointed out that it is optional to see this connection, but the other practitioner did not see it like that. She explained, "I noticed beautiful and invisible connections between a body and mind during a yoga practice. Just like two twin sisters where one cannot live without the other" (Speaker 6, 2024). Those who discussed this made it clear that there is no dualism and that practising yoga automatically means engaging not just the body but the mind, too. This approach is shown in the *Yoga Sutras*, as there is a strong emphasis on the mind in this book. The difference between how interviewees approach it and how the *Yoga Sutras* approach it is the hierarchy of the body and the mind. For modern teachers and practitioners, physical practice was the beginning, and only later did it develop to them that the mind played a role in yoga, too. No matter the journey of discovering this notion, it still proves that through modern yoga, people can see the body as related to the *Yoga Sutras*.

The rest of the results were mentioned by the majority, and now I will move on to discuss them. Once again, they are put together in themes that include Asanas, Yamas and Niyamas, finding the self through practice, and the body only as a tool for spiritual liberation.

3.3 Asanas, Yamas and Niyamas

The idea that suggests that the body can be connected with the *Yoga Sutras* is finding balance in the positions. It was mentioned by one teacher and one practitioner, and both of them agreed that it is essential to feel good during the practice. The teacher explained, "For the past 2-3 years, I have been paying a lot of attention to performing asanas in a way that is healthy and effective for me, without trying to fit into a position" (Speaker 1, 2024) and the practitioner said "I let my body decide how it wants to move" (Speaker 7, 2024). They both emphasise that they move in a way that feels good to their bodies, similar to one sutra that focuses on the balance of the position: "The posture must be firm and pleasant" (Patañjali, 2011, 2.46). This approach could not be more different from the idea that modern yoga is about having a particular body. Both the teacher and the practitioner discuss the trust and respect they have for their bodies, which is not at all connected to how they look. To sum it up, the body becomes something else, something connected to the *Yoga Sutras*.

A straightforward connection between the body in modern yoga and the *Yoga Sutras* was found when the interviewees mentioned the concept of eight limbs of yoga. Other people mentioned physical practice, meditation, and breathing exercises, which are parts of the eight limbs of yoga, but only two directly referred to this concept. The first teacher said, "By following the 8-step path of yoga, I take care of myself (...). This is a whole system of values that, once introduced into our lives, brings many benefits" (Speaker 4, 2024). The other teacher focused on four specific parts of the eight limbs of yoga, saying, "In the studio, I emphasise yoga not as physicality, and I incorporate the other aspects of yoga, trying to mix Asanas with Pranayama, elements of philosophy and what I call "yoga off the mat" (e.g. Yamas, Niyamas in everyday life)" (Speaker 1, 2024).

The fact that they mentioned eight limbs of yoga in their answers illustrates that they are familiar with the *Yoga Sutras*, or at least parts of it. Not only do they know about it, but they

regard it as something meaningful in their daily life. This proves that physical practice is a part of something more significant for them.

3.4 Finding the Self Through Practice

Another theme I found is the enlightenment. In the *Yoga Sutras*, the idea of enlightenment is sometimes connected with finding the self and understanding the world and ourselves, and I will, too, connect those ideas. Those three concepts relate to a profound connection with modern yoga, where the body becomes insignificant. I will start with the notion of enlightenment that was discussed by two instructors. One briefly mentioned it when she talked about the connection between the body and the mind, and the other went into detail by saying, "We are not to harm ourselves and others; we are to take care of ourselves so that we reach enlightenment" (Speaker 4, 2024).

Furthermore, two practitioners raised a point of understanding themselves and the world around them. In both cases, it was related to aspects of life outside of the modern yoga practice. An example is "(yoga) gave extra capabilities to see and understand things as they are" (Speaker 6, 2024). The last thing I want to discuss is finding the self. The quote, "Whatever path to self my students choose to take, at the end of the day, they are at peace" (Speaker 3, 2024), relates to the need to find the self. That instructor also said that, in her opinion, what comes after finding the self is the realisation that yoga can be practised anytime and anywhere.

Those three themes focus on a different aspect of modern yoga. Here, the body becomes insignificant and secondary, also reflected in the *Yoga Sutras*. The fact that when asked about the relationship between the body and yoga, interviewees mentioned those themes means that their practice does mean more. It means other areas of life where the

wisdom gained from the practice becomes useful are also included. That, too, is mentioned in the *Yoga Sutras*.

3.5 Body Only as a Tool for Spiritual Liberation

The next idea that I will analyse is the power of modern yoga. This is another concept that shifts away from the body but has the body at its core. Three interviewees point out the extreme power they found in the relationship between the body and modern yoga. Two practitioners mentioned the speciality of the practice, where one called it "indefinable and metaphysical" (Speaker 9, 2024) and the other "multidimensional and magical" (Speaker 10, 2024). A different take on the immense power of modern yoga was explained by saying, "I feel that it (yoga) penetrates all my cells and that it penetrates deep into my soul" (Speaker 2, 2024). Those three quotes illustrate that physical practice surpasses what is happening on the mat and manifests as something profound.

The questions I asked had the word *body* in them, but this word was, in most cases, understood by the interviewees as something more profound. Two people mentioned physical pain, which brought them on the mat, and two people pointed out the appearance. However, in both cases, it was only a reference to how, in the past, the role of the body was different than now. The rest of the interviewees were referring to their bodies in a way that is only a tool for something else. This specific point connects their approach to the *Yoga Sutras*, as in the philosophy of Yoga, the body is a means for achieving spiritual liberation. As spiritual liberation is understood differently by the interviewees, their interpretation of the body has its reflection in the *Yoga Sutras*.

Those results indicate that both groups see the body as something significant and something that can be related to the *Yoga Sutras*. My interviewees claimed to see the body

through a lens of many different values and truths. Both teachers and practitioners highlighted the relationship between their bodies and yoga as something life-changing. Especially with practitioners, this thankfulness was very prominent, and this is a sign of the body in modern yoga reaching far higher than how social media portrays it. Even the interviewees contrasted this practice with sport and said that what you learn during yoga stays with you, unlike other types of movement that do not. For example, "In yoga, practice continues off the mat as well" (Speaker 8, 2024).

What surprised me was the fact that the answers I got from the practitioners were not less connected with the *Yoga Sutras* than those from the teachers. I assumed that teachers would have a deeper connection to their bodies because part of the training to become a licensed yoga teacher would involve learning about the philosophy of Yoga (Yoga Alliance, 2023). Because of that, I also expected that they would mention Patañjali more often, but that did not happen either. What happened is that the majority of the interviewees from the two groups agreed on two concepts and had many points in common.

Apart from those commonalities, a few interviewees mentioned ideas which show that there are so many ways in which people can see the body in a relationship with the *Yoga Sutras*. Even though not everyone referred to Patañjali's philosophy literally, everyone mentioned links between the body in yoga and a similar spiritual connection to the one reflected by the *Yoga Sutras*. This proves that the knowledge from the *Yoga Sutras* can be found in the relationship between the body and modern yoga.

With this being said, I also want to clarify that just because there are few parallels between the body in the contemporary practice and Patañjali's philosophy, it does not mean that modern yoga is similar to the Yoga from the *Yoga Sutras*. I want to make this distinction because one is a philosophy, and the other is still mainly a physical practice. While this physical practice can lead to philosophical reflections, those two things are still different.

Those few parallels I found cannot be compared to all the wisdom in the book that has not been mentioned by any of the interviewees. As I explained in the first chapter of my thesis, Yoga to Patañjali is a way of living, and even if the body in modern yoga can be connected to this way of living, it does not go this far. Furthermore, three interviewees also mentioned that in the beginning, their practice was body goal-oriented. That shows that modern yoga does not have to relate to the Yoga Sutras, whereas the *Yoga Sutras* has always been related to the body.

CONCLUSION

Starting this research, I was not sure where it would take me, and I was surprised by the findings from the interviews. I became a yoga teacher two years ago, so I thought I knew how people approach this practice, but now I know that I did not. Furthermore, on one hand I knew that it is possible to treat modern yoga as something more than a sport, but I did not expect such a deep relationship between the body and the *Yoga Sutras*. Even though I have practised modern yoga for six years, only recently have I stopped viewing it through the lens of social media, and so I thought that my interviewees, or at least some of them might relate to that. This, however, is not what they told me, and quite the opposite turned out to be true.

The responses I got made it clear that it is possible for contemporary practitioners from Warsaw to relate their bodies to the Patañjali's *Yoga Sutras* through modern yoga practice. Even if the contemporary approach to the body in modern yoga differs from the approach of the *Yoga Sutras*, it does not diminish its resemblance. As shown above, practitioners nowadays can find a great depth in the body and find higher meaning in the practice. Some of the traces of the Patañjali philosophy in the relationship between the body and modern yoga practice are the connection between the body and the mind, finding the self through practice and the body only as a tool for spiritual liberation.

Future research could investigate how practitioners in other cities view the body and yoga and if the relationship with the *Yoga Sutras* can be found there. It would be interesting to know if the body can have more depth to modern yoga practitioners everywhere or if there are places where this idea is more prominent.

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