

‘Being’ and ‘Becoming’

Mid-aged women and Iyengar Yoga

by Julie Hodges

This article gives an overview of one aspect of a recently completed PhD titled *The Practice of Iyengar Yoga by Mid-aged Women: An Ancient Tradition in a Modern Life*. The thesis critically examined mid-aged women’s experiences of practicing Iyengar yoga. The study focused on a select group of 35 women living in New South Wales, Australia. The women met three set criteria: First, they were to be aged 45-60 (although one woman was 65). Second, they had been practicing Iyengar yoga for a minimum of two years. Thirdly, they practiced yoga at least once a week. The study sought to critically examine mid-aged women’s experiences of Iyengar yoga by conducting in-depth interviews to explore their individual experiences.

The research process became more complex as the women’s experiences unfolded. Their responses reflected broader issues of meaning and ‘the self’. A paradox emerged concerning the nature of ‘the Self’ that is depicted by yoga philosophy, and ‘the self’ that is portrayed in modern societies generally, and, in which Western yoga practitioners reside. This paradox raised critical questions that were then explored:

- Is ‘the self’ of practitioners transformed through a practice of Iyengar yoga?
- How do Western constructions of ‘the self’ ‘fit’ with Eastern depictions of ‘the Self’?
- How does each influence the other?

In short, the thesis evolved to consider the changing nature of ‘the self’ as it is expressed by the women’s experiences of Iyengar yoga. To examine how ideals from the West and the East have come together in the modern practice of yoga, the women’s experiences were compared with Giddens’(1) ‘reflexive project of the self’ (a process of self-actualisation/‘becoming’) and the broader principles of classical yoga (a process of self-realisation/‘being’). A summary of the two perspectives is provided in Table 1(2).

Table 1: *Comparative summary of central theoretical concepts in Giddens and classical yoga*

Giddens	Yoga
Self-actualisation	Self-realisation
Existential	Spiritual
Non-traditional	Traditional
Linear Time	Moments of Time
Self transformation requires mental narratives to control time and plan for the future	Self transformation requires letting go of mental thoughts/time to experience ‘being’ beyond the mind
Present moment used to plan for the future and ‘become’	Present moment used to let go of mental thoughts and ‘be’
Self-awareness used to plan ongoing progress of ‘becoming’ (external)	More subtle levels of awareness developed from external to internal
‘Being is the result of ‘becoming’	‘Becoming’ is the sum of continuous ‘being’
‘True self’ is a differentiated, reflexively constructed self	‘True Self’ is the universal Self, a permanent Self, the divine

Source: Hodges (2007: 45)

Western practices, like Giddens’ project, emphasise processes of ‘becoming’: a means to perpetually progress and improve oneself. Eastern practices, however, give priority to states of ‘being’, via the cultivation of awareness to attain experiences of constancy and stillness within.

Iyengar Yoga Works

The current research drew from a group for which a practice of Iyengar yoga ‘worked’, and as such their experiences may not be representative of the general population, although they may be representative of the nature of mid-aged women who become regular Iyengar yoga practitioners. Their experiences demonstrated that the benefits of yoga do come to those who are disciplined to practice regularly.

The most common reason for commencing a practice of yoga, at least initially, was to improve physical well-being. Ongoing physical ‘progress’ and improvements reinforced

the participants' sustained commitment to their yoga practice. Over time, their practice became a significant strategy of their overall self-care, which included a desire to age well. Annie said, 'I'm quite into health... yoga to me is a huge part of that'. All of the women interviewed, gained confidence and became more positive about their age and the aging process as they made the transition through mid-life.

As the participants' continued to practice, increasing significance was given to the mental and emotional benefits experienced. Leonie said, 'If you ask me what it is about my health that yoga has been most useful, it has been most useful around my mental health'. Such benefits were wide ranging and included the ability to relax and reduced levels of stress. The techniques acquired from their practice were often described as a 'tool' or a 'coping mechanism' in their lives. Alison said, 'I don't like using the word 'tool' but the practice is one of my primary mechanisms for getting through... yoga... supported me through times when I have needed it'. At a time when stress is well documented and a widely publicised influence on an individual's health and well-being, yoga improved the ability of all of the participants to better cope with stress.

Most of the women in the group were interested in pursuing a practice that promoted a more internal and stable sense of self-identity. Many of these women placed importance on a spiritual or philosophical component to their lives, even if this spirituality was individually and secularly defined. The experiences of almost half of the participants reported that their yoga practice had a spiritual dimension. For some of the more experienced practitioners, this reflected the evolving nature of their practice over time. Wendy said:

I think the more yoga we do... the harder that becomes to describe... because it really does become more like... What is God?... it's that big because it's so much a part of my life... To me it's like a real companion and an ally and a friend... something I can turn to, use, something that really supports me and teaches me.

Experiences of 'Being'

For the women involved in the study, a regular practice of Iyengar yoga cultivated experiences of 'being'. These experiences were differentiated from experiences of 'becoming', and for most of the participants, these

experiences were not anticipated prior to commencing a practice of yoga. Iyengar (1993) suggests that focusing one's attention in the present moment allows time to be mentally still. Such experiences were described by the participants as awareness, stillness, calmness, peacefulness, feeling at one with the universe, contentment, and of transcending everyday states of consciousness. Many of the women reported that 'being' in the present moment slowed down the 'constant chatter' of the mind, and allowed some mental space for experiences of stillness. Linda said

Yoga has been a way of stepping back from all that chaos and enjoying just doing one thing for a period of time. And that's shown me that as a possible way of life. You can be more balanced and be more measured and slow down - you still get things done.

When much of contemporary living is linked to experiences of feeling rushed, particularly amongst women, yoga quite literally created space and time in their otherwise busy lives.

The practices of *asana*, *pranayama* and *savasana* were central to the women's experiences of 'being'. These three practices were the 'tools' to develop self-awareness and the opportunity 'to be' in the present moment. The internalisation of awareness via their yoga practice enabled these women better to 'observe' and 'listen' to their bodies from the inside, which then transformed their experiences of 'the self'. Grace said, 'It's actually coming back more into yourself; you become more of an observer'.

Most of the participants linked their yoga practice with experiences of detachment (*vairagya*), when they experienced being 'an observer' of their thoughts and actions. They were able to observe 'the self' with greater clarity. This developed an ability to physically, mentally and emotionally detach and let go in a variety of situations that transpired in daily life. Fiona said:

I let stuff go much more than I used to, so whereas years ago I would have had a chip on my shoulder and maintained concerns and anger about certain sorts of things that bothered me... now I can just let it go.

Many women noted that they increasingly experienced and observed the body as a process as opposed to a physical object. Kelly said:

You feel more secure when your body's active internally... you're in contact with the workings of your body... you're making the mechanics work. You're locating every part of your body... I can feel this vitality in my hands and my wrist and my thigh and my toe... I function.

An important outcome of this process is that embodied experiences overcame some of the social conditioning held about the female body, because experiences drew from an internal sense of self. This transformation of perspective lessened the emphasis given to their physical appearance and fostered a positive sense of 'being' that facilitated greater self-acceptance.

As shown, the practice of Iyengar yoga provided the techniques to look within. Ongoing experiences of 'being' were cultivated because the women were committed to a regular practice of yoga over a significant period of time. Not surprisingly, there was a direct link between the length of time a participant practiced yoga, the intensity of her yoga practice and the impact of yoga in daily life. From a yogic perspective, 'being' and the subsequent cultivation of awareness are necessary, if self-transformation and transformation of one's life perspective are to occur. Thus, behaviour changes occurred because as awareness permeated the mind-body, the women became more aware of 'the self' from an embodied perspective. These experiences were of significance for the majority of women interviewed. Moreover, such experiences were associated with the capacity 'to be' more present in their lives generally and to have greater access to feelings of happiness and contentment in the present.

The intertwining process of 'being' and 'becoming'

For the women in the study, the opportunity to experience 'being' in the present moment created a 'balance' from the pressures often associated with 'becoming' in their everyday lives. It is somewhat paradoxical that what transpired from the techniques acquired from yoga ('being'), had a positive impact on the ability to manage particular daily events and stresses ('becoming'). Experiences of 'becoming' did not become irrelevant; rather, experiences of 'being' facilitated the participants' ability to 'become'. As noted, many of the participants referred to experiences where 'being' improved their ability to detach and 'let go' of certain life situations at will. Many attested that the effects of their practice made a positive

contribution to the fulfillment of individual goals. Annie said, 'I used to always be looking to the future... now... I can actually just enjoy the day-to-dayness of things which is really powerful'. Others expressed that they 'became' more efficient and better organised at work; better able to manage the demands of both home and family and generally better able to cope with the stress and time-pressure in their lives. Grace said:

The biggest thing about yoga is it makes me think of me, rather than doing and giving. Because of my work I'm giving, and being a mother you're always giving and it makes you realise that sometimes you're just running around and overwhelmed by everything you've got to do and anything that makes me centre myself is priceless.

According to the more long-term practitioners in particular, the effects from practicing yoga contributed to responding more effectively to 'the ego', 'becoming' more compassionate, and 'becoming' more connected towards 'the self', other people and the natural and social environments more generally.

At the level of practice, the women's progress revolved around returning to the process of the 'same' practice in the 'same' physical body. Even if they did not change their physical practice externally, in that they practiced the same *asanas*, their internal experience of 'the self' in their yoga practice was always changing. Leonie said:

This whole thing's about having a discipline and something to come back to that certainly isn't static... my experience is constantly changing around my yoga, but there's a practice that's static. The *asanas* have the same names... there's a ritual that I can go back to even though my experience of it is very different each time

Experiences of *asana* and *pranayama* encouraged a life-long commitment to their practice because progress reflected both experiences of constancy ('being'), an internal process of 'becoming' as levels of awareness permeated the mind-body, and an external experience of 'becoming' as they mastered and progressed in their ability to 'do' the *asanas*. Gillian said:

You just realise how deep is the well of yoga... something draws you to want to explore more... the deeper it becomes and it's not just the movement of the fibre... it's like the unfolding of the flower and little by little all these things and rotations all come together...

it's a true kind of opening and expanding of the physical and the mental and the emotional.

In short, 'becoming' evolved at two levels. First, an internal experience of 'becoming' represented embodied experiences as levels of awareness permeated the mind-body. Second, external experiences of 'becoming' that aligned with Giddens' body project.

In summary, practicing yoga cultivated experiences of 'being'. 'Being' in the present moment, the internalisation of awareness, being 'an observer' of their thoughts and actions and being a 'witness' to life events were all identified as important transformational experiences that arose from their practice of Iyengar yoga. The effects of 'being' were positively transferred to effect change at the level of practice and at the level of experience in other aspects of daily life. 'Practicing yoga provided a degree of 'balance' between the seemingly contradictory worlds of materialism and inner contentment in an intricate interplay of 'being' and 'becoming'. As B.K.S. Iyengar suggests, Patanjali's work established the techniques to provide a beneficial and 'practical way of living' in contemporary life (Iyengar B.K.S. 2003, 4).

An integral and delightful aspect of the study was the voices of the women, who brought the study alive through their personal experiences and words of wisdom. Unfortunately, space has been a limiting factor in this article; however, you can read and enjoy their experiences in the discussion chapters of the thesis (Chapters 5-8).

Notes

- (1) Giddens' is a renowned sociologist who has contributed extensively to the interpretation of classical sociological theory. He describes his own theory of reflexivity as a contemporary stage in the development of modern society, which he describes in *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991).
- (2) A comprehensive explanation of 'being' and 'becoming' can be found in Chapter Two of the Thesis.

Julie Hodges is a Junior Intermediate Level I teacher. She would like to sincerely thank the women who took the time to participate in the study. Her thesis can be found online at <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/library/adt/public/adt-NNCU20070511.122234/index.html> She would love to receive any feedback or questions about the thesis. Her email address is julielynnhodges@hotmail.com . Julie's thesis can be borrowed from the Association Library.

References

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