

**THE PRACTICE OF IYENGAR YOGA BY MID-AGED WOMEN:  
AN ANCIENT TRADITION IN A MODERN LIFE**

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

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## ABSTRACT

Yoga, an ancient philosophy and practice undertaken as a path towards self-realisation, was originally written for men, by men living in the East. However, a large and growing number of people in the West now practice some form of yoga, with more than 80% of practitioners being women.

Since the 1980s, there has been a ‘feminisation’ of yoga in the West, as female teachers and practitioners tailor its practice to meet the specific needs of women. The practice of yoga has also changed to meet the needs of the modern Western practitioner more generally, such that the primary reasons for practicing yoga are to improve physical well-being and to cope with stress. Nonetheless, for some practitioners, yoga continues to offer philosophical and spiritual direction.

The aim of this thesis is to critically examine mid-aged women’s experiences of Iyengar yoga. Focusing on a select group of 35 women living in New South Wales, Australia, the study ultimately seeks to determine whether a process of self-transformation arises from their yoga practice. Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* provides a very useful context for describing the study participants’ shared disposition and values. The women’s demographic characteristics, for example, help explain why they were attracted to and maintained a regular yoga practice. An aspect of their *habitus* is also distinctly feminine, incorporating values of connectedness and holism.

The women’s experiences were examined to consider why they were practicing yoga. In an exploration of the processes that emerged from the women’s experiences of Iyengar yoga, a paradox arose concerning the nature of ‘the Self’ that is depicted by yoga philosophy, and ‘the self’ that is portrayed in modern societies. To examine how ideals from the West and the East have come together in the modern practice of yoga, the women’s experiences are compared here with Giddens’ ‘reflexive project of the self’ (a process of self-actualisation) and the broader principles of classical yoga (a process of self-realisation). 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.

The women’s stories and experiences are integral to understanding the processes of self-transformation that arise from their yoga practice. Their experiences demonstrate that although initially reasons for practicing yoga identify primarily with Giddens’ reflexive project (‘becoming’), through the practice of yoga their experiences become embodied (‘being’). The thesis explores the evolving interplay between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ that ensues from experiences of Iyengar yoga, and explains how and why these processes of self-transformation impact on the lives of the women interviewed.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The nature of the self has been a topic of great interest and serious enquiry in the East as well as the West from ancient times to present... the riddle is not yet solved; the self continues to be an enigma (Paranjpe 1998, 1).

#### 1.1 Background to the research

Yoga is becoming increasingly popular as a mind-body practice for people living in the West<sup>1</sup>. Between 1998 and 2002, yoga participation in the United States increased by 95% (American Sports Data 2003), and an estimated 15 million people, 7% of the population, practiced some form of yoga (Yoga Journal, June 2003). In 2002, 311,000 Australians or approximately 2.3% of the Australian population over 18 were practicing yoga (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2003).

In the West, more women practice yoga than men. This is of note when traditionally yoga was written for men, by men living in the East (Cornell 2000). According to the ABS (2002), yoga was the seventh most popular form of physical exercise in which Australian women participated in 2002, with 266,200 women or 3.6% of the female population practicing yoga. This accounts for 86% of all yoga participants in Australia. Preliminary results of an online national survey of around 4,000 yoga practitioners in Australia also report that 85% of practitioners and 82% of yoga teachers are female (Stephen Penman 2006 in Eggins 2006, 12).

American research suggests that female baby-boomers in particular are seeking gentler alternative ways of exercising (baby-boomers are those born in the period 1945-1965) (American Sports Data 2003). These findings support studies which report that women over forty make up the majority of yoga participants, particularly within the practice of

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<sup>1</sup> 'West' denotes concepts drawn from Western philosophy, principally North American and European. 'East' is used to broadly present concepts taken from Indian yoga philosophy (e.g. see Strauss 2005).

Iyengar yoga (see Badell 1998; Thomas, Tori, Thomas & Mehta 2000; Eggins 2006; Yoga Journal, June 2003). A broad range of reasons for practicing yoga in the West has been identified and includes physical and mental health, stress reduction, relaxation, rehabilitation, overall well-being and spiritual development (see Badell 1998; Dragon 1998; Cushman 2000; Thomas *et al.* 2000).

The rise of yoga's popularity is often linked to increasing levels of stress experienced by people living in contemporary society (Corliss 2001; De Michelis 2004). Iwasaki (1999-2000; 2000) identifies major sources of stress as daily encounters, role tensions, chronic life problems, life transitions and life crises. Indeed, for many Western individuals, stress is a 'way of life' (Kabat-Zinn 1990), where 'living in the world means living with stress' (Domar 1996, 5). Physical exercise and participation in leisure activities are reported to help people cope better with stress (see Coleman 1993; Coleman & Iso-Ahola 1993; Ragheb 1993; Haworth 1995; Iso-Ahola & Park 1996; Haworth 1997; Zuzanek & Mannell 1998; Iwasaki & Mannell 1999-2000; Alfermann & Stoll 2000; Dishman & Jackson 2000; Iwasaki & Mannell 2000; Solberg, Ingjer, Holen, Sundgot-Borgen, Nilsson & Holme 2000). However, inactivity tends to govern the lives of the majority, and particularly women (Henderson, Ainsworth, Stolarczyk, Hootman & Levin 1999; Markula, Grant & Denison 2001).

Integral to experiences of stress are changes in the perception of time. Western lifestyles are associated with a perceived speeding up of time (Kabat-Zinn 1990). The globalisation of institutions and lifestyles are widely considered to have transformed both the content and nature of day-to-day living (Kabat-Zinn 1990; Giddens 1991), although two decades earlier, Linder (1970 in Robinson & Godbey 1998) described such experiences of time as 'time scarcity' or 'time-famine'. There is strong evidence indicating a correlation between people who feel rushed and people who describe themselves as suffering from high levels of stress (Robinson & Godbey 1998). Moreover, Kabat-Zinn (1990) suggests that time stress is a fundamental cause of disease in contemporary society, attributed to the sense of time pressure experienced in much of daily life.

Research on gender and the pace of life show that women, specifically, perceive contemporary life as hectic, intense and rushed (Deem & Gilroy 1998). From an Australian perspective, the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH) reveals that more than half of the mid-age respondents (>12, 000 women) frequently feel rushed, pressured and busy (Brown & Brown 1999). Other research reports gender differences in responses to stress. Women report stress in their lives more than men, and experience higher levels of distress and chronic conditions (see Robinson & Godbey 1998; Zuzanek & Mannell 1998; Brown, Mishra, Lee & Bauman 2000; McDonough & Walters 2001). An American study identifies stress as the primary problem for women when dealing with daily difficulties (Domar 1996, 8).

Experiences of 'time lack' also contribute to the inability of many people to make the time to look after themselves, and this is particularly the case with women (see Henderson & Allen 1991; Henderson & Bialeschki 1991; Kabat-Zinn 1990; Jackson & Henderson 1995; Domar 1996; Kay 1998). Women are associated with selflessness related to taking care of others and carrying out multiple roles at work and home. These commitments are recognised as having a detrimental effect on women's health and well-being (see Henderson & Allen 1991; Domar 1996). Mind-body exercise is becoming increasingly acceptable in Western societies as a means to manage stress and improve well-being (see Brown 1990; Kabat-Zinn 1990; Chin 1992; Jin 1992; Domar 1996; La Forge 1997; Lasater 1997; Roth & Creaser 1997; Berkel 1998; Collins 1998; Szabo, Mesko, Caputo & Gill 1998; Andrews, Angone, Cray, Lewis & Johnson 1999; Sobel 2000; Funderberg 2001; Mate 2003). Domar (1996) suggests that this form of exercise is of particular benefit to women because emphasis is given to taking care of the self.

Since the 1970s, a changing attitude regarding the integration and connectedness of mind-body has occurred in the field of behavioural medicine and more recently in the field of psychoneuroimmunology (see Kabat-Zinn 1990; La Forge 1997; Mate 2003). The same time period also saw feminist theories challenge the existing mind-body dichotomy (Braidotti 1994; Grosz 1994; McDermott 1996; Davis 1997; Bray & Colebrook 1998; Putman Tong 1998; Budgeon 2003). These newer theories challenged the West's

traditional approach that divided the wholeness of being into separate, non-interacting qualities of mind and body, a point of view put forward by Rene Descartes in the seventeenth century (see Russel 1995 (1946)). According to Herrick and Ainsworth (2000), the widening recognition of a connection between mind and body is partly responsible for the growth in the popularity of yoga in the West.

Yoga's increasing popularity is also influenced by the globalisation of religions and traditions that have presented an increasing number of choices for the inquiring 'spiritual' seeker. In general terms modern interpretations of 'spirituality' identify a connection between the individual and some larger supernatural reality (Long Marler & Hadaway 2002, 295). Gary Bouma (2000 in Garrett 2001, 340) defines 'spirituality' as 'experiences of and ways of relating to that which is "more", "beyond" and "greater" than the ordinary, the material, the everyday aspects of life... spirituality involves those experiences, things, ideas, actions and beliefs that give life meaning'. Since the 1970s, there has been an influx of mind-body Eastern traditions and practices into the West (Kohn 2003). It is argued that this trend is a response to increasing experiences of meaninglessness in the lives of many Westerners, which are linked with all aspects of life: leisure time, work, and people's lives more generally (Goodale & Witt 1985):

The current interest in spiritualities... speaks of the ontological insecurity experienced by many today, and, more psychologically, that speaks of the fragmentation of self, a condition for which remedies are being sought (Chatterjee 1997, 20).

However, Paranipe (1998, 144) also suggests that the influx of Eastern practices has meant that there are a 'bewildering array of alternatives' available in contemporary society, that potentially can increase the difficulties in the development of one's identity as well as presenting numerous opportunities for seeking spiritual fulfillment in one's life. The seeking of 'spiritual fulfillment' by incorporating practices like yoga is in particular a significant trend amongst the baby-boomer population in the West (Heelas 1996; Long Marler & Hadaway 2002) (see also Chapter Three). Moreover, according to some psychologists and researchers working in the social sciences, midlife (the present

baby-boomer age bracket) is also acknowledged as a time of life for reflection and change (O'Connor 2000; Vicker-Willis 2002). Although there is some research in this area, O'Connor (2000) indicates that the transition into the fifties is neither well defined nor predictable. A gap exists to explore to what extent an internally directed mind-body exercise such as Iyengar yoga may provide meaning in the lives of those who practice during their middle years.

## **1.2 Research aims and significance**

Even though the practice of yoga is becoming increasingly widespread in the Western world, many aspects of its philosophy, practice and effects have not been studied. For example, medical studies have analysed the effects of yoga practice for a range of conditions including physical flexibility, hypertension, arthritis, asthma, carpal tunnel syndrome, lower back pain and anxiety (see Patel 1973; Patel 1975; Berger & Owen 1988; Munro, Ghosh & Kalish 1989; Singh, Wisniewski, Britton & Tattersfield 1990; Berger & Owen 1992; Coats 1998; Collins 1998; Garfinkel, Singhal, Katz, Allan, Reshetar & Schumacher 1998; Sequeira 1999; Williams, Steinberg & Petronis 2003; Kolasinski, Garfinkel, Gilden Tsal, Matz, Van Dyke & Schumacher 2005). Such research has been mainly concerned with the potential of yoga practice to improve specific physical and physiological conditions. Most of this research has also been quantitative, set in clinical conditions where the participants often have little or no previous experience of yoga. As a result, the findings are out of context with the holistic and inclusive nature of yoga's practice.

Presently, research that investigates yoga as a mind-body modality is limited (Dragon 1998). There is also a need to explore the more subtle processes that arise from a regular practice of yoga (Watts 2000; Garrett 2001). Collins (1998) highlights a need for research to focus on the process of self-transformation arising from yoga's practice, including potential changes to self-awareness and spiritual life perspective. The current project addresses these gaps by examining a group of women's experiences of yoga from a

qualitative and more inclusive perspective. The processes of self-transformation are explored via the participants' experiences of their Iyengar yoga practice.

The aim of this thesis is to critically examine mid-aged women's experiences of Iyengar yoga. Focusing on a select group of women living in New South Wales, Australia, the study ultimately seeks to determine whether a process of self-transformation arises from their yoga practice. Given this aim, the objectives of this thesis are:

1. To document similarities and differences between the teachings and practice of yoga in the West and the East;
2. To investigate whether the practice of yoga by female Western practitioners is significantly influencing the practice of yoga in the West;
3. To create a profile of the mid-aged women interviewed for the study;
4. To explain why these women at mid-life are practicing Iyengar yoga;
5. To investigate whether expanding levels of awareness impact on the women's experiences arising from their regular Iyengar yoga practice;
6. To analyse how and why women's experiences of Iyengar yoga impact on their conceptions of 'the self' and the extent to which their experiences reflect processes of 'becoming' (Anthony Giddens' interpretation of 'the self') and states of 'being' (yoga's interpretation of 'the Self');
7. To understand how Western constructions of 'the self' fit or differ from Eastern constructions of 'the Self' and the ways in which they influence each other.

### **1.3 Change in the direction of the thesis**

As shown above (also see Chapters Two & Three), the effects of stress and loss of meaning for individuals living in the West perhaps in part explain why Westerners are turning to a practice of yoga. This thesis began by looking at why Western women practice yoga, exploring the conditions in the West that encourage women to practice Iyengar yoga, through interviews with a group of mid-aged women living in Australia.



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 in which Western yoga practitioners reside. 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. 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?

To address these broader, theoretical concerns two conceptions of 'the self' were compared. The work of Anthony Giddens offers a Western perspective of 'the self', and contemporary interpretations of classical yoga philosophy provide an Eastern perspective. Giddens has contributed extensively to the interpretation of classical sociological theory and has published prolifically since the 1970s (see Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1994, 182-183). He describes his own theory of reflexivity as a contemporary stage in the development of modern society. Central to his conception of reflexive modernity is the development of 'the self', which he describes in *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991).

For Giddens (1991, 2) modernity is represented by the interconnection of two opposing characteristics: global influences on the one hand and personal dispositions (self-identity) on the other. These two factors transform the nature of modern living because social relationships are removed from their traditional local contexts, and are further influenced by changed experiences of time and space. It is within the context of these local and global mechanisms that 'the self' becomes a reflexive project (see Giddens 1991, 32). Giddens suggests that the nature of contemporary society makes reflexive opportunities available for the attainment of self-actualisation. The transformation of the reflexive self

has become a practical endeavour rather than an abstract one (Giddens 1991, 37). Individual fulfillment and happiness are attained through the discipline and mastery of the physical body. One recent trend that seemingly fits Giddens' 'project of the self' in contemporary Western society is the rising popularity of the practice of yoga. The modern practice of yoga in the West is essentially experiential, primarily via the practice of physical yoga techniques (De Michelis 2004).

The traditional Eastern practice and philosophy of yoga and its relationship to 'the Self', also raises a number of interesting questions with respect to contemporary theories of 'the self', particularly when compared with Giddens' reflexive project. In the first instance, there do appear to be similarities between both conceptualisations of 'the self'. In addition to the central role of the physical body, both describe 'being in the present moment' and 'awareness' as integral components in the process of self-transformation (see Giddens 1991; Paranjpe 1998). Yet, the two perspectives offer different explanations of the role of the physical body, the mind, awareness and being in the present moment. The differences and similarities between the two approaches are examined in Chapter Two.

Another salient dimension of the thesis is the analysis of the 'feminisation' of yoga, given that it has been women who have primarily embraced yoga's practice since its introduction into the West. There is little empirical research examining the embodied nature of yoga's practice as a means of understanding women's lived experiences. Thus I draw in part from the work of Luce Irigaray (2002). She devises a feminist theory of 'the self' from her own experiences of yoga. Gayford (1999) also suggests that the rise in the use of alternative therapies is more female-orientated, offering health strategies that encourage wholeness in body, mind and spirit. The question of whether the evolution of yoga in the West encompasses a feminisation of its practice is explored in Chapter Three.

#### 1.4 History of yoga – an overview

Yoga's heritage has a legacy of more than 5,000 years (Feuerstein 2003a). It is one of six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy, the beginnings of which have been traced to India's oldest sacred text, the *Rig-Veda*, compiled prior to 2000 B.C. (Iyengar B.K.S. 1991 (1966); Feuerstein 2003a). Other ancient texts associated with the development of yoga's practice and philosophy include the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which contains India's most popular scripture, *The Bhagavad Gita* (Mehta 1994). Over the centuries, and indeed millennia, yoga's practice and philosophy continued to evolve (Whicher 1998a). The history of yoga's evolution remains a complex topic, and even the word yoga is not easy to define.

Feuerstein (2003a, 3) suggests that in general terms, yoga means 'spiritual discipline' within the traditions of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. Whicher (1998a) notes that within India, there are as many kinds of yoga as there are spiritual disciplines. More specifically, within the Hindu schools of *Vedanta* and *Samkhya* the word 'yoga' comes from the Indian Sanskrit word 'yuj', which means to join or integrate, to make whole, to connect, to unite (Iyengar B.K.S. 1991 (1966), 19; Whicher 1998a, 7; Feuerstein 2003a, 4). B.K.S. Iyengar also interprets the meaning of yoga as 'to concentrate one's attention or direct one's energy in search of the Ultimate Truth' (Iyengar B.K.S. 1999a, 11). The word yoga depicts various paths of 'unification' (Whicher 1998a, 6). There are several 'paths' or forms of yoga that can be undertaken to attain self-realisation (Prahavananda 1979; Iyengar B.K.S. 1991 (1966)), and within the Hindu tradition several forms of yoga have gained prominence (see Table 1.1).

**Table 1.1: Types of yoga**

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| <i>Raja-yoga</i>   | Royal yoga or classical yoga<br>(Later referred to as Patanjali's school of yoga in order to contrast it with <i>Hatha yoga</i> ) |
| <i>Jnana yoga</i>  | The yoga of 'knowledge' or 'wisdom'   |
| <i>Hatha yoga</i>  | The 'forceful' yoga of the physical body  |
| <i>Bhakti yoga</i> | The yoga of 'devotion'  |
| <i>Karma yoga</i>  | The yoga of 'action'  |
| <i>Mantra yoga</i> | The yoga of the 'recitation of sound'   |

Source: (Whicher 1998a, 6).

The Iyengar system of yoga is portrayed as incorporating principles from the different forms of yoga (*Raja*, *Hatha*, *Mantra*, *Karma*, *Jnana*, *Bhakti* and *Laya* yoga<sup>2</sup> (Iyengar P.S. 1999a, 30). The history and philosophical interpretations of the various paths of yoga are both vast and complex and beyond the scope of the current thesis. A brief overview is provided here and in Chapters Two and Three.<sup>3</sup> Of the schools listed in Table 1, perhaps the most prominent is the system of classical yoga (Whicher 1998a).

Patanjali, an Indian sage, wrote the first classical text on yoga: the *Yoga Sutras*. The aphorisms or *sutras* within the text have become definitive in providing the techniques and transformative approaches in the classical school of yoga (see Whicher 1998a; Feuerstein 2003a). There is much debate about when Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* was written, but most place its composition between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. (Prahavananda 1979; Iyengar B.K.S. 1993; Stoler Miller 1998; Whicher 1998a). The complexity of yoga's history is noted in Patanjali's presentation of techniques and theories, many of which have their origin in more ancient yoga texts (Stoler Miller 1998).

<sup>2</sup> *Laya* yoga is the total absorption of the mind (Iyengar P.S. 1999b, 27).

<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough discussion see De Michelis (2004), Feuerstein (2003a), Paranjpe (1998), Prahavananda (1979) and Whicher (1998a).

According to Whicher (1998a, 1, 303), the *Sutras* remain one of the most influential spiritual guides in Hinduism, possessing the potential to be ‘one of India’s finest contributions to our modern/post-modern struggle for self-definition, moral integrity, and spiritual renewal’. Stoller Miller (1998, ix) describes the *Sutras* as ‘a set of philosophical analyses that probe the timeless dilemmas of cognition and obstacles to spiritual tranquility’. For B.K.S. Iyengar, Patanjali’s work established the techniques to provide a ‘practical way of living’ in contemporary life (Iyengar B.K.S. 2003, 4). Indeed, millions of Westerners practice some form of yoga influenced by the philosophy and practice presented in the *Yoga Sutras* (Whicher 1998a; Feuerstein 2003a).

Evolving from the *Yoga Sutras* philosophically, while placing greater emphasis on the physical practice of yoga, *Hatha* yoga developed around the tenth century (Feuerstein 2003a, 41). Later, between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, *Hathayoga Pradipika* expanded the system of yoga into a practice of physically and spiritually ‘efficacious postures’, in Sanskrit called *asanas* (Stoler Miller 1998, 57). *Hathayoga Pradipika* identifies different physical postures and practices in detail, with the intention that the body is used to explore the potentially transformative processes of yoga’s practice (Feuerstein 1998). This text also remains popular within the teachings of contemporary yoga (Iyengar & Iyengar 2002; Feuerstein 2003a). Feuerstein (2003a) draws attention to the fact that the practice of *Hatha* yoga has undergone a number of transmutations, with the most significant adaptations taking place in recent decades as yoga has met the diverse needs of a growing number of Western practitioners. The evolution of yoga in the West is discussed in Chapter Three.

Prashant Iyengar (B.K.S. Iyengar’s son) (2003) describes *Hatha* yoga as one of the most misunderstood and misused terms in Western interpretations of yoga. His observation has significance for the current thesis which focuses on the effects of practicing Iyengar yoga. Philosophically, B.K.S. Iyengar aligns the style of yoga he teaches (Iyengar yoga) with the *Astanga* system (classical yoga or *Raja* yoga) outlined in the *Yoga Sutras* (see Iyengar

B.K.S. 1999a).<sup>4</sup> Foundational practices of *Hatha* yoga are not part of the system of Iyengar yoga, even though some aspects such as the physical practice (*asana* and *pranayama*) draw from practices detailed in the *Hathayoga Pradipika* (Iyengar P.S. 1999a). Prashant Iyengar describes *Hatha* yoga as ‘a post graduation course based on *Astanga* Yoga’ (Iyengar P.S. 2003, 12), implying that the practitioner has to be adept at *Astanga* yoga before progressing on to some of the practices outlined in the *Hatha* yoga texts. That said, Iyengar yoga is often referred to in the yoga community as a practice of yoga that embraces the principles of *Hatha* yoga. De Michelis (2004, 226) argues that the practice of Iyengar yoga is a modernised form of *Hatha* yoga that has developed within ‘a hathayoga framework’.

In the West there are several significant contemporary approaches to yoga that have developed alongside Iyengar yoga. A few of the more established styles include: *Astanga*, *Integral*, *Kripalu*, *Satchinanda*, and *Sivananda*. These styles of yoga are based on traditional teachings to varying degrees.<sup>5</sup> Lloyd (1997a) suggests that an increasing number of ‘hybridised’ approaches to the traditional yoga teachings are emerging, as some Western yoga teachers devise their own ‘brands’ of yoga.

### 1.5 Iyengar yoga

Iyengar yoga describes yoga devised and taught by *Yogacharya* Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja (B.K.S.) Iyengar (Yoga Rahasya 2004a).<sup>6</sup> His students devised the term ‘Iyengar yoga’ in the 1970s as a way of distinguishing the style of yoga they practiced (Yoga Rahasya 2004a). During his long experience of practicing yoga he developed a precise practice of *asana* (postures) and *pranayama* (breathing techniques). These two components provide the foundation of practice of the Iyengar method of yoga. Iyengar

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<sup>4</sup> In the second chapter of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, the eight limbs of *Astanga* yoga are translated as: moral or social discipline (*yama*); self-restraint or individual discipline (*niyama*); practice of postures for physical discipline (*asana*); breath control for mental discipline (*pranayama*); withdrawal or detachment of the senses (*pratyahara*); concentration (*dharana*); meditation (*dhyana*); and absorption of the self, self-realisation or union with the Universal Spirit (*samadhi*) (Iyengar 1993; 1999a).

<sup>5</sup> See Feuerstein (2003a) for an overview of the main yoga styles taught in the West.

<sup>6</sup> *Yogacharya* means master teacher (Hart 2004, 12).

yoga has been described as a unique interpretation of the *Yoga Sutras*, embodying the principles of Patanjali's text (Iles & Gandhi 2001, 20).

Since the 1960s B.K.S. Iyengar has been influential in bringing the practice of yoga to the West and his style of yoga remains one of the world's most practiced styles (Lillas 2002; Feuerstein 2003a). His first book, *Light on Yoga*, was published in the West in 1966, and was instrumental in establishing him as an internationally respected teacher (De Michelis 2004, 199). The book remains a modern classic yoga text. It is published in sixteen languages (Iyengar B.K.S. 2001a, xiii), and has never been out of print (B.K.S. Iyengar Association of Australia 2006, 7). B.K.S. Iyengar's influence in the West was further acknowledged when the word 'Iyengar' was included in the 2003 edition of the *Oxford Dictionary*. Iyengar is defined as a 'mass noun' to denote the particular style of yoga, derived 'after B.K.S. Iyengar (born 1919), the Indian yoga teacher who devised this method' (Yoga Rahasya 2004a, 59). In addition, B.K.S. Iyengar was listed in the May 26, 2004 issue of *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential personalities in the world, under the category of 'Heroes and Icons' alongside Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama and Aung Sang Suu Kyi (Yoga Rahasya 2004b, 63).

The Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (RIMYI) in Pune, India, was established in 1975 as a centre where B.K.S. Iyengar could teach his students. Since that time, the Institute has continued to attract thousands of Iyengar yoga students from around the world who come to study Iyengar yoga there. His son Prashant and his daughter Geeta continue his tradition and have also become respected and revered teachers of the Iyengar method. Prashant, Iyengar's son, describes three characteristics specific to the practice of Iyengar yoga: technical intricacies (precision and alignment), sequencing, and timing (Iyengar P.S. 2000, 5-6). He also identifies the use of props as a key feature of the Iyengar system of yoga (Iyengar P.S. 2005, 3). An authentic practice of Iyengar yoga requires a 'blending' of all of these features (Iyengar P.S. 2000, 5-6) (see Appendix A).

The attention given to precision and alignment in the practice of the various *asanas* is a hallmark of Iyengar yoga (Iyengar P.S. 2005, 4). This comprises precise and subtle points to assist correct alignment and positioning of the body in the pose. Prashant Iyengar (2005, 4) explains that the importance of precision in *asana* and *pranayama* is not just for the physical alignment, but on a more subtle level, if the body is aligned with precision, then the breath and then the mind, emotions and senses also become balanced. According to B.K.S. Iyengar, when the *asanas* are practiced with precision there is ‘complete involvement of the mind, awareness and intelligence’ (n.d. in Mehta 2001, 33).

Sequencing determines the order and type of postures to be undertaken. Different sequences of *asanas* can have different effects on the body and mind. For example a particular sequence of poses can be energising, or calming, or quietening (see Appendix A). The sequencing of poses enables the effects of practicing yoga to be accumulative and progressive (Iyengar P.S. 2000, 6). Sequences can be specific to a particular ailment or condition (Mehta, Mehta & Mehta 1990; Iyengar B.K.S. 1991 (1966); Mehta 1994; Iyengar B.K.S. 2001b; Mehta 2004). De Michelis (2004, 211) attributes B.K.S. Iyengar’s success to his presentation of a practice in a ‘modern way by incorporating the use of medical and anatomic-physiological models’, thereby making it more accessible to Western practitioners. His diligence and attention to practice has meant that one of B.K.S. Iyengar’s most significant contributions has been the use of yoga as a therapeutic tool (De Michelis 2004).

Different timings have different effects on the body and mind. *Asanas* practiced quickly are more stimulating and energising while staying longer in the *asanas* enables a more in-depth exploration of the mind, body and breath. The ability to stay in the *asanas* trains the mind and the body so that the physical and mental effort required in the pose is diminished. When the *asana* is performed with ‘stability’ and ‘ease’, then there is potential to become reflective and meditative (Iyengar P.S. 2005, 5). The use of props in practice is integral in the cultivation of experiences of ‘stability’ and ‘ease’ for the practitioner (Mehta 2001).



The use of ‘props’ is possibly the best known innovation of B.K.S. Iyengar’s teaching. Props assist the beginner student to maintain the correct posture without causing strain or bodily harm. Some common props used in an Iyengar class include mats, blocks, belts, blankets and bolsters. Props are used therapeutically, when for example a particular medical condition would prevent the student from being able to practice the classic version of some or all of the *asanas* (Iyengar P.S. 2004). Props are also beneficial for the more accomplished yoga practitioner. They provide support physically and mentally that makes it possible to stay longer in the *asanas* so that some practitioners may more likely experience the transformative potential of yoga’s practice (Iyengar P.S. 2004, 43).

Prashant Iyengar (2005, 6) stresses that the above key features of an Iyengar yoga practice need to be applied to the principles of *Astanga* yoga if the ‘transformative potential’ is to occur. In order for the practice of *asana* and *pranayama* to be authentic, *asanas* need discipline encoded by moral and social discipline (*yama*) and self-restraint and individual discipline (*niyama*) (see also Baier 2001). The features of Iyengar yoga are undertaken in practice so that the mind and intelligence can be completely involved in the practice of both *asana* and *pranayama* (Iyengar B.K.S. 1991 (1966); Iyengar B.K.S. 1992 (1981); Iyengar P.S. 2001; Mehta 2001). When the senses of perception (*pratyahara*) relax, the state of concentration (*dharana*) ensues (in Mehta 2001, 33). This cultivates the potential to become reflective and meditative with practice (Iyengar P.S. 2005, 5). This process identifies how the higher states of consciousness are involved in the practice of *asana* and *pranayama*. Prashant describes this process as the ‘hierarchy in practice’ (Iyengar P.S. 2005, 6).

Iyengar yoga has been taught in Australia since the 1970s. Martyn Jackson, one of the first Iyengar teachers in Australia, was responsible for starting the first Iyengar yoga school in Sydney, and the first Iyengar teacher-training group (Lillas 2002). By the 1990s some of this group had established themselves as part of the nucleus of senior Iyengar teachers around Australia (Nolan 2003). The number of Iyengar teachers and yoga schools continues to grow. In 2003 there were approximately 165 qualified Iyengar yoga teachers (of which I am one) recognised by the Iyengar Association in Australia (Nolan

2003). This association was established in 1985. Among its main responsibilities are to oversee the process of Iyengar teacher training and certification and to promote Iyengar yoga in Australia (Rabold 2002). In 1983 and 1992, the Association was responsible for organising B.K.S. Iyengar's visits to conduct workshops in Australia and New Zealand. His daughter Geeta Iyengar made two subsequent visits to Australia in 1996 and 2003 (Nolan 2003).

#### *1.5.1 The researcher's experience of Iyengar yoga*

I experienced my first Iyengar yoga class in 1993 in Glasgow, Scotland. I continued to attend a couple of Iyengar classes a week until I moved to Canberra, Australia in 1994. In Canberra (1994-1998) I attended two to three Iyengar classes weekly and over this time I began to develop a regular personal practice. In 1996 I completed yoga teacher training through the International Yoga Teachers' Association (IYTA) and in the same year started to teach two weekly yoga classes. In 1998 I began Iyengar Teacher Training in Sydney and became a certified Iyengar yoga teacher in 2002, acquiring an Introductory Teaching certificate. I continue to attend classes and training with my yoga teacher in Sydney as part of an ongoing commitment to develop my practice and teaching. I practice regularly at home and teach a number of classes in the city of Newcastle, NSW. I have noted that mid-life women make up a large proportion of the participants who attend the Iyengar yoga classes in which I teach and participate, substantiated by the records kept of class attendances.

The practice of Iyengar yoga has made a huge impact on my life and continues to influence the way I live. Although my intention is not to explicitly share my own experiences of yoga within the study, implicitly, my passion, understanding and experiences in the subject matter are intimately intertwined with the entire research process. The effects of my yoga involvement in the study are explored further in the discussion of the methodology in Chapter Four.

## **1.6 Sources of information**

The study draws from primary and secondary sources of information. Primary data were collected from interviews with 35 mid-aged women who had at least two years' experience of regularly practicing Iyengar yoga. A qualitative approach is utilised within an interpretative paradigm. In part, grounded theory is used to establish a women-centred perspective, allowing the women's experiences to be told in their own words (Crooks 2001). This is necessary to gain insight into how the women themselves experience their practice. A 'double hermeneutic' is applied using the theoretical framework developed in Chapters Two and Three as the means to further interpret the women's experiences of Iyengar yoga.

A variety of secondary sources were reviewed throughout the research period. A range of literature was consulted on women and well-being, theories of the body and 'the self', and research on yoga, philosophy and spirituality. With regards to yoga philosophy and Iyengar yoga specifically, yoga journals and yoga books were read and interpreted where academic information was lacking on the subject and as part of an ongoing journey to develop my understanding of yoga philosophy and practice.

Finally, I attended the School of Philosophy from 2002-2005. The School offers a practical philosophy class that draws from the Vedantic tradition (early yoga lineage). Attending the classes provided an ongoing source of information in relation to yoga philosophy, which contributed towards my understanding and the overall direction and development of the thesis.

## **1.7 Thesis outline**

This chapter has provided some background to the study and presented the main aims of the thesis. It was explained that the direction of the thesis was revised in the light of the data arising from the interviews. The main aims of the thesis were modified to examine the personal transformative experiences of the participants through their yoga practice. Key research questions include: How do Western constructions of 'the self' 'fit' or differ

with Eastern constructions of ‘the Self’ and how does each influence the other in the practice of Iyengar yoga?

Chapter Two develops the theoretical framework to interpret the women’s experiences of Iyengar yoga by comparing two theories of ‘the self’. Giddens’ reflexive project and interpretations of classical yoga’s practice and philosophy are compared as two different approaches to assist the individual attain self-actualisation (Giddens) and self-realisation (yoga). Emphasis is given to the role of the body, mind-body connection, awareness, being in the present moment, ‘the self’, relationships of time and space and ‘connectedness’. The comparisons are integral to interpreting the processes of self-transformation reflected in the women’s experiences.

Chapter Three considers to what extent the modern practice of yoga in the West reflects a traditional practice and identifies the main transitional phases in yoga’s practice since its arrival in the West. It explores whether the practice of yoga in the West has become another ‘project of the self’, designed to meet the needs of those living in contemporary society. The chapter considers why most people practicing yoga in the West are women, and assesses to what extent the increasing number of female yoga teachers and practitioners are influencing the way yoga is practiced and experienced.

The study’s methodology is critically examined in Chapter Four. The qualitative nature of the research is explained. This includes a discussion of the methodology and data analysis. How the research process was affected by my involvement in and knowledge of the yoga is described. The chapter concludes with a summary of the strengths and challenges of the methodology.

Chapter Five presents a profile of the women interviewed for the study, which includes an overview of the women’s demographic and broader lifestyle characteristics. Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* is incorporated in an examination of the age, class, lifestyle and values of this particular group of women. The women’s involvement with Iyengar

yoga and their motivations for starting yoga are discussed, together with the length of time and the nature of their commitment to a regular yoga practice.

Chapter Six explores the nature of the physical self-transformations arising from the participants' practice of Iyengar yoga. It examines how and why their practice of yoga transforms the way they experience and perceive their physical bodies. The chapter considers how expanded levels of awareness and embodied experiences transform the participants' perceptions of the physical self. The participants' experiences are interpreted within the theoretical framework described in Chapter Two.

Chapter Seven examines how the practice of yoga transforms the participants' mental and emotional experiences of 'the self'. Being in the present moment is identified as central to their perceived self-transformation. The women's experiences refer to a paradox that occurs as their experiences of yoga develop. The nature of their experiences is explored within the intertwining processes of 'being' and 'becoming'.

Chapter Eight further explores the influence of yoga in the women's lives. The women's practice becomes a vehicle for exploring 'the self'. The findings consider the extent to which experiences are representative of both processes of self-actualisation and self-realisation. Interpreting the participants' experiences contributes to an understanding of the process of self-transformation that arises from a practice of Iyengar yoga.

Chapter Nine summarises the major findings of the study and presents the paradoxical nature of experiences that arise from the women's sustained practice of Iyengar yoga. It describes the process that takes place as both Eastern and Western constructions of 'the self' are experienced and continue to evolve in a perpetual interplay between the two. The discussion also returns to the aim which set the initial direction of the thesis, that of 'why are women in particular attracted to a practice of yoga?' Finally, the study's contribution to knowledge in the social sciences is discussed, and the limitations of the study and possible avenues for further research are provided.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **BODY, MIND AND ‘THE SELF’: TWO PERSPECTIVES**

The Vedantic approach (yoga lineage) to self-knowledge is clearly an outcome of a long tradition of the contemplative search of enlightenment... while its Western parallel was overshadowed by the rational empiricist approach to the European enlightenment (Paranjpe 1998, 180).

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the theoretical framework in which the nature of the experiences described by a group of women with a regular practice of Iyengar yoga has been interpreted. As indicated in Chapter One, two different perspectives of ‘the self’ will be analysed: Giddens’ description of the nature of ‘the self’ in contemporary society, and ‘the Self’ depicted in classical yoga. The following discussion highlights the similarities and differences between these two perspectives. As they are quite complex, a table summarising the main differences is provided on page 45.

Giddens presents a project for attaining self-actualisation, a typically Western goal, whereas classical yoga presents techniques for attaining self-realisation, a traditionally Eastern orientation. The role of the body and the mind, awareness, being in the present moment, ‘the true self’ and the relationship between ‘self’ and ‘other’ are examined here, as they are qualities central to both transformative processes. These two perspectives provide the key determinants in exploring the possible tensions between how ‘the Self’ of yoga’s ancient tradition and ‘the self’ described by Giddens are represented in a modern practice of yoga.

## 2.2 Background

### 2.2.1 Giddens' perspective

As noted in Chapter One, Giddens' (1991, 4) description of the conditions of 'high-modernity' or the 'late modern world' reflect predominant features of contemporary Western society, primarily industrialism and capitalism. 'Modernity' is a term to describe particular features that distinguish the modern period from traditional ways of living, including: economic, political, religious, social and cultural aspects of life (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1994, 270), in the midst of disagreement whether the modern period represents the last three hundred or the last five hundred years. Giddens argues that modernity has impacted on all traditional types of social order in an unprecedented fashion, resulting in emerging theories and ways of daily living that uproot old belief systems without replacing them (Myerson 1995). In pre-modern societies religion was the main tradition, providing a stabilising influence in terms of the body, self-identity and the potential for living a meaningful life (Shilling 2003). The loss of formal religion in the lives of many contemporary people has contributed to the deprivation of meaningful and reflective experiences (Giddens 1991; Moore 1993).

Giddens (1991, 9) suggests that individuals living in modern society are faced with personal meaninglessness, 'the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer'. Moreover, the lessening role of tradition and increasing levels of stress create 'insecurities' in contemporary life that threaten an individual's self-identity (Giddens 1991). For Giddens, there are two factors contributing to rising levels of stress. First, if the individual is ontologically unaware, they become anxious, and this causes them to think ahead. Second, the uncertainty of what the future will bring also leads the individual to become anxious. Therefore, to overcome anxiety, Giddens (1991, 33) suggests it is necessary for the individual to acquire some control of time, their future, and their lives through active participation in reflexive projects, in order to connect 'personal and social change' (see also Callero 2003).

### 2.2.2 A yoga perspective

The second perspective interprets broad philosophical ideals and practices of classical yoga, drawing mainly from yoga's most influential text, Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras*. As noted in Chapter One, Iyengar yoga embraces the principles of classical yoga following in the tradition of the ancient Eastern practices. The works of Fields (2001), Feuerstein (1991; 2003a; 2003b), Feuerstein and Miller (1970), Iyengar (1993; 1999a), Paranjpe (1998), Stoler Miller (1998) and Whicher (1998a; 1998b), are also incorporated, as these are contemporary interpretations of Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras*.

Traditionally, the techniques of classical yoga were practiced to eradicate human suffering in order to attain self-realisation (Feuerstein 2003a, 13). According to the *Sūtras*, attachment to the material world is caused by spiritual ignorance (*aviyda*), which is the cause of all human suffering (*dukha*) and dissatisfaction (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993). Patanjali identified five afflictions (*klesas*) as the cause of all human suffering: ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion and clinging to life (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993, 6). These afflictions cause human suffering arising from the insatiable nature of human desires (Paranjpe 1998, 253).

Traditionally, the techniques of yoga were intended to isolate 'the self-as-enjoyer-sufferer' from the daily involvement in the affairs of the external world by connecting with 'the Self', an internal experience of 'being' beyond pleasure and pain (Paranjpe 1998, 253). However, B.K.S. Iyengar (1993, 139) suggests that the modern individual 'seeks to change not himself but his environment, in order to create the illusion that he is enjoying health and harmony'. He is implying that when people lose their sense of self, there is a tendency to seek solutions externally through the acquisition of goods and possessions and the satiating of desires rather than turn inward to connect with 'the Self'.

Researchers working in the fields of leisure have also long argued that leisure activities, and indeed life in general, focus too much on the acquisition of material goods, subject to increasing commodification and consumerism. One good example is Velben's notion of



‘Conspicuous Consumption’ (Veblen 2004 (1899)). According to Irigaray (2002, 93), people living in contemporary society fail to understand ‘who the self is’, and suggests that, ‘we know more things but we return less to ourselves in order to examine the meaning of all these things’. Answering the question of ‘who is the self?’ is at the heart of many philosophical traditions, including the tradition of yoga (Paranjpe 1998). As one of the world’s ancient traditions, yoga’s increasing popularity in the West is a trend worthy of further exploration.

## **2.3 Experiences of time**

### *2.3.1 Giddens and the control of time*

Giddens (1991, 2) describes contemporary life as a ‘runaway world’, where time is being squeezed as a result of the globalisation of institutions and lifestyles. A process of ‘disembedding’ accelerates individual experiences of time and space because social relations become increasingly global as opposed to local (Giddens 1991, 16). Experiences of time pressure are increasingly acknowledged in much of modern daily life (see Domar 1996; Zuzanek & Mannell 1998; Iwasaki & Mannell 1999-2000; Iwasaki & Mannell 2000; Fullagar & Brown 2003; Warner-Smith & Cartwright 2003; Brown & Warner-Smith 2005). Experiences of time pressure, the associated stress, and the lack of meaning in people’s lives are all detrimental to maintaining a positive relationship between the individual and ‘the self’ (Giddens 1991). Giddens argues that the way to overcome identity problems is to gain some control over time by planning ahead for the future. His reflexive project maintains that if some control over time is gained, it establishes zones of personal time.

Giddens’ (1991) theoretical perspective has been shaped by Western interpretations of time. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) set the foundations for modern understandings of time that exist as a construct of the mind (Russel 1995 (1946); Feuerstein 2000). Krishnamurti (1995, n.p.) describes Western conceptualisations of time as: ‘Time is thought and thought is the process of memory that creates time as yesterday, today, and tomorrow, as a thing we use as a means of achievement, as a way of life’. Similarly for Giddens, time

is depicted as a mental construct, where time is continuous, linking events from the past to the future. This largely unidirectional view of time emphasises progress and achievement, indicative of a ‘perpetual process of becoming’ (Paranjpe 1998, 6). This perspective is central to Giddens’ descriptive reflexive project.

### 2.3.2 *Yoga and present time*

Alternatively, yoga and most ancient Indian traditions embrace a cyclical view of time (Paranjpe 1998). In the West, it was not until the twentieth century that scientific research challenged established linear notions of time. Theories in quantum physics have questioned notions of fixed time and space (Verthuy 1989). Feminist writers, like Irigaray, also support these alternative perspectives of time. Irma Garcia (1989, 181) devises the term *hors-temps*, to depict moments where nothing happens, moments of great peace and serenity. *Hors-temps* describes a temporal experience that is beyond the linear and ‘an explosion and valorisation of the present’. Experiencing time in the present moment is also integral to an authentic practice of yoga.

The aim of Patanjali’s yoga is the ‘cessation of movements in the mind’ (Stoler Miller 1998; Whicher 1998a) or ‘the cessation of movements in the consciousness’ (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993, 46). Feuerstein (2000) describes the practice of yoga as ‘the conquest of time’, where it is necessary to focus completely on the present moment, rather than on the past or the future. Iyengar (1989, 145) describes the present moment as the space between the restrained thought and the rising thought. If the space between the restrained thought and the rising thought increases, it becomes ‘a single uninterrupted point of awareness’. Unlike Western concepts of time, there is no aggregation of moments but rather a continuity of moments, where ‘moment’ is viewed as the ultimate unit of time in which the individual becomes aware (Whicher 1998a).

From this perspective, the modern problems of time-lack and stress are created because although the moment is stable, most people do not see the moment, they ‘only see the movement created by the succession of moments’ (Iyengar B.K.S. 1989, 147). Patanjali’s system of yoga is intended to guide the individual ‘to live in the present so that the future

can take care of itself' (Iyengar B.K.S. 1999a, 85). Time is created only when thoughts focus on the past and future (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993). According to yoga philosophy, linear constructs of time limit the individual by viewing 'the self' from the level of mental processes or the mind, where thinking about the world depends on a temporal sequence of ideas (Feuerstein 2003a, 176).

Krishnamurti (1995) explains how the West's focus on a linear relationship of time, from the past to the future, is precisely what increases a person's anxiety levels. Thinking ahead to the future involves a process of moving from what *is* ('being' in the present), to what *should be* (what is desired in the future), because the change to get to what should be involves time. The physical practice of yoga is said to transform the way time is experienced because, as Baier (2001, 7) notes, during practice the focus is on the present moment. The practice of yoga *asana* unites:

... thoughts and actions so that there is no time gap between them. When there is absolute synchronicity of thought and action, the yogi is free from the material limitations of time and space (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993, 32).

Feuerstein (2000) describes the present moment as a place where ordinary experiences of time are suspended, because time literally stands still. When attention is completely focused on the present moment, there is no space for stress and anxiety to manifest in the mind. The present moment is changeless. Therefore, in the practice of yoga, rather than trying to control time the opposite is said to be true:

The more we try to control our world, the less control we have. The more we are willing to let go and simply stay present with what is, the more control we have (Lasater 2000, 57).

From a yoga perspective, by focusing on the present moment, experiences of stillness quieten the thought process of the mind and thereby reduce feelings of anxiety.

## 2.4 Self-awareness: a process of ‘being’ or ‘becoming’?

### 2.4.1 *‘Becoming’ progresses towards ‘being’*

Both Giddens and classical yoga describe being in the present moment as essential for the cultivation of self-awareness (Giddens 1991; Iyengar B.K.S. 1993). Experiences in the present moment are associated with ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. As noted, for Giddens (1991, 77), an individual’s progress requires temporal control as a means of acquiring personal time in order to attain one’s potential in the future. In keeping with Enlightenment ideals, progress implies an ongoing process of improvement (see also Paranjpe 1998, 16). Brentano (1874 in Paranjpe 1998, 80) suggests that thought processes towards ‘becoming’ are always characterised by an individual’s intention, and are driven by a desire towards a particular end result (Krishnamurti n.d. in Rajagopal 1970b (1958)).

For an individual to progress it is necessary to come into the present moment. Awareness of the body is integral to ‘grasping the fullness of the moment’, where sensory input is constantly monitored from the environment as well as directly from the body (Giddens 1991, 43). For Giddens, coming into the present moment is necessary to develop the required level of self-understanding in order to effectively plan ahead. ‘Doing’ everyday life allows the individual to ‘answer’ the question of ‘being’, by forming ‘a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future’ (Giddens 1991, 71, 75). The future is continually drawn into the present by means of reflexive organisation of ‘knowledge environments’. This requires the consideration of future and past events in the present to effectively plan for the future (Giddens 1991, 48).

A central premise of Giddens’ perspective is that an individual’s potential is unmet in the present time. To overcome this ‘lack’ he devises a means of improving ‘the self’ by planning ahead in order to ‘make something’ of ‘the self’ in the future. The focus is on one’s ability ‘to become’: ‘we are not what we are, but what we make ourselves’ (Giddens 1991, 75). In keeping with the Western tendency to focus on improving human potential, Giddens (1991) assigns individual contentment to a continuous process of

‘becoming’, driven largely by external representations and ideas about how ‘the self’, using the body, should be presented. Progress is necessary for self-actualisation. Only when an individual self-actualises does he/she experience ‘being’ (Giddens 1991, 48). These are typical of Western directives proposing progress towards higher levels of accomplishment (see Paranjpe 1998, 182).

In short, Giddens’ reflexive project requires coming into the present moment to reflect on one’s biographical narrative and draw from internal and external influences, past and future, to plan for the future. A progressive trajectory of ‘becoming’ provides the individual with the opportunity of self-actualisation in the future, where the individual can ‘be’. Giddens (1991, 48) acknowledges that the flux between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ can result in an ongoing ‘struggle’ for the individual because the very nature of progress may increase stress and insecurity arising from the constant pressure to ‘become’. Similarly, Shilling (2003) and Turner and Rojek (2001) argue that focusing primarily on future aspirations can increase levels of anxiety because the aspirant potentially never finds satisfaction from a never-ending process of future goals.

#### 2.4.2 *‘Being’ is the process of ‘becoming’*

The cultivation of awareness is also central to the practice of yoga (Sarasvati 1981; Kawano 1997). Iyengar (1993, 9) describes the cultivation of awareness as a process that ‘takes one through layers of being, outwards from the core, the soul, towards the periphery, the body; and inwards from the periphery to the core’. Cultivating awareness is defined as an improved propensity to relate to things internally as well as externally (Sarasvati 1981):

Self-awareness is not self-consciousness. When you are self-aware, you are fully within yourself, not outside of yourself looking in. You are aware of what you are doing without ego or pride (Iyengar B.K.S. 2005a, 31).

The *Sutras* outline practical techniques to become more self-aware in order to guide the aspirant through layers of awareness, ultimately to discover ‘the divine’ or the spirit

within (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993). Many other terms are used interchangeably to convey yoga's interpretation of 'the divine'. Some examples include, 'the transcendent Self', 'the soul', 'the omnipresent reality', 'the 'heaven' within', 'the ultimate unit of awareness', 'the absolute as pure awareness', and 'the Self (*purusa*, *atman*)' (Feuerstein 1991, 100, 104, 109, 177-178). The process of discovering 'the divine' begins with external awareness, and as awareness penetrates internally with practice, the mind, the ego, the consciousness and the individual self are filled with awareness (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993, 9).

These changes in self-awareness and perspective, although difficult to quantify, are described as one of the most beneficial outcomes of a sustained yoga practice (Herrick & Ainsworth 2000). According to Iyengar (1993), individuals in modern Western societies fail to spend adequate time in the present moment, allowing time to be still. As previously noted much of modern life is focused on acquisition, accomplishment and success (see also Bodian 2002). Irigaray (2002) considers the ability 'to be' a particularly useful skill for women in contemporary society, where there is a predominant focus on 'becoming' in many women's lives.

As Kabat-Zinn (1990, 96) notes, 'Most of us need permission to switch from the doing to the being mode... we have been conditioned since we were little to value doing over being'. Stoler Miller (1998, 1) describes mental stillness as an opportunity to experience a 'state of perfect equilibrium and absolute spiritual calm, an interior refuge in the chaos of worldly existence'. Chip Hartanft also suggests that, 'in wisdom we come to see yoga not as a scheme to improve or empower ourselves, but as a coming to freedom through seeing things as they are' (n.d. in Feuerstein, Goldstein, Kane, Mallett, Hartranft & Gannon 2004, 50). This is precisely where the emphasis of Eastern traditions differs from most Western philosophies on how life should be lived (see Paranjpe 1998).

Stillness is a pre-requisite in order 'to be'. Krishnamurti notes it is not possible for the mind to be quiet when it is acquiring or 'becoming'; only when the mind is still, does one experience 'being' (n.d. in Rajagopal 1970b (1958), 32). When focus is completely in the present moment, it cultivates the awareness 'to be'. 'Being' is concentrating with total

awareness in the present moment, ‘free of the conceptual overlays of past and future’ (Bodian 2002). In Eastern philosophy focus is generally given to ‘being’ over ‘becoming’, where focus on the present moment defines the nature of ‘being’. This act of ‘being’ is also described as meditation (Kabat-Zinn 1990).

In a departure from Giddens’ ongoing mental narrative of ‘becoming’, the practice of yoga defines experiences of ‘being’ as experiences beyond the thinking processes of the mind. Indeed, Iyengar (2000, 3) suggests the mind is the cause of all dualities. Krishnamurti (n.d. in Rajagopal 1973a (1956), 32) asserts ‘being’ cannot be thought upon; only when thoughts cease is there an experience of ‘being’. Paranjpe describes how this process overcomes experiences of duality:

... the mind is temporarily emptied of all cognitive constructions, it enters what may be called a ‘no thought zone of consciousness’ (*nirvikalpa samadhi*) as a state devoid of the distinction between the knower, known and knowledge’ (Paranjpe 1998, 226).

Paranjpe (1998, 263) describes such experiences as devoid of intention, experiences of ‘nonintentionality’, thereby contrasting with the ‘intention’ behind Giddens’ ‘becoming’. ‘Being’ represents an experience of consciousness beyond ‘becoming’ (Paranjpe 1998). It questions the likelihood or perhaps to what extent ‘being’ can be experienced and sustained in a contemporary Western life via a modern practice of yoga, when emphasis otherwise is primarily given to ‘becoming’. It also raises questions as to how ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ influence one’s experience of the self.

However, the transformative process of classical yoga also acknowledges a process of ‘becoming’. The issue does not simplistically privilege doing over ‘being’ as such, but to undertake the doing in the mode of ‘being’; that is, with the mind remaining steady on the present moment, in the ‘stillness’ (Bodian 2002). ‘Becoming’ is a process of ‘being’. The ability to live life as a continuum of present moments (i.e., ‘being’) allows the individual to experience ‘becoming’ (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993). Thus, as Paranjpe (1998, 184) suggests, making progress makes sense, ‘despite the claim that self-realisation implies the

attainment of a state beyond progress'. Similarly Feuerstein (1991, 99) describes self-realisation or, 'the Absolute... [as] both Being and Becoming, State and Process'.

## **2.5 The nature of the self**

### *2.5.1 The reflexive self*

Giddens' (1991) 'project of the self' outlines a progressive path of self-actualisation. As noted, the dominant philosophy of Western tradition, self-actualisation, is linked to self-development and ongoing progress. As Paranjpe (1998, 369) identifies, these ideals embrace writings from Aristotle to Maslow, all of which support the idea that human beings have hidden strengths and potential to be actualised, and thus Giddens' project corresponds with a definite stage in the development of modern society.

Giddens attributes the nature of uncertainty arising from the conditions of modern society to a re-directing of individual attention from without to within in an effort to find a more secure and permanent identity. The construction of self-identity has become 'a reflexively organised endeavour' (Giddens 1991, 5). The purpose of the reflexive project is to cultivate self-mastery, self-knowledge and self-awareness, and ultimately self-actualisation (Giddens 1991). This is achieved through reflexive personal and interpersonal programmes of self-management and applying expertise in an effort to gain some control of one's life.

Essential to Giddens' (1991, 3) project is the construction of 'a differentiated self', where 'the self' is reflexively made. This requires being 'true to oneself' in an effort to locate 'the true self' or 'the authentic self' from 'the false self'. According to Giddens, 'the false self' is the socially constructed self, and it is important for the individual to live 'an authentic life' via the construction of 'the authentic self' or 'the true self'. The process of being 'true to oneself' involves self-construction and self-differentiation, made possible by the reflexive process of self-reflection and self-awareness (Giddens 1991).



Giddens (1991, 33) defines a person's self-identity as 'the self as reflexively understood... in terms of his or her biography'. A coherent sense of self-identity is maintained and refined by asking questions and reordering self-narratives. Choosing a particular lifestyle can 'give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity' (Giddens 1991, 81). Thus, it is necessary for 'the reflexive self' to sustain and revise biographical narratives within the context of multiple 'lifestyle' choices in order to maintain one's self-identity. More specifically, the physical body is integral to the cultivation of a particular identity (see Section 2.6.1). Giddens' project depicts a constructivist approach, supporting the view that 'the self' is always in the making, via engagement in ongoing activities (see also Paranjpe 1998, 194).

Giddens (1991, 80) acknowledges the potential for difficulty in identity formation and the construction of a future self because of the diversity and range of choices available to the individual. Individuals are faced with a series of complex choices and receive limited guidance with regard to which options to take. A certain level of self-understanding and agency are necessary to make preferable choices that are in keeping with personal narratives.

### 2.5.2 *'The Self' in classical yoga*

Yoga is an established path of self-realisation (Iyengar B.K.S. 1991 (1966); Paranjpe 1998; Whicher 1998a; Feuerstein 2003a). 'The Self' attained by self-realisation is a transcendental Self (Feuerstein 1991, 13). To assist the process of self-transformation, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* presents various practical techniques (Paranjpe 1998; Stoler Miller 1998). Whereas most Western philosophical ideals remain largely impersonal and theoretical, yoga's personal project seeks self-realisation via a psychological transformation of 'the self' (Paranjpe 1998, 9). Giddens (1991, 56) acknowledges that his interpretation of 'the self' differs from 'the Self' depicted by most Eastern traditions.

Yoga was introduced in Chapter One as one of six classical philosophical systems or *darsanam* of India. One translation of *darsanam* is mirror, proposing a 'revealing of the Self' (Bouanchaud 1997, xi). 'The Self' is a transcendental consciousness, and is also

depicted as spirit, soul or universal Self (*purusa*, *atman*) (Feuerstein 2003a). According to Paranjpe (1998, 258), ‘A fundamental characteristic of *purusa* or “the Self” is sentience, or the capacity for experiencing objects and events’. The nature of self-transformation requires an experience of an altered state of consciousness, often described as the fourth state of consciousness (Paranjpe 1998).

Yoga philosophy identifies ‘the Self’ as an experience beyond the mind (Feuerstein 2002a). ‘Our deepest nature is infinite, for it is consciousness. It is not mind. The mind is merely the instrument of consciousness and the storehouse of our finite personality’ (Sarasvati 1981, 73). The ancient yoga masters advocate that since the mind-body is constantly changing, it cannot possibly have a permanent identity (Feuerstein 2003a). Therefore, it is mistaken to understand ‘the Self’ and the totality of ‘being’ with the body and mind (Sarasvati 1981).

Misidentification with the body and mind creates a ‘deluded self’ or ‘false self’, which identifies ‘the self’ with the body and mind, as being ‘the true Self’. ‘The true Self’ is not the mind-body construct but rather a transcendental, free and independent consciousness (Feuerstein 2003a). When the mind is still, it leads to ‘an undoing’ process that enables the individual to ‘rediscover’ his/her ‘true Self’ or more ‘authentic Self’ (Whicher 1998b). Feuerstein (2003a, 5) encapsulates this singular experience of ‘the Self’ as the ‘union’ between the ‘lower or embodied self and the transcendental Self’. The ‘true Self’ is considered to be one’s real identity (Feuerstein 2003a, 10).

Paranjpe (1987) describes the transcendental Self as the ‘being’ behind the ‘becoming’ - an experience ‘beyond the person as one who knows, feels and acts’ (in Paranjpe 1998, 92). The discovery of the ‘true Self’ reveals a ‘permanent (*nitya*) principle’ or witness (*saksin*) that underlies the continually changing images of ‘the self’ (Paranjpe 1998, 169, 183). The yoga tradition provides a very different interpretation of ‘the Self’, identity and reality when compared with Western ideas, particularly with respect to their claim of ‘a direct experience of an undivided, nondual, and unchanging Self’ (Paranjpe 1998, 356).

This depiction of the Self is not largely recognised by contemporary psychology or by rationalist epistemologies (Paranjpe 1998, 120). In the West, such concepts are considered ‘mystical experiences’. This portrayal of ‘the Self’ and the existence of a higher consciousness contrasts with Giddens’ interpretation of ‘the self’ as well as Western philosophical thought generally, where the mind is central to the consciousness of ‘man’ (Sarasvati 1981, 73). A practice of yoga is said to transform consciousness (Iyengar B.K.S. 1999a, 28). B.K.S. Iyengar describes consciousness (*citta*) as:

... a unique capsule, as the mind, ego and intellect are enclosed in it. All these components of *citta* are so intermingled that it is hard to tell which overpowers which. The practice of yoga brings clarity in their modes of behaviour (Iyengar B.K.S. 1999a, 49).

In the yoga tradition a clear distinction is made between ‘the true self’ (or ‘the Self’) and the ego (*ahamkara*, ‘the self’) (Paranjpe 1998, 169). The techniques of classical yoga aim to dissociate consciousness from its identification with the phenomenal world and thereby lessen the role of the ego (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993). Traditionally, the main purpose of yoga was intended to bring about a profound personal transformation that transcended the ego (Feuerstein 1991, 13; Whicher 1998a; Feuerstein 2003a). The nature of such a self-transformation differs from Giddens’ reflexive project, where rather than ‘construction of the ego’, a practice of yoga aims towards ‘dissolution of the ego’.

*The Sutras* identify two principal characteristics required for self-transformation via a practice of yoga: relentless effort (*abhyasa*), and nonattachment (*vairagya*). The cultivation of detachment is necessary to lessen the bond that joins ‘the self’ with objects of the world (Paranjpe 1998, 261). Once the ‘true Self’ is discovered, the desire to seek and build the ego is lessened because the ‘true Self’ is ‘infinitely blissful by nature’ (Paranjpe 1998). As noted, self-transformation arises when experiences of a level of consciousness occur that are differentiated from the thought processes of the mind (Whicher 1998b). The mind itself is not the issue, but rather the specific state of consciousness of the mind, because of the tendency of individuals to conform and

identify with the changing nature of thought processes (Whicher 1998a). According to Krishnamurti:

Thought is always an outward response, it can never respond deeply. Thought is always the outer; thought is always an effect, and thinking is the reconciliation of effects... thought is always old, the past, the conditioned (n.d. in Rajagopal 1973a (1956), 158-9).

In sum, Giddens' depiction of 'the true self' differs from classical yoga's. Giddens' 'true self' is a 'construction of the ego', because in the reflexive project it is necessary to 'differentiate the ego'. In stark contrast, the yogic path intends to dissolve the ego. The path of yoga represents 'an undoing' process. This cultivates an experience of 'the Self' beyond the level of thought and discourse.

## **2.6 The body**

### *2.6.1 Giddens' body project*

The body is at the centre of Giddens' 'project of the self' where as noted 'becoming' is primarily concerned with constructing one's self-identity. Emphasis is given to routine and discipline in the praxis of body, in order to overcome 'anxieties' and construct a strong self-identity (Giddens 1991). Thus, it is the responsibility of the individual to actively participate in body regimes, depicted by a multitude of practices and/or behaviours adapted as a means of cultivating particular body traits (Giddens 1991; see also Budgeon 2003; Shilling 2003).

Regimes are central to self-identity because they connect habits with visible appearance of the body by retaining or improving his or her appearance. Body control ensures an individual's body appearance represents what cannot be said in words, and establishes an individual's agency and acceptance in society as a competent person. Action and working on the body as a project constructs a 'differentiated self', where '[b]ody planning is more often an engagement with the outside world than a defensive withdrawal from it' (Giddens 1991, 178). The process of self-transformation is attained via one's

biographical narrative, which is determined by social and cultural factors (Giddens 1991, 57). Some, like Budgeon (2003) and Shilling (2003), argue that Giddens' approach is limited because it focuses on 'an outer layer', or an external sense of self.

Giddens' (1991) project privileges the mind as the primary mode of engagement with the world, where the body becomes 'the material upon which the mind acts' (Budgeon 2003, 37). Different choices are enacted out on the body to foresee suitable and desired changes to 'the self'. The body becomes an object of choice, in response to an ongoing dialogue, that places a certain identity on 'who' 'the self' is (Budgeon 2003, 37). These interpretations of identity embrace existential ideals rather than 'corporeal foundations' (see also Green 1995; McNay 1999).

Giddens' objective perspective has been criticised on the grounds that it inadequately describes how individuals experience their bodies, and thereby describes 'a reflexive self but not an embodied self' (see also Bray & Colebrook 1998; Mestrovic 1998; McNay 1999; Adkins 2003; Budgeon 2003).<sup>1</sup> Fields (2001, 21) is hopeful that the new philosophical awareness towards embodied experiences can benefit by drawing from India's traditions through practices like yoga, whose practices and principles interpret the relationship between the mind-body and 'the self' in a more holistic way.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.6.2 *Yoga and the body*

The body is also central to the process of self-transformation in classical yoga. Fields (2001, 1) describes the primary role of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* as placing the physicality of the body at the centre of a tradition. The *Sutras* state that the more subtle dimensions

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<sup>1</sup> Giddens (1991) makes reference to mind-body integration, even though greater significance is given to the development of the mind, via the construction of the ego, elsewhere in his discussions. Towards the end of his book, he proposes the body and self 'become intimately coordinated within the reflexive project of self-identity' (Giddens 1991, 218) and suggests that '[t]he self is embodied' (Giddens 1991, 56). However, Mestrovic (1998) argues that Giddens' description of the individual is 'disembodied' because it gives priority to the individual as a meaning-making agent. Moreover, he proposes that, at times, Giddens' writing, can be 'confused and confusing', and his theories 'slippery' in nature at various points in his book (Mestrovic 1998, 36).

<sup>2</sup> Sociological studies of the body increasingly acknowledge the mind and body as embodied (Turner 1984; Shilling 2003). Many of these approaches draw from phenomenological and non-Western approaches (see Fields 2001).

of self-transformation are not possible unless attention is given first to the body. Geeta Iyengar notes:

The *sadhaka* (yoga practitioner) should bear in mind that one must start with the body, which is the external covering of the self. This gradually leads to the pursuit of the internal – the mind and the innermost Self (Iyengar G.S. 1995, 67).

Yoga provides opportunities to experience being embodied (Lloyd 1997a, 29). Taylor (1993, 7) describes experiences of embodiment as the most rewarding aspects of yoga practice, discovering how mind and body unite in movement. Bailey (1997) suggests that yoga's practice can assist individuals in the West become more embodied. She defines the process of embodiment as:

A process of experiencing or understanding the full dimension of the self as it is expressed within the body. More than just a physical technique, embodiment involves a deepening of interior awareness, sensation, kinesthetic awareness as a way of knowing all the dimensions of the self – emotional, cognitive, spiritual and physical – intersect in their bodily expression (Bailey 1997, 5).

In this way, yoga is a means of exploring, observing, transforming, and knowing all aspects of oneself as expressed through the body (Bailey 1997). Stoler Miller (1998) describes yoga as the 'ultimate' mind-body discipline, where mind and body have an equally vital role in the transformation of 'the self'. Thus, yoga techniques intend to unify experiences of the body and the mind (Iyengar B.K.S. 1989; Bouanchaud 1997). The aim is to experience the individual self as an integrated and embodied state with the universal Self or 'true Self' (Whicher 1998a; Feuerstein 2003a).

The yoga tradition views the individual holistically, possessing psychophysical and spiritual dimensions (Fields 2001, 4). The body is a temple of the divine, where the serious yoga practitioner can embody consciousness and ultimately embody the divine (Bailey 1997). Establishing a connection between mind-body and spirit is considered essential for self-transformation (Irigaray 2002). 'When there is wholeness of body, mind

and self, this wholeness becomes holy... without divinity you cannot truly speak of holistic practice' (Iyengar B.K.S. 1989, 82). In departing from Giddens' interpretation of 'the self' (comprising the body and the mind), classically, yoga's practice embraces the integration of body, mind and spirit.

The philosophy of classical yoga makes an ontological distinction between the mind-body and 'the Self'. Although 'the true Self' is not the mind-body, the mind-body is integral in the process of self-transformation. The mind-body is the 'vehicle' by which to attain liberation. Sarasvati (1981, 72) describes the mind and body as a person's 'grosser vehicles'. However, to one on the 'path' of yoga, experiences of the body and mind are real (Whicher 1998b). The practice of yoga develops a sense of 'the lived body', which overcomes experiences of the mind and body as separate (Morley 2001, 74; see also Sarukkai 2002):

When we have to do *asana* and *pranayama*, the action has to coordinate with the thought wave and the thought wave has to understand the action so that there is understanding between the mind and the body. A communion and communication takes place between the body, mind and intelligence so that all three act as one (Iyengar B.K.S. 2005b, 7).

Self-understanding is intertwined with the lived experience of the body, rather than its external form. Baier (2001) further highlights the non-dual nature of this process:

There is no duality between body and mind insofar as we are personally living the body; only when we are looking at the body as an external, corporeal thing... then the problem of mind and body relationship may arise (Baier 2001).

Therefore the practice of *asana* and *pranayama* is said to attain a 'duality free, neutral state' (Iyengar P.S. 2002, 16). Diligence and intelligence are required in practice to experience full awareness and overcome the dualities of the mind-body and spirit (Iyengar B.K.S. 1989).

The rate of progression on the path of individual self-transformation is determined by the degree and intensity of practice (Stoler Miller 1998; Iyengar B.K.S. 1999a). B.K.S. Iyengar (1999a, 85) suggests that practice can be mild, moderate and intensive. When the level of practice becomes more subtle then the ‘esoteric phase of *Astanga* yoga with its depth of meaning’ is revealed (Iyengar B.K.S. 1999a, 85). Rawlinson (1994, 172) devises the term ‘cool structured’ to describe the nature of yoga’s teachings. He states, ‘anyone can be a beginner – it is easy to start. The drawback is that it may take a very long time to get to the end... Everyone has to work on himself [herself]’ (Rawlinson 1994, 168). Patanjali defines this process of self-discipline as *tapas*, meaning ‘heat’ or ‘glow’, emphasising the considerable personal effort and commitment required in practice (Feuerstein 2003a, 23).

### 2.6.3 How body techniques influence ‘knowledge’

Paranjpe (1998, 211) argues that Western philosophical thought in general has shown a lack of interest in ‘the manipulation of one’s own mental processes’. Self-transformation in yoga is said to occur when the practitioner gains control of the senses by cultivating attention and improving somatic function (Shusterman 2000). The techniques of yoga aim to ease the dominance of mental activity in order to experience a non-verbal state of embodied awareness (Sarasvati 1981, 71). According to B.K.S. Iyengar:

... being in the present moment, has both a strengthening and a cleansing effect; physically in the rejection of disease, mentally by ridding our mind of stagnated thoughts or prejudices; and, on a very high level where perception and action become one (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993, 28-9).

The purpose of discipline (*abhyasa*) is to overcome ingrained habit patterns. This is achieved by gaining control of the mind and the senses via the repeated performance of yoga techniques that cultivate a positive state of mind. Detachment or dispassion (*vairagya*) is a complementary practice of letting go of old behaviour patterns or attachment. Paradoxically, the ability to let go is said to lay out positive tracks in the mind (Feuerstein 2002b; 2003a). The process of discipline in yoga practice begins at the



level of the body, then the breath, and then refines towards the control of thinking and cognitive processes (Paranjpe 1998, 336):

When the stream of consciousness is brought close to a standstill, the nature of conscious experience is said to undergo a radical change... an altered state of consciousness called *samadhi*... As the traces left behind by *samadhi* experience accumulate, they strengthen the tendency to seek inner bliss while at the same time they weaken the tendencies to seek objects of pleasure in the external world. Thus a 'positive cycle' sets in (Paranjpe 1998, 336).

Paranjpe (1998, 211) notes that philosophical ideas in the West have been persistently reluctant to embrace the evidence of experiential states obtained through meditative practices like yoga. This difference relates to the way knowledge is sought and gained. For Giddens, reason takes precedence over intuition. Mestrovic (1998, 31) describes Giddens' perspective as 'rational enlightenment-based trajectory of cognition and rationality'. Focus is given to one's personal narrative and can be described as 'discursive knowledge'. Paranjpe (1998, 222) describes this process as 'a knowledge of objects', emphasising a process of 'cognitive construction and validation'. Giddens allows no place for intuition and mystical knowledge in one's understanding and experience of 'the self', qualities prevalent in Eastern traditions (Collins 1998; Fields 2001). In the contemporary West, mystical or discriminative knowledge is rarely advocated (Paranjpe 1998, 205).

Whereas Western science relies on rational thought and the application of scientific method, Eastern 'scientific' tradition uses 'intuition' as a basis of knowing (Chin 1992). The practice of yoga aims to cultivate 'discriminative knowledge' (Fields 2001, 84). From a yogic perspective, discriminative knowledge is a higher form of knowledge than discursive knowledge. Discriminative knowledge is experienced in the present (Stoler Miller 1998, 83). Such knowledge is largely derived from sensory perception. It is not an intellectual practice in a mental sense, but a form of embodied knowledge. It is an experiential process that is difficult to express in words (Bailey 1997). Transformation

through yoga occurs when the individual lets go and experiences a state of ‘being’ not dependent on the discursive nature of the mind (Stoler Miller 1998).

## **2.7 The relationship between self and other**

### *2.7.1 Giddens and ‘other’*

According to Giddens (1991, 225), the process of globalisation has unified the community. Experiences of external space are reduced as advances in technology and communications make the world a seemingly smaller place. These changes contribute to an individual’s increased sense of connectedness with others. New levels of relatedness in turn influence how an individual behaves so as to have a positive impact on the broader social system:

The day-to-day activities of an individual today are globally consequential. My decision to purchase a particular item of clothing... has manifold implications. It not only affects the livelihood of someone living on the other side of the world but may contribute to a process of ecological decay which itself has potential consequences for the whole of humanity... accelerating connectedness between everyday decisions and global outcomes (Giddens 1994, 57-58).

This particular feature of modern society is reflected in the global nature of the teachings of Iyengar yoga, now taught in numerous countries around the world:

One of the great benefits of teaching training in the Iyengar method is the degree to which a student can move from school to school, and even across countries and find the language and the terms almost identical (Goode 2003, 29).

For Giddens (1991, 243), it is the emergence of ‘internal referentiality’, a process whereby one’s social relations become organised reflexively, that leads to ‘committed, responsive and reflexive individuals’, who recognise new forms of belonging in a globalised society (Turner & Rojek 2001, 186).

Reflexive and ethically responsible personal values require high levels of personal autonomy (Turner & Rojek 2001). Giddens' (1991) describes autonomy as a missing right in the development of 'the self'. If someone is reflexive, they are autonomous in their relationship with others, and this further inspires 'good interaction' with others. The development of self-awareness is associated with an increasing concern for 'other' (Giddens 1991). For Giddens, discernment in making ethical decisions occurs because individuals are aware of their finitude in life and therefore plan for a better balance between 'the self' and society and nature (Turner & Rojek 2001). However, as previously discussed, in an increasingly time-pressured society, this contributes to rising levels of stress. Arguably, the arising stress and anxiety from increasing time-pressure could mean that potentially it is less likely people will have the time or make the time to consider others in a positive light, and thus act for the good of society.

Turner and Rojek (2001) question the likelihood of Giddens' positive relationship between individual and 'other', when an individual's ability to consciously reflect upon and respond to conditions of their own making is the prime mode of operation on 'the self'. If Giddens' experiences of 'the self' are derived largely from interactions with consumer culture and mass media, it is difficult to comprehend how the development of an ethical and trusting self and society is a likely outcome. Responsible personal values are not a given in a modern technological society which therefore could inhibit the reflexive and self-monitoring processes of the individual (Turner & Rojek 2001). For example, the nature of such a decision process fails to account for 'the agent not always being able to give an adequate account for what he or she does or feels' (Mestrovic 1998, 194). Mestrovic (1998) disagrees with Giddens' perspective that individuals can obtain 'moral rule' from human agency:

Giddens presents a more disturbing vision of agents who will obey while thinking because they are convinced that reflexivity has emancipated them... Modernity is divisive, but in the end, he thinks, modernity will unify humanity (Mestrovic 1998, 162).

Finally as noted, Giddens rejects the existence of a ‘universal truth’ and describes the secular nature of society that is discontinued from tradition, while adopting a more scientific perspective (Mestrovic 1998). He neglects a possible relationship between humanity and the rest of the cosmos (Strauss 2005, 134). His perspective cultivates a rational mind less open to mystical experiences and creates an inherently unsettling ‘risk culture’, where, as discussed, individuals are required to make something of themselves in their world (Giddens 1991; see also Fields 2001). These factors lead to an individuation of society that Shilling (2003, 170) argues cultivates experiences of people feeling increasingly separate to others and the external world. Mestrovic (1998, 205) points to Giddens’ focus on the ego at the neglect of altruism and his omission to consider the virtues of compassion and self-sacrifice for others.

### *2.7.2 Yoga and ‘other’*

In classical yoga, ‘the self’ is depicted as being part of the cosmos, where experiences of space expand as the practitioner focuses attention inward. According to Indian traditions, the human body is described as the microcosm within the macrocosm of the universe (Bailey 1997). When thoughts are stilled and awareness is expanded, the practitioner acquires the ability to encompass all of reality from the microcosm to the macrocosm (see Stoler Miller 1998, 39). Arguably, traditions like yoga have the potential to bring ‘the sacred’ into people’s lives, and reconnect the individual with society and the cosmos (see also Shilling 2003).

As intimated above, part of the problem of addressing issues of connectedness with others in the modern world relates to the issue of agency, where issues of morality and personal freedom are separated from societal needs and feeling connected with others (Stoler Miller 1998). The Indian concept of personhood is also individualistic, but it proposes a different kind of individualism: ‘While in the West the emphasis is generally on the individual rights in the sociopolitical sphere, in the Eastern traditions the emphasis is on the individual’s obligations and status in the ethical and spiritual domains’ (Paranjpe 1998, 61). In the yoga tradition, the individual is considered responsible for his

or her actions, as well as the consequences of those actions. The concept of *karma* is a cosmic principle whereby each person faces appropriate consequences for their actions, be it good, bad, or indifferent (Paranjpe 1998, 64).

Applying yoga's philosophy at the level of practice, yoga facilitates the ability of a person to come into the present moment and create time, which arguably provides that person with time to give to others (see Baier 2001, 7). Iyengar (2001) argues that the effects of yoga practice steady the mind, allowing the mind to become more dispassionate and connected with others. A sense of connection with others and experiences of 'wholeness' and 'connectedness' are directly linked to the self-transformation arising from practice (Kabat-Zinn 1990, 161). As an individual's perception and consciousness transform, they are able to become more sensitive to the needs of others and more capable of responding to them effectively; thus, 'the purified mind... can now be used as a vehicle for an enlightened life of interrelationship, interaction, and service, such as imparting knowledge to others' (Whicher 1998b, 292).

Drawing from her experiences of yoga, Irigaray (2002) suggests that the integral nature of breath awareness in yoga practice can contribute to 'the respect of the natural and spiritual life of self and of other' because the breath is something shared by everyone (Irigaray 2002, 11). Irigaray (2002) and others (see Heelas 1996; Paranjpe 1998; Whicher 1998a; Feuerstein 2003a) differentiate the experiential nature of yoga's practice from the focus on the written word, integral to the delivery of moral and ethical values in many Western religions.

The goal of a yoga practice to lessen the role of one's ego is intricately linked with the cultivation of a greater connection and concern for others. Stoler Miller (1998) describes an authentic practice of yoga as a process that diminishes the role of the ego, and increases emotions of love, compassion and joy. The cultivation of such qualities are said to demolish the boundaries between 'the self' and others. Accordingly, the 'true Self' (i.e., the dissolution of the ego) makes choices that exhibit a connection with others.

This perspective differs from Giddens' interpretation of how the individual is connected with others. From a yogic perspective, Giddens' 'construction of the ego' will not necessarily cultivate a compassionate and caring individual. Although difficult to quantify, Paranjpe (1998, 229) draws attention to the countless claims by yogis over the ages who, having attained altered states of consciousness, have related their experiences to becoming more selfless. In his opinion, Western philosophy has neglected this kind of personal transformation, whereas it is the essence of the yogic tradition.

## 2.8 Conclusion

This chapter compared and contrasted Giddens' 'project of the self' with the broader principles underlying Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*. These perspectives present two different processes for self-transformation. A summary of the main differences discussed in the two theories is listed in Table 2.1. This comparison forms the theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of transformation described by the participants in the study, and enables questions to be raised concerning the extent to which participants identify with these conceptualisations of self and how the two perspectives might influence each other.

However, the comparison with Eastern conceptions of 'the self' identifies possible tensions for yoga practitioners in the West. Western yoga practitioners practice and live under very different social, cultural and political conditions than those existing when the *Yoga Sutras* were written. Giddens highlights the problems of meaninglessness, anxiety and time pressure for those living in contemporary society and describes his reflexive project as a means to overcome these contemporary issues. Yoga has possibly become an alternative project that some people seek in answer to very modern issues. This raises a number of further questions with respect to the current thesis: How has the practice of yoga been modified because of 'Western' conditions? What happens when 'East meets West' via a practice of Iyengar yoga? The following chapter explores the evolving nature of yoga since its arrival in the West, and justifies this study's focus on women practicing Iyengar yoga.

**Table 2.1 Comparative summary of central theoretical concepts in Giddens and classical yoga**

| <b>Giddens</b>   | <b>Yoga</b>   |
|--|---|
| 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                                       |
| Body essential in construction of the self   | Body central to understanding the Self  |
| Aims to control body   | Aim to control the mind and senses using the body   |
| Mind and body split  | Mind-body connection (embodied)   |
| Discursive knowledge   | Discriminative knowledge  |
| Construction of the ego  | Dissolution of the ego  |
| External space decreases   | Internal space expands  |
| Connection with 'other' is linked to autonomous individual via external connection with others | Connection with 'other' cultivated from within via internal connection with self                      |

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE EVOLUTION OF YOGA'S PRACTICE IN THE WEST

... yoga can be understood as part of a methodology for living a good life. It offers a critical practice, which encompasses both ends of modernity's personal/global spectrum... [yoga] catalysed an international wave of interest in self-realisation, and provided a framework for individuals seeking emancipation from the bounds of emergent modern society's materialism through a simplified interpretation and re-orientation of the yoga *darsana* (Strauss 2005, 138).

#### 3.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, tensions between conceptions of the modern Western self and 'the Self' depicted in classical yoga were identified. The points of comparison provide a theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of yoga as practiced by a group of mid-aged Western women. However, there is some debate about the extent to which a Western yoga practice is representative of yoga's ancient spiritual tradition. In Strauss' (2005) opinion (see quote above), yoga has substantially transformed to meet the needs of modern practitioners living in the West. This chapter thus addresses the following questions: How can yoga transform 'the self' according to its traditional ideal in a society where 'the self' is shaped by the key features of modernity depicted by Giddens? What changes have been made to yoga's practice as it has evolved in the West?

The intention here is not to give a detailed history of yoga's evolution, but to highlight the major changes that have impacted on the way yoga is practiced in the contemporary West.<sup>1</sup> A specific focus is to consider why the majority of yoga practitioners in the West are women and determine whether an increasing number of female yoga teachers and practitioners are influencing the way yoga is taught and practiced. The findings of this discussion add to the interpretive framework used to analyse the yoga experiences of the women who participated in this study.

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed discussions of yoga's heritage and evolution can be found in the work of Feuerstein (1991; 2003a), Feuerstein & Miller (1970), Swami Prahavananda (1979) and Whicher (1998a).



## 3.2 The changing nature of yoga practice in the West

### 3.2.1 *From an ancient tradition to a modern practice*

It was noted in Chapter One that yoga's philosophy can be traced back some five thousand years (Iles & Gandhi 2001). Since that time, several 'paths' of yoga have evolved into many interweaving and overlapping paths and systems, each with a similar goal of self-realisation (Prahavananda 1979; Iyengar B.K.S. 1991 (1966); Feuerstein 2003a). Feuerstein (2003a, 39) likens the complexity of yoga's evolution to a branch of a gigantic tree, 'whose roots are anchored deep in the Neolithic age, with the highest branches of its canopy still growing in our own era'. According to Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati (2001, 23), head of the Satchinanda School of yoga, the practice of yoga in the West continues to evolve in a way that incorporates 'the solid foundations of its past with innovation, adaptability and flexibility'.

Although yoga was introduced to the West in ancient times, its theory and practices did not receive significant attention until the nineteenth century. Influential Western philosophers such as Frederick Hegel, and later Ralph Waldo Emerson and David Thoreau were all informed by Eastern thought and practices, through texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*. However, it was not until the teachings of Vivekananda, one of the first Indian yoga teachers to visit the West in the 1890s, that the influence of India's philosophical heritage gained momentum (see Stoler Miller 1998; De Michelis 2004; Strauss 2005).

Vivekananda's success at transmitting his teachings made yoga's philosophy more accessible to the West. Feuerstein (2003a) accredits Vivekananda's success to his focus on practice rather than the theoretical contributions of India's ancient wisdom. Strauss (2005, 35) describes Vivekananda's vision of yoga as 'universal, spiritual, rational and practical', an interpretation of yoga's tradition that she argues was specifically tailored for the American and European middle-classes. Vivekananda's specific appeal to the middle classes is attributed to his interpretation of yoga that embraced ideals associated

with alternative medicine, focusing on ‘techniques’ and ‘spiritual practices’ rather than the ‘religiousity’ of yoga’s subject (De Michelis 2004, 119, 225).<sup>2</sup> His work and teachings were influential in providing the foundations that fueled the counter-cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s, of which yoga was a central component (Feuerstein 1991; De Michelis 2004; Strauss 2005).

Yet, the focus of a modern yoga practice is markedly different to the teachings Vivekananda presented at the World Parliament of Religions meeting in Chicago in 1893 (Stoler Miller 1998; De Michelis 2004). Although emphasis was given to the experiential nature of practice, drawing techniques from Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, Vivekananda focused on the practice of meditation and considered the practice of physical postures (*asana*) of lesser importance (Stoler Miller 1998).

### 3.2.2 *From individual aspirant to mass phenomenon*

By the end of the twentieth century, the transmission of yoga’s teachings had evolved from a one-on-one relationship (disciple-guru), to a mass produced phenomenon in the West, where millions of people access, at least in part, the teachings of yoga. This transition began in the first decades of the 1900s. There were several pioneering Indians who explored the physical practices of *Hatha* yoga and began to introduce them to a lay audience, both in India and in the West. They were Sri Krishnamacharya (B.K.S. Iyengar’s guru)<sup>3</sup>, Swami Sivananda, Swami Kuvalyananda and Sri Yogendra (Cushman 2000, 75). Cushman describes these men as visionaries of their time. They introduced the practice of yoga to a broader audience, through their shared interest in the practical techniques of *Hatha* yoga (*asana* and *pranayama*), not only as a tool to attain a healthy mind and body, but also as a vehicle to transmit the more spiritual teachings of yoga philosophy. These

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<sup>2</sup> According to De Michelis (2004, 125), the discourses of India Neo-vedanta and of Western New Age Religion both contributed to the development of a framework of ‘alternative healing’.

<sup>3</sup> Krishnamacharya (1887-1998) was B.K.S. Iyengar’s guru. During Krishnamacharya’s lifetime of teaching yoga, his pupils included B.K.S. Iyengar (his brother-in-law), his son T.K.V. Desikachar (*viniiyoga* style), and Pattabhi Jois (*Astanga* Yoga style), a brother-in-law of Krishnamacharya. He also taught Indra Devi (1899-2002), of European origin, who became known as the ‘First Lady of Yoga’ in America (Feuerstein 2003a). All four of his students have had a substantial impact on spreading their interpretation of yoga’s teaching to the West.

‘visionaries’, together with their students are responsible for much of *Hatha* yoga’s growing influence in the contemporary West.

Another significant influence in the success of teaching yoga to a broader audience is the emphasis on modern practice as a lay, non-sectarian practice. This transition is also significant in the way yoga is presently practiced in India. For example, in the 1920s, yoga teacher Sri Yogendra became known as a ‘householder yogi’ in India (Strauss 2002, 243). Similarly, Krishnamacharya pursued his yogic path while remaining married and having a family. Thus for some, it was no longer necessary for the yoga practitioner to renounce the world.<sup>4</sup> Most modern practitioners want a yoga practice that is an adjunct to family and work so that it can be accommodated alongside other aspects of modern life (Cushman 2000; Strauss 2005).

As a result of this transition, most Western practitioners experience the teachings of yoga by attending classes at a designated place, often once, but possibly up to several times a week. More intense experiences are available by attending a growing number of retreats, conferences or workshops, while within the Sivananda and Satchinanda traditions of yoga, for example, there are ashrams located in various centres around the world. Ashrams offer students the opportunity to study the practices of yoga for weeks, even months at a time, away from their everyday lives and routines (see Strauss 2005).

### *3.2.3 The role of the teacher*

Yoga’s teachings were traditionally passed on to the student by a ‘fully realised’ guru, someone who is considered ‘an embodiment of ultimate reality’ or ‘higher Self’. The role of the yoga teacher is considered integral in order to transmit ‘an authentic’ experience of yoga (Feuerstein 2003a, 116). Lineage of a tradition reflects the integrity of the teachings, where a connection with a guru is said to increase the likelihood of experiencing the guru’s wisdom, techniques and practice (Shankardev 2003).

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<sup>4</sup> Strauss (2005) and De Michelis (2005) discuss the historical influences that impacted on the evolving nature of yoga practice in India that occurred simultaneously with yoga’s development in the West.

De Michelis (2004, 193) argues that the ‘new generation’ of Western yoga teachers have established ‘their leadership more on the grounds of high level professionalism and technical specialisation rather than of “spiritual” charisma or religious knowledge’. In the US, a ‘yoga boom’ has seen substantial growth in the number and variety of yoga teacher training programmes and the number of people teaching yoga. The range of yoga teacher training offered in Australia has also grown in recent years, and is demonstrated in the number of yoga teacher training courses advertised in the Australian yoga journal; *Australian Yoga Life*.

Although many contemporary yoga teachers are linked to a lineage that is connected with ‘an authentic’ Indian teacher, the quality of teaching varies enormously (Feuerstein 2003a). As a result, some in the field are concerned about the lack of consistency in the quality of what is classified as ‘yoga’ (see Bilimoria 1989; Stoler Miller 1998; Glass 2002; Feuerstein 2003b). In Feuerstein’s (2003b, 14) opinion, only a few Western yoga teachers are qualified to do justice to the tradition of yoga, because many others have not received their training from ‘an authentic’ teacher. Others are concerned that unless the subtle holistic nature of the yoga tradition is embraced and passed on by the yoga teacher, it is possible that the yoga class will become no more than a place for stretching and physical exercise (see Bilimoria 1989; Stoler Miller 1998; Glass 2002; Feuerstein 2003b).

#### *3.2.4 Does a modern yoga practice have the potential for self-transformation?*

In Chapter Two the experiential nature of yoga’s tradition was discussed. Practice is integral to the most ancient of yoga’s teachings. An early translator of the *Yoga Sutras*, Sri Vyasa, believed to have lived between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, said:

Yoga is the teacher of yoga; yoga is to be understood through yoga. So to live in yoga is to realise yoga; comprehend yoga through yoga; he who is free from distractions enjoys yoga through yoga (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993, 8).

Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* embrace a philosophy where there is no separation between theory and practice (Whicher 1998a). Similarly, Feuerstein (1970, 1) notes 'the nucleus of yoga is its practice, and the yogin is the primary practitioner, not philosopher, theologian or psychologist... he takes his own experience (*pratyaksa* or 'perception') as the highest criterion'. Regardless of the yoga technique embraced, the experiential nature of yoga's practice lies at the centre of its tradition which maintains that only by practicing yoga can self-transformation occur. However, since the nature of yoga practice has evolved so dramatically since its arrival in the West, the question arises as to whether a modern practice of yoga effectively maintains this transformative potential said to be at the heart of its practice.

According to Kabat-Zinn (1990), the contemporary practice of yoga still provides opportunities for self-transformation. In keeping with a more traditional practice of yoga, he considers that a modern practice can cultivate a different way of 'being' (Kabat-Zinn 1990, 171). In Swami Ramananda's opinion, 'The use of yoga to reach real awareness and well-being seems to be coming out of mainstream yoga' (n.d. in Cushman 2000, 72). According to Geeta Iyengar (1995), not only does the steady practice of *asana* bring health and well-being to the body and mind, but, more importantly, the practice of *asana* is an essential step towards self-realisation, via transformation of 'the self'. B.K.S. Iyengar has written at length about the nature of his own self-transformation arising from his yoga practice (Iyengar B.K.S. 1991 (1966); 1992 (1981); 1993; 1999a; 2005a).

In Chapter One it was noted how the Iyengar system of yoga embraces the principles of *Astanga* yoga (see also Baier 2001). According to B.K.S. Iyengar, if practice is authentic, there is the potential to experience the eight steps of *Astanga* yoga within the practice of *asana*, such that the practice of *asana* becomes a reflective, meditative and spiritual practice (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993; Iyengar P.S. 1999b). B.K.S. Iyengar (1999a) describes the eight steps as a chain with eight interwoven links. He proposes that the ethical and the moral aspects (*yama* and *niyama*) of *Astanga* yoga become embodied for the individual with a serious, committed yoga practice. Geeta Iyengar (1995, 65) has said, 'The awakening has to come. You cannot practice yoga and be un-philosophical and

unethical'. Prashant Iyengar suggests that the principles of *yama* and *niyama* reveal qualities such as peace, tranquility, dispassion and serenity of mind (Iyengar P.S. 2001, 28, 31).

The links of the chain cannot be separated because all of 'the links' can be experienced in the practice of *asana* (Iyengar B.K.S. 2001c). Iyengar (1993, 138) cites, '*dharana* [concentration], *dhyana* [meditation], *samadhi* [self-realisation]... are the effects of the practice of *asana*, *pranayama* and *pratyahara* [withdrawal of the senses], but in themselves do not involve practice'. According to B.K.S. Iyengar (1999b, 29), if the first five steps of *Astanga* yoga are embraced and cultivated it will 'prepare the body, mind and the intellect to serve as fit vehicles for spiritual growth'. If the commitment to yoga is sincere, a practice of Iyengar yoga has the potential to transform the practitioner's life.

Thomas *et al* (2000, 77) report in a study of Iyengar yoga practitioners that practice leads to 'higher development in morality, spirituality, discipline and strength of will'. Garrett's (2001, 337) own experiences of Iyengar yoga and those whom she interviewed also support the claim that there appears to be a link between a disciplined yoga practice and a transformation that is ethical and in keeping with yoga's broader philosophy. For Garrett (2001, 331), if yoga is practiced as a 'ritual', then a disciplined practice has the potential to transform the individual in a way that counteracts the seeking of practices that are 'ego-driven' and 'prosperity orientated'.<sup>5</sup> However, she also recognises that some modern yoga practitioners choose to practice for reasons that are ego-enhancing, whereas others are drawn towards the notion of a more ethical self and ideals of selflessness (Garrett 2001, 339). According to Prashant Iyengar (1999b, 6), the effects of *asana* practice will depend on the motivation behind practice. B.K.S. Iyengar notes that not all of his students embrace the holism of yoga's practice. Of these students he said:

... some students only pay attention to the physical aspect of yoga. Their practice is like a fast-flowing stream, tumbling and falling, which lacks depth. By attending to the mental

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<sup>5</sup> Garrett (2001, 331) defines ritual as a way that people can make changes to their lives. Through repeated practices like yoga, it is possible to change the embodied self and 'the self'.

and spiritual side, a sincere student of yoga becomes like a smooth flowing river (Iyengar B.K.S. 2001b, 7).

Perhaps then, the potential for personal transformation that is more representative of a traditional practice of yoga is related to the ‘intent’ behind a person’s practice (see also Chapter Two).

Research to date has not adequately dealt with the transformative potential arising from a modern practice of yoga. A few studies do report that a personal transformation arises from an ongoing yoga practice (Bailey 1997; Thomas *et al.* 2000; Garrett 2001; Thomas & Thomas 2004; Hasselle-Newcombe 2005). Bailey’s (1997) study, in which she draws from her own experience as a *vinyasa* (flow) yoga teacher and practitioner, explores how the process of yoga cultivates embodied experiences for her students. Bailey (1997) interviewed twelve students from her beginner and intermediate yoga classes. Very little demographic information about her respondents is given.

Bailey’s (1997) findings show that beginner students display signs of disembodiment. Students demonstrate a dominance of mental activity even while engaged in bodily activity (i.e., practicing yoga poses), and report difficulty accessing ‘the self’ internally. For example, some students had difficulty feeling different parts of the body, were unaware of the breath, and were unable to fully relax the body. By comparison, the intermediate students show greater levels of embodiment. Students report an improved ability to perceive physical expressions of emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions of ‘the self’. According to Bailey (1997, 124), the most practical benefit of becoming more embodied is the cultivation of awareness that includes an improved ability to stay present with the experience of the body. All twelve students indicated that heightened body awareness also led to insights about ‘their emotional life, their approach to work, dietary needs, movement patterns, relationships, direction in life, and spiritual journey’ (Bailey 1997, 125).

Bailey's study makes a small but insightful contribution towards understanding the transformational process of yoga practice. However, the description of her students' experiences is brief and lacks detail. Bailey's study would be difficult to replicate, and given the limitations in her methodology and analysis, generalisations cannot be made about her findings. The relevance of Bailey's work to Iyengar yoga specifically is also questionable.

Within the practice of Iyengar yoga, Dragon (1998, 80), Badell (1998), Hasselle-Newcombe (2005) and Thomas *et al* (2000) all report that yoga practitioners experience higher levels of awareness as a result of an ongoing practice of Iyengar yoga. In addition, participants in Thomas *et al's* (2000) study reported that spiritual aspirations became more important to their overall reasons for continued practice. It is these transformative effects of practice, although difficult to quantify, that are considered the most beneficial outcomes of a sustained yoga practice.

A sustained practice of yoga is not easy to achieve, as substantial commitment is required from participants. Yoga is not a 'quick fix' approach to better health and well-being, but can benefit those willing to make an effort (Rawlinson 1994; Morris 1998). The practice of yoga requires patience, perseverance and faithfulness to 'the self'. According to Irigaray (2002, 91) and Herrick and Ainsworth (2000), these qualities are often lacking in modern individuals, and so, for some, an ongoing yoga practice may be difficult to maintain in a 'quick-fix', consumer society.

Corliss' US perspective (2001) proposes that people who are already fit are more likely to practice yoga. He describes yoga as an additional 'fitness' regime that contributes to overall care of the body and the mind that attracts primarily 'Type A' personalities. He further suggests that other sectors of the population, who could possibly benefit from yoga, are those who are generally unfit and unhealthy, 'who would rather take a pill than devote a dozen hours a week to yoga' (Corliss 2001, 52). Although his generalisations are perhaps simplistic, it does beg the question as to whether a modern practice of yoga attracts a certain type of personality and/or class. Research on yoga has not examined in



detail the idea that perhaps a Western practice of yoga is more likely to attract a specific type of person. In the context of this study, the question arises as to whether a certain type of mid-aged woman is attracted to practice Iyengar yoga.

From a sociological perspective, Bourdieu's (1997) concept of '*habitus*' outlines a 'habit or a disposition theory of agency' (see also Crossley 2001, 81), with potential to help unravel reasons that motivate women to practice yoga. *Habitus* is a 'system of lasting transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions' (Bourdieu 1977, 83). The notion of *habitus* proposes that dispositions and tastes are embedded and closely related to material circumstances or class, manifesting as outward signs of social position.

According to Bourdieu (1977), *habitus* is essentially an *embodied* phenomenon. Through the workings of the *habitus*, the body becomes 'charged with a host of social meanings and values', expressed as 'a way of talking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech and... a certain subjective experience' (Bourdieu 1977, 85-87). Even though each person's *habitus* is unique, aspects of an individual's *habitus* are shared within specific groups, within which individuals belong and continue to develop 'appropriate' habits (Crossley 2001, 84). Thus, a person's *habitus* contributes to, and is influenced by, a variety of individual and collective practices (Adkins 2003, 23).

*Habitus* presents a conceptualisation of the play between constraint and freedom in individual action (Bourdieu 1977, 73). It implies that 'identity may be less susceptible to intervention than theorists such as Giddens have implied' (see Sweetman 2003, 528). This is an important observation given the attention to Giddens' reflexive project in Chapter Two. Adkins (2003, 25) argues that Bourdieu's social theory challenges the objectivism seen in the work of Giddens (see also McNay 1999; Crossley 2001; Adkins 2003; Bufton 2003; Sweetman 2003; Adams 2006). For Bourdieu, reflexivity is 'not separated from the everyday but is intrinsically linked to the (unconscious) categories of habit which shape action' (Adkins 2003, 25). As McNay (1999, 102) points out, *habitus*

suggests ‘a layer of embodied experience that is not immediately amenable to self-fashioning. On a pre-reflexive level, the actor is predisposed or oriented to behave in a certain way’.

In recent years there has been increasing discussion regarding the ‘*hybridisation* of reflexivity and *habitus*’ in contemporary society (Adams 2006, 516; see also McNay 1999; Crossley 2001; Adkins 2003; Bufton 2003; Sweetman 2003). Crossley (2001) proposes that reflexivity must be intricately connected in the *habitus*, rather than exhibiting separate habitual, unconscious forms of action. Sweetman (2003, 529) also suggests that ‘certain forms of *habitus* may be *inherently* reflexive, and that the flexible or reflexive *habitus* may be both increasingly common and increasingly significant due to various social and cultural shifts’. This implies that perhaps those of a particular *habitus* exhibit the reflexive qualities necessary to successfully partake in a reflexive project such as the one Giddens describes. As Adams (2006, 522) notes, adopting a perspective that recognises the ‘complex coexistence of reflexive awareness and habitual dispositions’ may at least in part contribute towards some understanding of the complex nature of identity in modern society. In this instance, both perspectives (reflexivity, *habitus*) may contribute to a greater understanding of the study’s participants.

In particular, McNay (1999) argues that the movements of women into traditionally non-feminine spheres of action ‘may be understood as meaning that in late modernity there is a lack of fit between gendered *habitus* and the field’ (in Adkins 2003, 29). Thus the identification of the detraditionalisation of gender may assist understanding and analyses of ‘the transposition of movement of a “feminine *habitus*” into different fields of action’ (see also Adkins 2003, 27). Could this notion of a ‘feminine *habitus*’ help explain why so many women are attracted to a modern practice of yoga in the West when traditionally yoga was a male dominated practice?

### 3.3 Why people in the West practice yoga

Although interest in yoga's philosophy gained attention in the West in the nineteenth century via the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras*, and interest in yoga's more practical techniques arose by the turn of the twentieth century, it was not until the 1950s and the 1960s that larger numbers of Westerners became involved in the physical practice of yoga (De Michelis 2004). According to Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati (2001), since the 1960s a number of transitional stages have taken place in yoga's development in the West. They are discussed here to highlight the many reasons why Westerners have embraced a modern practice of yoga.

#### 3.3.1 1960s: Health, beauty and physical well-being

The 1950s and 1960s saw yoga's popularity in the West increase dramatically (De Michelis 2004). During this time, yoga was primarily promoted as a practice to improve physical health and well-being (Feuerstein 1991; De Michelis 2004). As the numbers of yoga teachers and schools increased, yoga classes became a popular means of experiencing yoga's physical postures and breathing techniques (De Michelis 2004). De Michelis (2004, 249) attributes some of yoga's rising popularity to changing social ideals regarding body image and identity. Much of the emphasis in practice was given to improving external appearances and toning the body (Sarasvati 2001).

De Michelis (2004, 191) notes that in the UK, the same time period saw substantial media attention given to yoga's practice, evidenced via numerous yoga books and TV shows at that time. A number of yoga books published in Australia in the 1960s convey a similar focus. For example, *Yoga for Women* (1963) promotes the 'special' advantages of yoga techniques for women as being 'designed to beautify face and figure and delay old age', and claims that 'women can become better-looking through yoga' (Phelen & Volin 1963, 13). Another book, *Yoga for Beauty* advocates the benefits of practicing yoga for 'diet, relaxation, sleep, care of the skin, delaying age, weight, general health and hygiene' (Volin & Phelen 1966, n.p.). A whole chapter is dedicated to the 'Beauty of Face' and

another to the ‘Beauty of Body’ (Volin & Phelen 1966, n.p.). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, yoga teacher, Swami Sarasvati, appeared on the Australian 0-10 Television Network Series, and also produced a concurrent book, *Yoga with Swami Sarasvati*, which focused primarily on toning different parts of the body (see Sarasvati 1970).

### 3.3.2 1970s and 1980s: Stress and relaxation

In the two decades that followed, the motivations for doing yoga diversified. During the 1970s, relaxation and stress management became important reasons for practice (Sarasvati 2001). These changes coincided with the identification of increasing levels of stress in contemporary society. De Michelis (2004, 249) suggests that the recognition of stress as a specific condition was a ‘great boost’ to the increasing success of yoga’s popularisation. Growing numbers of people turned to complementary strategies like yoga when conventional medicine failed to alleviate complaints arising from stress (Schell, Allolio & Schoneke 1994; Herrick & Ainsworth 2000). For example, in 1976 Dr. Herbert Benson, an Associate Professor at the Harvard School of Medicine, reported that 60% to 90% of patients visited a doctor because of stress related symptoms. He noted that stress and its related symptoms were not easily treated by allopathic medicine and devised a popular meditative technique known as *The Relaxation Response* (which incorporates yoga) to help individuals deal with stress (Benson 1976).

De Michelis (2004, 192) also describes this period as a time of ‘consolidation’, when the established yoga schools began to develop more substantial and permanent institutional structures or expand existing ones. For example, yoga teacher training courses became more standardised. In the late 1970s, the popularisation of yoga continued to benefit from the influences of the ‘fitness revolution’. Increasing numbers of people started yoga as ‘a safe and balanced way to keep fit and improve well-being’ (De Michelis 2004, 201).

By the 1980s, teaching yoga was incorporated into a wide range of institutions, such as rehabilitation clinics, hospitals and prisons (Sarasvati 2001). In North America in particular, yoga was recommended and adapted as a complementary therapy to relieve

the pain and anxiety that often accompanied certain chronic illnesses (Andrews, Angone, Cray, Lewis & Johnson 1999). Yoga therapy was adopted in a variety of settings, including hospital stress management programmes, corporate well-being programmes, nursing homes and rehabilitation centres (Joseph 1998). In the 1980s, Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) established a significant programme in America: *The Stress Reduction and Relaxation Programme*. His programme applied a combination of practical meditation and yoga techniques to assist sufferers from the symptoms of chronic pain and stress. In Australia, the integration of yoga into institutions was less significant during this time.

### *3.3.3 1990s – Present: Towards a more spiritual and commercial practice*

Saraswati (2001) describes the 1990s as a time when the practice of yoga in the West matured and began to incorporate the broader and philosophical aspects of yoga's practice. To varying degrees, elements of yoga's philosophy have been embraced by some Western teachers, and perhaps more significantly integrated into the way yoga is practiced and taught. Arguably, a growing percentage of practitioners and teachers want to embrace yoga's philosophical perspectives in their lives (Saraswati 2001). This trend is reflected in an increasing number of books published by Western yoga teachers who have interpreted the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of yoga, by applying its significance to everyday contemporary living (see Bouanchaud 1997; Christensen 1998; Cope 1999; Lasater 2000; Jeremijenko 2001; Main 2002; Farhi 2003; Feuerstein 2003a; Chopra & Simon 2004; Johnson 2004). As more Western yoga teachers mature in their practice, perhaps it is not surprising that some are embracing the philosophical dimensions of yoga.

It is worth noting that the West first turned to the East in significant numbers for spiritual fulfillment in the 1960s, a time that saw the rise of a counter culture amongst the middle classes (Heelas 1996). A significant difference between the more recent rise in yoga's popularity and the 1960s was the onus on people at that time to give up their Western lifestyles and seek alternatives in, for example, an ashram, commune or community. As noted earlier, the majority of modern yoga practitioners wish to integrate their yoga

practice within their modern lifestyle. This is perhaps why systems like Iyengar yoga are seen as accessible, because Iyengar himself is a 'householder', and lives alongside his family, and community, while maintaining a strong commitment to practice and teaching.

The consequences of the 1960s 'spiritual revolution' were huge, and were responsible for initiating a process of globalisation of many religious traditions in the West (Kohn 2003, 4). Increasingly, Westerners uptake practices like yoga for reasons that are 'more spiritual than religious' (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 314; see also York 2001; Long Marler & Hadaway 2002; Tucker 2002), embracing qualities in their practices that represent the more functional and intrinsic dimensions of religion (Parament 1999 in Long Marler & Hadaway 2002, 289).

According to Hanegraaff (1996 in De Michelis 2004, 34-35), the 'New Age movement' superseded 'New Age religion' in the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> In general terms, the New Age movement advocates 'intuition and personal experience to find the God within', encourages 'individualised, experiential mysticism' (O'Neil 2001, 471), and comprises 'a disparate and loosely coordinated confederation of contrasting beliefs, techniques and practices' (York 2001, 364). Although notions of divinity are incorporated into an individual's spiritual quest, 'It is not God but the essence of God which is sought' (Kohn 2003, 19). The 'sacrilisation of the self' is a prominent trend associated with the growing popularity of the New Age movement since the 1970s (Heelas 1996). This trend has corresponded with the rising popularity of yoga and meditation into Western culture (Cushman 2000, 70).

However, Kohn (2003, 143) argues that spirituality in modernity reflects 'the individual's capacity for happiness and living the good life'. In her opinion, tradition, spirituality and morality are largely forgotten. Feuerstein (2002a) is also concerned about the lack of focus on self-realisation in modern yoga practice. In his opinion most modern

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<sup>6</sup> See De Michelis (2004) and O'Neil (2001) for a historical perspective of social and cultural influences that contributed to the development of the New Age movement.

practitioners do not incorporate the traditional purpose of cultivating the 'divine-body' as a means to attain self-realisation into their practice (Feuerstein 2003a, 232, 233).

The period since the 1990s has also witnessed an increasing commodification of several aspects of yoga. In many ways the practice of yoga has become more 'consumer friendly' (Heelas 1996, 128). The commercial availability and sales of yoga clothing, equipment, retreats, books, jewellery and courses have, for example, expanded to meet the demand of Western consumers. This can be observed in the dramatic rise in advertising of these and other products in two key American yoga journals, *Yoga Journal* and *Yoga International*, particularly since 2000.

Wild (2002) highlights the extent of yoga's commercialisation in the US, citing the diverse range of products that are marketed using images not usually associated with yoga: alcohol, cars, sleeping tablets, fashion clothing and concrete mix! He estimates that in 2002, the average American practitioner's expenditure on yoga equipment, clothing and workshops was US\$1500. He multiplied this figure by the estimated 18 million American yoga practitioners, to provide an average annual expenditure on yoga commodities of US\$27 billion. Although the total sum represents a consolidated and somewhat crude figure, it is only slightly less than the total income for Microsoft (one of the biggest companies in America) during 2002 (Wild 2002).

As indicated in Section 3.3.1, the growth of yoga in the West is also linked to other broader social trends, in particular the growing interest in fitness, but also Eastern culture, mind-body connection and the aging of the population (Wild 2002; De Michelis 2004; Strauss 2005). For example, the president of an advertising company in New York sees the use of yoga in business promotion as illustrative of a broader connection to lifestyles that encompass values associated with yoga's teachings: 'flexibility, tranquility, wisdom, inner and outer health' (in Wild 2002, 113). These trends reflect the nature of 'the contemporary therapeutic culture' (Tucker 2002, 46), where Kovel (1991 in Garrett 2001, 337) argues that 'health ethics' is good for business, because it impels the individual towards commodity consumption.

Yoga's commercialisation also draws parallels with Giddens' (1991, 198) description of a commodified 'project of the self': 'not just lifestyles, but self-actualisation is packaged and distributed according to market criteria'. Practices like yoga exist in the market place offering 'a supermarket of lifestyles' to potential customers searching for meaning in their lives (Aldred 2002, 70). For example, it is becoming increasingly common to promote the potential benefits from practicing yoga as, 'either a rosy, peaceful, spa-like lifestyle or an intense workout aimed at physical perfection' (Glass 2002, 46). Such desirable benefits have subsumed Western notions of 'perfectability', and more broadly the West's preoccupation with 'becoming' (see Paranjpe 1998).

In brief, there is some concern and debate about the way the teaching and practice of yoga is evolving to suit the needs of modern individuals. According to yoga teacher Chip Hartanft, 'The goals of yoga are ultimately incompatible with capitalism, consumerism or any other 'ism' built on desire and fear, because yoga exists to bring about freedom from desire and fear' (2004 in Feuerstein, Goldstein, Kane, Mallett, Hartranft & Gannon 2004, 51). Wild (2002, 112) also argues that much of the commercialism is in conflict with yoga's traditional goal, to turn one's attention inward to find peace as opposed to finding peace in 'material excess'. Conversely, there are yoga teachers who express a more positive opinion of yoga's commercialisation, believing it can bring the potential benefits of yoga to a growing number of people (Cushman 2000). Ultimately, as Glass (2002, 46) suggests, the fact that yoga is taught in the market place means that the tension between 'yoga-as-business' and 'yoga-as-spiritual-tradition' is likely to continue.

### *3.3.4 The diversity of yoga's appeal*

The above discussion illustrates the complexity of yoga's evolution in the West. It was noted in Chapter One that the reasons why people practice yoga are diverse (see Badell 1998; Dragon 1998; Cushman 2000; Thomas *et al.* 2000). It cannot be presumed that modern practitioners are motivated by a unified purpose that reflects yoga's traditional



goal of self-realisation; rather, modern practitioners ‘understand and use yoga in different ways’ (Strauss 2005, 21).

The nature of modern living creates many opportunities and choices that include the possibility to practice yoga. Heelas (1996, 137) describes such opportunities as the ‘certainties of modernity’. As the nature of modern society becomes increasingly complex it is not surprising that yoga’s transition into the West continues to be influenced by broader societal trends affecting the individual and the choices they make. This has occurred to such an extent that De Michelis (2004, 205) describes a modern yoga practice in the UK as ‘everyday British life, regarded at least by some, as a fairly mainstream leisure activity’. These trends do not necessarily embrace yoga’s more traditional goals.

According to Strauss (2005, 133), the reasons why participants in her study practiced yoga were a response to broader societal conditions. Practicing yoga allowed participants to look to the future in a positive light because their practice supports the premise that things can change for the better. In keeping with Giddens’ (1991) reflexive project that presumes modern society creates opportunities for people to improve their potential, yoga provides a means to make improvements to ‘the self’. As such, Strauss (2005, 19) describes yoga as a ‘personal strategy for living under the conditions of modernity’. In short, many people practice yoga for reasons that encapsulate the modern reflexive project.

Health, for example, has been identified as a central value and marker in modernity (Herzlich 1995 in Strauss 2005, 6). From this perspective, a modern practice of yoga is depicted as an alternative available ‘body technique’ or ‘body project’, with those participating concerned primarily with personal health and well-being (see Lloyd 1997a; Garrett 2001; Hasselle-Newcombe 2005; Strauss 2005). Paranjpe (1998, 9) argues that yoga practice can improve physical health and further contribute to higher levels of personal change and fulfillment. If yoga is depicted as a ‘self-management’ system, its practice supports values of flexibility, discipline and control that are representative of living a modern life successfully (see also Paranjpe 1998; Strauss 2005).

At this point, it is perhaps worth considering some of the different interpretations of 'health' since the 1960s. For example, the World Health Organisation (WHO) initially defined health as a state free from disease. During the twentieth century the meaning of health has evolved to incorporate physical, mental and social aspects. More recently, the definition was refined to encompass a spiritual dimension (Larson 1996). This is reflective of societal changes and advances in ideas of what health is, as interpretations have become more holistic (Clark 1999). The reasons why some people practice yoga could also be reflective of more holistic interpretations of personal health.

Friedman (1992, 354) links the decline of 'modernist identity' with the search for self-realisation with Eastern traditions, which embody universal truths about human nature. Yoga's popularity arose at a time of increasing secularisation in the West, a time that also saw religious practices become more inward and individualised (De Michelis 2004, 183). Kohn (2003, 14) argues the attraction of practices like yoga is linked to the fact that Eastern spirituality places responsibility on the individual, and that the notion of 'the self' within has been the most potent spiritual notion to infiltrate Western spirituality (see Section 3.3). Given the conditions of modern society described by Giddens in Chapter Two, some people are attracted to practices like yoga because of various 'uncertainties' of modernity, and, in particular, because people are unsure of their identity (Heelas 1996, 137). Strauss (2005, 73-74) cites two trends that have been embraced extensively in the US: (1) that yoga practitioners attain a social identity from attending classes; and (2) practicing yoga fulfils a 'material identity' in the form of specific yoga clothes and equipment.

Strauss (2005, 118) and De Michelis (2004, 201) attribute the initial popularity of the modern practice of yoga in the West to the development of New Age religion, with shared characteristics including: practice, healing, personal growth, connection with self and nature, and freedom. In De Michelis' (2004, 192) opinion, the New Age movement continues to influence how modern yoga is practiced and taught, in a way that further reinforces New Age values. Practices like yoga draw inspiration, direction and even

language from the secular world (Kohn 2003, 4), with specific ‘discourses’ providing a language and series of techniques that unify common assumptions amongst group members (Bessant & Watts 1999, 343). New Age discourse draws terminology from a variety of influences including twentieth century ecology, biology, and theoretical physics (Ivakhiv 2003, 109). For example, the term ‘eco-yoga’ is used to depict the convergence between yoga spirituality, social activism and ecological concerns (Feuerstein 2003a). This development appears to reflect the desire for some members of the modern yoga movement to establish yoga as a social movement, advocating the potential for the Western population practicing yoga to make a positive socio-cultural and environmentally sensitive impact in the world (Rosen 1999; Cushman 2000).

The different perspectives discussed give some indication of the complexity of yoga’s evolutionary process in the West, reflecting the diversity of reasons that presently attract an increasing number of Western yoga practitioners. As Strauss’ (2005, 138) opening quote suggests, the modern practice of yoga in the West is: ‘*new* theory with *old* practice’. To some extent, this has been shown here to be the case. The question remains, though, to understand how transformations of ‘the self’ are experienced in a modern practice of yoga. To what extent does a Western practice of yoga embrace yoga’s traditional internal transformation of self-realisation? How much have Western notions of self-actualisation penetrated yoga practice and the way yoga is experienced in the West? Whatever the answers to these questions, a major influence on the way yoga is practiced and experienced in the West is surely linked to the large numbers of women who have embraced yoga’s practice since its transition to the West.

### **3.4 The ‘feminisation’ of yoga’s practice**

#### *3.4.1 Background*

In the Vedic period (approx 2000 B.C.) in India (early yoga lineage), women enjoyed equal rights and opportunities, including the privilege of practicing yoga (Iyengar G.S. 1995). Women’s involvement in yoga is referred to in the scriptures of the time, where,

for example, men and women were equally represented as gods (Iyengar G.S. 1995; Irigaray 2002). However, following the Vedic period, women's freedom was minimised, and women were regarded as the weaker sex and their role in society became a more subsidiary one. This had a negative impact on the possibility for women to practice yoga (Iyengar G.S. 1995). Despite the focus of Indian culture towards self-realisation, women were not permitted to practice yoga in India for a long time.

The tradition of yoga from this time was written for men by men, and became a practice promoted for the 'superior male' (Iyengar G.S. 1997; Cornell 2000). It developed as a system that taught men to sit properly for meditation. Later, it evolved into a series of rigorous practices (*asana* and *pranayama*) to strengthen and purify their bodies and minds. The practice of yoga developed rigidly in a class stratified and patriarchal culture, where it was common in both Hindu and Buddhist thought that liberation was only possible in a male body (Cornell 2000). These practices formed the basis of yoga as it has been transmitted in the West. It was not until the nineteenth century that women in India were permitted to dedicate their lives to yoga (see Cornell 2000).

When yoga made its transition to the West, it attracted a largely female audience. Even by the turn of the nineteenth century, Vivekananda had more female disciples than male (Strauss 2005, 78). In the 1920s, Indra Devi was the first Western woman to be personally taught yoga in India by her guru, Krishnamacharya (Cornell 2000). Women in the West have continued to be attracted to yoga, and since the 1950s and 1960s growing numbers have embraced its practice (Cornell 2000). It is somewhat ironic that more women than men have taken to yoga as teachers and practitioners.

As noted in Chapter One, in 2004, of the estimated 7% of the American population practicing yoga (about 15 million people), 77% were female yoga practitioners (Yoga Rahasya 2004c, 66). In Australia the trend is similar; women account for 86% of all yoga participants (ABS 2002). More specifically, within the Iyengar tradition in Australia, Eggins (2000, 17) reports that in 2000, 85% of regular students were women, and 80% of

certified Iyengar yoga teachers were female.<sup>7</sup> Despite the popularity of yoga, few studies have explored the profile of an Iyengar yoga practitioner (Badell 1998). Badell (1998) dedicates her thesis to examining the characteristics of Iyengar yoga practitioners in San Francisco, USA. Three other studies have provided information on the profile of Iyengar yoga practitioners (see Table 3.1):

**Table 3.1. Profile of Iyengar yoga practitioners**

|  | Number of participants | % female practitioners | Age       | Full time employment | Higher education      | Years practicing yoga |
|--|------------------------|------------------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Badell (1998)</b><br><b>San Francisco, USA</b>            | 145                    | 77%                    | 60% >40   | 64%                  | 90%                   | + 8 years             |
| <b>Dragon (1998)</b><br><b>Perth, WA</b><br><b>Australia</b> | 6                      | 50% (3)                | 4>40      | Not available        | Not available         | 15 years (mean)       |
| <b>Thomas (2000)</b><br><b>Pune, India</b>                   | 360<br>(53% teachers)  | 270 (75%)              | 44 (mean) | Not available        | 16.5 yrs of education | 12 years (mean)       |
| <b>Hasselle-Newcombe (2005), UK</b>                          | 188<br>(46% teachers)  | 84%                    | 47 (mean) | Not available        | 64%                   | 11-15 years           |

Sources: (Badell 1998; Dragon 1998; Thomas *et al.* 2000; Hasselle-Newcombe 2005).

The majority of participants in the studies shown in Table 3.1 were mid-aged women. Badell (1998) attributes the high percentage of mid-aged women to the fact that baby-boomers, and women in particular, are found to be more health conscious than other population groups, due to their significant concerns about growing older. Badell (1998) also found participants were searching for alternatives to conventional health care and sought a more holistic approach in caring for their health. Other research shows that the use of alternative therapies has gained most popularity amongst women, with primary users being mid-aged urban females who are well educated, with middle to high incomes (Clark 1999). These criteria are representative of the women identified in Table 3.1.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Within the Satchinanda lineage of yoga, there are also more female than male practitioners. Women account for 60% of participants attending yoga classes (Saraswati 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Within the Satchananda style of yoga, Strauss' (2005) study participants were primarily educated and professional middle classes.

As mentioned, yoga has been described as a practice for reforming the body, a ‘body technique’ (see Lloyd 1997a; Garrett 2001; Hasselle-Newcombe 2005; Strauss 2005). Strauss (2005) argues that women more so than men engage in bodily practices that give significance to ‘control’ as a way of acquiring power in other areas of their lives. This objective is in keeping with the ‘personal is political’ aphorism of the women’s movement where directed efforts to change society begin with a modification at the level of the person and at the level of practice (Strauss 2005). More broadly, women’s participation in leisure activities has also been linked to a personal project (Warner-Smith & Cartwright 2003, 322).

As noted (Section 3.3.2), broader societal trends imply that rising levels of stress experienced in contemporary life generally, in part explain the rise in yoga’s popularity (De Michelis 2004). In Badell’s (1998) study, 96% of the participants practiced yoga to relax and de-stress from their busy and time pressured lifestyles. Chapter One identified stress as a problem that affects more women’s lives than men (see Robinson & Godbey 1998; Zuzanek & Mannell 1998; Brown, Mishra, Lee & Bauman 2000; McDonough & Walters 2001). In particular, high levels of stress and anxiety are a growing concern amongst mid-aged Australian women (see Brown, Young & Byles 1999). Research suggests that women may find some relief by pursuing forms of leisure and activities that help them relax and slow down their ‘pace of life’ (see Davis 1997; Deem & Gilroy 1998; Brown & Brown 1999; Brown *et al.* 2000; Fullagar & Brown 2003; Warner-Smith & Cartwright 2003; Brown & Warner-Smith 2005).

Houtman’s (2002, 464) study also found women had a stronger affinity with the New Age movement than men. Participants were also well educated and demonstrated a high level of individualism. Penney (1997, 102) suggests that ‘through its emphasis on the equality of women as well as through the prominence of women in leadership roles in New Age thinking, the New Age movement has combined ecological concern with feminist concerns’, perhaps providing some indication as to why such practices may be of particular appeal to women. If the meanings assigned to practices like a modern yoga

practice are more ‘female’ in their values, this may help explain the high percentage of female practitioners.

The New Age movement has been identified as a primarily middle-class phenomenon (Heelas 1996; O’Neil 2001). Troeltsh (1931 in De Michelis 2004, 71) describes the rise of Eastern spiritual traditions in the West as the ‘secret religion of the middle classes’. More recently, Kohn (2003, 81) describes the majority of Buddhist practitioners in the West as ‘high-earning mainstream professionals who are searching for the spiritual and moral support that their busy lives demand’. Feuerstein (2003a, 11) also cites the increasing popularity of yoga amongst baby-boomers seeking answers to spiritual and moral concerns. According to Eggins (2002, 26), a ‘typical’ mid-aged Iyengar yoga student is ‘someone who ‘systematically “does” their three [yoga] classes a week, perhaps has read *The Tree of Yoga*, and views their practice of yoga as contributing towards a more peaceful integrated life’.<sup>9</sup>

In Hasselle-Newcombe (2005, 317) opinion, it is because the middle classes are above the ‘crude struggle for existence’, that they have the money, time and energy to explore more contemplative avenues such as yoga. Moreover, their levels of education also make it more likely that they are interested in practices that are ‘individualistic’, ‘self-reflexive’, ‘experiential’, and ‘syncretistic’ (Long Marler & Hadaway 2002, 289; Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 317). These characteristics concur with Bourdieu’s *habitus* of the middle classes, identified as those who have the time and opportunity to cultivate a particular aesthetic outlook that reflects the different positions people have in society (Crossley 2001, 85). This homogeneous group has caught the attention of some who are concerned that a modern practice of yoga ‘will become an elitist “leisure activity” for those who can afford to take part’ (Tawanna Kane in Feuerstein *et al.* 2004, 47).

The baby-boomers are noted to be ‘culturally primed’ to embrace practices like yoga because they were influenced by the expressivistic values of the 1960s (Heelas 1996,

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<sup>9</sup> *The Tree of Yoga* is one of B.K.S. Iyengar’s (1989) books that presents the practical and philosophical dimensions of yoga

172). Research shows that the baby-boomers population are most likely to seek out complementary practices because they are interested in the philosophical, spiritual and emotional aspects of their being (Badell 1998; Clark 1999). Given the evidence that the majority of yoga participants within the Iyengar tradition of yoga are midlife women, this suggests that their practice may contribute to philosophical, spiritual and emotional aspects of their lives.

### *3.4.2 The evolution of a female practice*

As increasing numbers of yoga practitioners and teachers continue to be women, it is not surprising that their influence is having an effect on the way yoga is both practiced and taught in the West. Female yoga practitioners are exploring and developing a practice of yoga that has been described as the ‘feminisation of yoga’ (Sparrowe & Walden 2002). For example, there are a growing number of yoga books written by women, for women, signifying that women to some extent are having an impact on the way yoga is practiced and taught (Iyengar G.S. 1995; 1996; Muktananda 1998; Saraswati 1998; Cornell 2000; Sparrowe & Walden 2002; Francina 2003).

Within the Iyengar tradition, specific women’s yoga intensives (for example, *Iyengar International Women’s Intensive* in Pune in 1997, and the Women’s Class and discussion held at the 1996 *Geeta Iyengar Yoga Convention* in Sydney) also indicate that women’s issues are receiving specific attention (Iyengar G.S. 1996; Iyengar & Iyengar 1997). Yoga conferences for women have also found their place as part of the yoga conference circuit in the US, as have specific yoga retreats for women, as female teachers gain more confidence and experience in establishing a yoga practice that at times is distinctly feminine.

Although most of the developments regarding a specific female practice of yoga have occurred in the last twenty years, its beginnings can be traced back to the 1960s, when, in India, Krishnamacharya identified suitable poses for women to practice during pregnancy (Iyengar G.S. 1995; 1997; Irigaray 2002). To date, Iyengar yoga has been credited as the



most prominent yoga style for addressing the specific needs of women (Cornell 2000). Sparrowe and Walden (2002) credit Iyengar's daughter, Geeta Iyengar, with developing a yoga practice that is specifically tailored to meet the needs of women. Geeta Iyengar published *A Gem for Women* in 1990. Her book reflects the development of new sequences and ways of doing poses that allow women to practice more appropriately during the three main cycles of menstruation, pregnancy and menopause (Iyengar G.S. 1995; see also Cornell 2000; Lasater 1997; Sparrowe & Walden 2002). These practices have introduced modified versions of some of the classical yoga poses, such as using supports or props to enable certain poses to be practiced in a more passive and restorative manner.

By way of example, the Iyengar tradition advocates that women should rest while menstruating. Specific poses and sequences are offered to relieve abdominal aches and discomfort, to relax the mind and to overcome fatigue and tension (Iyengar G.S. 1997). Such practices are said to be invaluable to practitioners whose lifestyles may otherwise be hectic and stressful. Geeta Iyengar (1997) asserts that the practice of *asana* can have a positive effect on the whole body, at a physical, mental and emotional level. These outcomes are significant when, for example, women can be more prone than men to mental depression and emotional disturbances (see also Domar 1996; Iyengar G.S. 1997). Within the Iyengar tradition, information and sequences for menopause are slowly emerging. In 2003, four articles in *Yoga Rahasya* (the yoga journal of the Iyengar Institute in Pune, India) were dedicated to menopause (see Dani 2003; Mehta 2003; Iyengar G.S. 2003a; 2003b), and Iyengar yoga teacher Suza Francina (2003) published *Yoga and the Wisdom of Menopause: A Guide to Physical, Emotional and Spiritual Health at Midlife and Beyond*.

The emergence of a distinct feminine yoga practice is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Sparrowe and Walden (2002, ix) argue that even as late as the 1980s, yoga practice for women in the West focused too much on 'the masculine emphasis on physical prowess and rigorous discipline... but was not seen as a means to heal [women]'. Irigaray's personal experiences of yoga practice reflect a masculine focus:

... practitioners of yoga are moving in the direction... of the treatment of the two sexes as equals, of the admission of women into the latest and most masculine tradition of yoga while forgetting what they have contributed to it and can contribute to it that is specific to them... (Irigaray 2002, 70)

A number of American yoga teachers also differentiate their experiences in their yoga practice. Patricia Walden, a senior Iyengar yoga teacher, points to a number of issues with respect to the contemporary practice of yoga:

As more and more women became practitioners, they saw the need to make yoga uniquely their own. They midwived a discipline that encouraged women to find their own truth, to discover the needs of their own bodies and their own minds. These yoginis [female yogi] worked toward creating a discipline that would help women shed society's destructive and inappropriate messages of the perfect body and the ideal woman (buxom, flat-bellied, submissive), that allowed them to become strong and powerful, secure in their femininity, grace, and individuality (n.d. in Sparrowe & Walden 2002, ix).

Walden's interest in 'shedding' contemporary perceptions of the female body has received much academic attention within the fields of Feminist and Women's Studies. The body image of mid-aged women is widely discussed in the literature. Cultural beliefs concerning gender result in women being more socialised than men to attain a 'feminine ideal of the body-as-object' (Franzoi 1995, 433; see also Hunt 2000; Hurd 2000). In particular, Hunt (2000, 709) argues that the aging process for women is 'rarely viewed as a dignified inevitability but rather a process to be vigorously resisted by having a "young attitude"'. This results in many women undertaking a variety of activities in an effort to remain 'young' as opposed to ageing well (see Roopavati 1999; Hunt 2000; Hurd 2000). It is of note that in Badell's (1998) study, 83% of participants (the majority of whom were women) practiced Iyengar yoga to lessen the effects of aging. Although this quantitative study was based on only 144 participants, this finding gives some indication that societal concerns about aging are influencing female motivations to practice yoga.

Daubenmeir's (2002) study found that for 43 female yoga practitioners, their practice helped improve their attitude towards their physical appearance. They experienced higher levels of self-acceptance and body satisfaction when compared with 44 women who did aerobics. Daubenmeir suggests that the mind-body nature of yoga reconnected her participants with a sense of 'being' in their bodies that redirected the focus to what the body does rather than the body's external appearance. In short, the participants cultivated a positive experience 'from the inside' that changed the way they experienced 'the self' (Daubenmeir 2002). Other yoga studies have touched on similar transformative experiences arising from a sustained practice of yoga (see Dragon 1998; Cornell 2000; Thomas *et al.* 2000).

#### *3.4.3 Issues arising for female yoga practitioners*

As women continue to dominate the number of people teaching yoga and attending yoga classes, there is a *prima facie* case for suggesting that female issues and experiences influence the way yoga is practiced and experienced in the West. However, to date much of this knowledge is anecdotal. Bonnie Myotai Treace Sensei, a meditation teacher in the Zen tradition said:

I recognised that my path as a woman was in some ways different than it would be for a man. I had a sense that my spiritual practice would express itself in gender issues. The questions that arise for women are different (n.d. in Linet 2003).

According to Feuerstein (2003b, 16), female yoga practitioners have the potential to establish more 'feminine principles' that can bring about a quality that is 'very much integral to authentic yoga' as opposed to the masculine prowess and competitive characteristics that have dominated aspects of a modern practice of yoga.

There is considerable consensus that women typically think and respond differently from men (see Simson 2005). Drawing from her own yoga experiences, Myers (2003, 22) argues that since the vast majority of yoga teachers and students are women, differences

in communication styles and values will impact on the nature of yoga's teaching and practice. She points to the work of Carol Gilligan (1982), whose research reports that women make ethical decisions in a relational context or connection rather than from abstract principles. Gilligan (1982 in Weiss Ozorak 1996, 18) argues that women define themselves in the context of their relationships and evaluate themselves and others on the basis of their ability to care for those who rely on them. Alternatively, men are socialised to value power and autonomy as well as abstract rules of fairness.

Weiss Ozorak's (1996, 17-18) study of religiousness reports that themes of relationship are far more prevalent in women than themes of individuation and further argues that women do experience God and faith differently from men. These distinctions are identified by the two voices of morality contrasted by Gilligan (1982): the 'voice of relationship' and the 'voice of individuation' (in Weiss Ozorak 1996, 18). More broadly, the emerging of feminine perspectives or principles is attracting growing interest from a number of cultural and religious traditions that developed primarily as male practices, as an increasing number of female practitioners find their voice and share their experiences (see Willis 1989; Zweig 1990; Muto 1991; Hunt 1995; Friedman & Moon 1997; Farrer-Halls 2002; Hart 2003).

Irigaray (2002) envisions a distinct feminine practice of yoga. Drawing from her personal experiences, she theorises a specific spiritual practice of yoga for women. She proposes a 'difference of consciousness' between men and women and therefore it is necessary for women to experience their own transcendence and their own practice of yoga (Irigaray 2002, 99, 114). Her proposition of a gendered consciousness conflicts with yoga's traditional understandings of consciousness, where transcendence is considered to be 'beyond gender'. For Irigaray (2002), consciousness and spirit vary according to their masculine and feminine forms. She describes the universal subject central to Eastern philosophy as a masculine model of enlightenment under the guise of 'being universal'. Her perspective has been described as controversial by Boon (2004, 66), who defines the 'me' focus of her writing as 'unyogic', suggesting that Irigaray goes too far in proposing a completely separate yoga and consciousness for women and men. Perhaps it is not so

much consciousness itself that is different, but rather the way it manifests in experience (see also Zweig 1990).

Many authors argue that changeable societal factors at least in part contribute towards a 'feminine thinking' (see Simson 2005, 7). If to some extent gender is determined by a set of socially constructed relationships, then this is significant when it is shown that women's decisions and experiences are influenced by social psychological ideas such as the 'ethic of care' (Henderson 1996, 143). Given that women and men typically experience life differently, this could also contribute to the development of distinctive thought tendencies (see Simson 2005, 6; see also Harding 1986). However, Simson (2005, 6) points out that it is simplistic to argue that the thinking of all women and all men can be neatly divided into masculine and feminine. She argues that such an essentialised view is problematic 'because many individual women think in typically masculine ways and many individual men think in typically feminine ways' (Simson 2005, 6). As previously noted, people's patterns of thinking are shaped by a variety of influences, of which some are specific to personal circumstances, while others are rooted in their race, class and culture (see Simson 2005, 7).

From a yoga perspective, Muktananda (1998) notes that even amongst individual women, experiences are different and are experienced differently, depending on age, health and the nature and stage of practice. Indeed, gender research more generally recognises the importance of acknowledging diversity amongst women (Henderson, Bialeschi, Shaw & Freysinger 1989; Freysinger & Flannery 1992; Henderson 1994; Freysinger 1995; Henderson 1996; Deem 1995; Deem 1999). This diversity exists both within and across groups of women making generalisations about needs, participation and experiences difficult (Henderson 1994; 1998). The issue perhaps, then is not about having a female yoga practice that is separate, but, rather to explore the outcomes of a modern practice of yoga for women, so that, as McDougall (2003, 5) proposes, women may have living examples from women on the path of yoga.

Henderson and Allen (1991, 108) argue that ‘women, in particular, need the opportunity to make choices about how they will embody the ethic of care in their lives’, in which, ‘[T]he balancing of work, leisure, and significant relationships with self and others seem to be a goal of how the ethic of care can empower men and women’ (Henderson & Allen 1991, 107). This may also impact on issues brought to, and experiences arising from, a practice of yoga. Does this fact explain why more women practice yoga than men? Do some women bring an existing ethic of care with them into their yoga practice? Does yoga then cultivate this quality through the self-transforming process of practice?

In Garrett’s (2001, 331) opinion, an awareness of ‘sharing’ and a connection with others is developed via a sustained yoga practice. It is the practice of yoga itself that becomes the means of perceiving a connection with self and others (See also Chapter Two). Adashko Raskin’s (2003, 138) study of the impact of yoga on a group of pregnant women identified ‘connectedness’ as central to her participants’ overall experiences arising from their yoga practice. She incorporated Noerdlinger’s (1997) definition of connectedness to describe her participants’ experiences that encompassed both a connection to self as well as a connection with others:

Connectedness to the self is that which contributes to an individual’s sense of self, including one’s sense of identity, autonomy, and individuality, as well as awareness of one’s thoughts, feelings and values. Connectedness to others is a basic human need that is fulfilled through relationships with family, friends and caregivers. Connectedness to a greater sense of purpose or meaning in life is derived from spiritual, religious, or philosophical beliefs and practices, such as church attendance and prayer or through involvement with family, community or groups (Noerdlinger 1997 in Adashko Raskin 2003, 7).

The importance of experiences of connectedness have gained prominence within research examining the links between connectedness, spirituality and healing (see McColl 1989; Chandler, Miner Holden & Kolander 1992; Cerrato 1998; Wright 2000; Spaniol 2002).

In the late 1980s, female Kripalu yoga teachers created a yoga sequence called the ‘moon salutation’ in response to meeting the needs of female yoga practitioners during the three main cycles of their lives (Cornell 2000). The moon salutation is a specific sequence for women, which is said to connect practitioners with values associated with the archetypal feminine, whereas the more traditional and well-known sun salutation is described as being representative of the archetypal masculine (Cornell 2000). Of the sun and moon salutation practices Cornell suggests that:

The two paths represent the complementary poles of masculine and feminine, insight and compassion. Both belong fully to each of our natures, despite the particular gender in which we experience ourselves (Cornell 2000, 88).

Cornell (2000) incorporates the work of psychologist Gareth Hill (1992) to explore the archetypal masculine and feminine characteristics as expressed through the voices of her female participants. Hill’s interpretation of Jung’s work does not assign particular tendencies more to one gender than the other. Instead, it suggests that both principles are integral in the psyches of men and women. If this is the case, then accordingly, a balanced practice of yoga reflects both masculine and feminine principles in the individual (see Cornell 2000). Cornell’s (2000, 17) study shows that female yoga practitioners benefited from a practice that was at times nourishing and restorative (female principle), as well as vigorous and taxing (masculine principle).

As noted in Chapter One, the meaning of yoga can be broadly defined as ‘union’, ‘to join’, ‘to connect’, ‘to integrate’, ‘to make whole’ (Iyengar B.K.S. 1991 (1966); Whicher 1998a; Feuerstein 2003a). The tradition of India has an androgynous deity, *Ardhanareeshwara*, to depict the integrating characteristics of male and female personality, depicted by a half-male, half-female statue. It implies that by removing the burden of stereotypes people are able to express the best traits of both masculine and feminine principles, thus allowing the individual to ‘be both independent and tender, assertive and yielding, masculine and feminine’ (Muktananda 1998, 62). The practice of

yoga is intended to cultivate both male and female qualities or principles within the practitioner to enable a person to feel whole (Radhananda 2003).

In their study of female practitioners of Aikido, Noad & James' (2003) devised the term 'female-value' to denote qualities valued by the women who practiced Aikido. 'Female-value' did not mean feminine, but rather encompassed values associated with both feminine and masculine principles that arose from a practice of Aikido. Noad and James (2003, 144) found that participants' experiences 'cross backwards and forwards' between the 'traditional' masculine and feminine personality traits depicting qualities from both perspectives (Noad & James 2003, 136). Experiences arising from the group identify the potential for the deconstruction and redefinition of feminine and masculine behaviours in a way that manifested positive outcomes for the participants, such that possible negative female qualities of passivity, low self-confidence and self-sacrifice are overcome (Noad & James 2003, 149). The practice of Aikido provides a process that enables a transformation of values comprising both 'feminine' principles (caring, valuing connection and interrelations with others), and 'masculine' principles (empowerment, power, strength and agency) (Noad & James 2003, 143-144).

Similarly, there appears to be an element of a modern yoga practice that offers alternative experiences of femininity that are both reaffirming and empowering for women. Kate Anderson, a 68-year-old yoga teacher draws attention to the central role of yoga's process in her transformation of 'the self':

What I really appreciate about yoga, especially for women, is that it's so process orientated, so permissive. It gives us the opportunity to be okay about our bodies and not have to achieve a certain level of performance. The process becomes our own (n.d. in Neilson 1999, 19).

The role of awareness in the process of yoga may also be a key factor to understanding female experiences of yoga. Franzoi (1995, 418, 433) reports that 'the body-as-process is not a defining characteristic for women' and found that when females engage in body-



awareness their attention was focused on specific body parts. Marion Woodman (1990 in Zweig 1990, 9) also describes ‘process-orientation’ being of particular benefit for women because it enables being present in the body and being in the moment (see Chapter Two). Thus, as Garrett (2001, 338) argues, it is necessary to be aware of the process in order to understand whether the process has the potential to change the ‘relation to one’s own embodiment, as well as to one’s relation to others’. This leads to the question of whether the process of yoga transforms those who practice, so that they experience more embodied ways of being.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

The practice of yoga has evolved substantially from its ancient beginnings to its present day form in the West. The authenticity of a modern yoga practice has raised much debate, particularly with regard to the extent to which a Western yoga practice represents yoga’s ancient spiritual tradition. This review indicates that the reasons why people practice yoga are in many respects in keeping with Giddens’ reflexive project, with many key aspects of yoga’s evolution in the West reflecting central values in modern society. However, some research suggests that the modern practice of yoga is transformational in a way that maintains the traditional aim of its practice; the cultivation of awareness. The nature of yoga’s evolution in the West still raises the conundrum of the extent to which yoga can reveal ‘the Self’ according to yoga’s ideal, in a society where ‘the self’ is shaped by the key features of modernity as described by Giddens.

Women, more so than men, are attracted to a practice of yoga in the West, therefore it is not surprising that women have had some impact on the nature of practice, as well as the issues and experiences they bring to a modern practice of yoga. Recent developments show female practitioners are adding another dimension to the teaching of this ancient tradition.

In summary, this chapter suggests that yoga’s evolution in the West has been three-fold:

1. The nature of yoga's practice is a transformational process. The practice of yoga can benefit those who have an authentic and sustained practice. This perspective is informed by classical yoga's path of self-realisation.
2. The conditions of contemporary society have also transformed the way yoga is promoted and practiced, as yoga has adapted to meet the needs of those living in a modern society. In keeping with Giddens' reflexive project, yoga has become a possible 'project of the self'. Some of the reasons why people are practicing yoga reflect Giddens' path of self-actualisation.
3. The large numbers of women practicing and teaching yoga are also subsequently influencing yoga's evolution in the West. The nature of practice has adapted to meet women's needs, as women bring their values, issues and experiences to the practice of yoga.

These three factors suggest that as well as the practice of yoga being a transforming practice, the practice of yoga has been transformed so as to meet the needs of contemporary Western society. These transformational processes raise a number of further questions, which will be addressed in the empirical chapters. To what extent do women experience 'the self' identified by Giddens' project of self-transformation ('becoming'), through their practice of yoga? To what extent do women experience Eastern conceptions of 'the self' ('being') through their practice of yoga? To what extent do female practitioners bring new experiences and issues to their practice of yoga? There is a need for qualitative research that investigates yoga's holistic nature, particularly in the context of women's participation and experiences in the West. The next chapter describes the study's methodology.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### METHODOLOGY

... qualitative research is a mutual journey taken by the researcher and the researched (Dupuis 1999, 45).

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the qualitative methodology employed in the collection and analysis of data for this thesis. It discusses the nature of the in-depth interviews with 35 women and describes how the empirical research took place. Since the research process has been intricately intertwined with my own life experiences from practicing and teaching Iyengar yoga (see Chapter One), the chapter also explores the impact of the researcher's experience of the phenomenon under study and how this influenced the research process.

#### 4.2 The context for this study

An interpretive paradigm is context-based, accommodating multiple perspectives and aims to understand the behaviour of others according to their interpretation of reality (see Henderson & Bialeschki 1987; Howe 1988; Henderson 1991; Henderson, Ainsworth, Stolarczyk, Hootman & Levin 1999; Henderson & Ainsworth 2001). In qualitative research, the meaning assigned to human phenomenon is described as 'a cumulative, holistic process' (Ricoeur 1981 in Hemingway 1995, 38). This allows for the creation of knowledge through a subjective meaning making process (Markula, Grant *et al.* 2001; Schwandt 2000). A qualitative methodology is particularly appropriate in the study of Eastern traditions such as yoga, where experience is at the essence of the practice. It provides the potential to acquire detailed descriptions of the subjects' feelings, thoughts and experiences (Rubin & Rubin 1995; Sarantakos 1998).

The current study seeks to understand unique patterns of human experience, by focusing on a smaller number of participants in order to explore their experiences in detail. Although the findings of qualitative research studies involving a small number

of participants may not be representative of the wider population, the findings of such research have social and possibly universal significance (see also Moustakas 1990; Patton 1990). In order to understand the meanings of the activities undertaken, it is essential to take account of the social, cultural and historical variables that exist amongst individuals (Henderson 1998; Schwandt 2000). As Henderson (1994, 3) argues, research on women needs to assume a 'focus on the different experiences' and different meanings that women as gendered subjects may have.

Although there exists a significant amount of research on the benefits of mental and physical health within the social sciences and leisure studies specifically, there is limited research regarding moral and spiritual health, that are arguably of equal importance when seeking a holistic view of the health of the individual (Mannell 1999). A more holistic interpretation integrates all aspects of health that include emotions, spirituality and the environment of the individual, in order to more fully comprehend a person's well-being in relation to their 'whole' person (see McDonald & Schreyer 1991; Chandler, Miner Holden & Kolander 1992; Cerrato 1998; Davis-Floyd & St. John 1998; Foley, Wagner & Waskel 1998; Heintzman 1999; Zuefle 1999; Eastwood 2000; Heintzman 2000; Spaniol 2002). Lincoln (2000, 185) describes the present time as an age of 'greater spirituality', where an interpretive paradigm is a legitimate means of understanding human functioning, providing a place where 'spiritual meets social enquiry'. Adashko Raskin's (2003, 50) study of yoga and women during pregnancy found a heuristic methodology well suited to the introspective and subjective experiences integral to spiritual traditions such as yoga.

Lincoln (2000) describes the methodology of the modern researcher as a merging of various disciplines and perspectives. Most social scientists agree that no one method or data type can encompass a complicated phenomenon such as human behaviour (see also Henderson *et al.* 1999). The researcher is confronted with an array of choices about 'how each of us wants to live the life of a social inquirer' (Schwandt 2000, 205).

The current study adopts a phenomenological perspective to establish the meaning of the women's experiences of yoga practice, and examines their experiences in the light of a theoretical framework, based on two perspectives presented in Chapter Two;

namely, Giddens' 'project of the self' and classical yoga's philosophy of 'the Self'. Although the women's experiences are their own, the frames of meaning assigned to their experiences are compared with the meanings and values of these two theories. Giddens (1976, 79) describes this two fold process as a 'double hermeneutic', whereby the meanings of individuals under study are understood and are then further interpreted within a more robust or refined conceptual framework. Therefore a reciprocal relationship between individual experiences and technical theory results in a relationship defined as an eminently interesting feature of sociology, and one that is inherently complex (Giddens 1976, 79,162).

### **4.3 The 'insider' in qualitative research**

The choice of research topic is often guided by who the researcher is and what is happening in their own lives (Peshkin 1988 in Dupuis 1999). In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences being researched it is necessary to acknowledge the involvement of the researcher and what the researcher does, so that knowledge and insight developed from past experiences can be incorporated into the research process. Moustakas (1990) refers to this stage as the 'initial engagement', reflecting the researcher's inner search of the topic being studied. Garrett (1993) argues that texts mean more and are better understood by the reader when information is provided about the writer, the experiences upon which the writing is based and the circumstances for its production. This leads the reader to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the research (see also Crick 1989).

Moustakas (1990) describes the involvement of the self as part of the heuristic process. He describes the stages of the process of how the researcher subjectively becomes immersed in the research: tacit knowing (knowing more than the researcher realises), intuition (an internal sense of knowing), indwelling (turning inward to comprehend what is being studied), focusing (clarification of the research project) and an internal frame of reference (the researcher's internal base of perception and reflection). I have been practicing Iyengar yoga since 1993, have undertaken training to become an Iyengar yoga teacher, and have changed occupation to teach Iyengar yoga. These life events were integral to my decision to research the phenomena of Iyengar yoga. Being so closely involved with the subject matter means my own experiences and

understandings of Iyengar yoga are consciously and unconsciously interwoven into each stage of the research process.

The autobiographies of writers can be the place where ideas are refined and theories created (Garrett 1993). Meaning is created not only from the theory, but from the life of the researcher as well. Although my own 'yoga story' is not integral to the overall research process, my own experience of yoga has influenced the research topic and my understanding of it. As a result, meaning is both re-created and co-created through my own life and the lives of the study's participants. The nature of this process and the theories and knowledge developed and applied are invaluable for sociological analysis and indeed as a strategy for 'making life matter' (Garrett 1993, 6).

The quality of the research will be greatly affected by the ability of the researcher to know themselves and their role in the research process (Henderson 1998). To be clear about one's position in the research process requires a high degree of reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Douglas (1976 in Howe 1991) cautions that the researcher who is not experienced or comfortable with, and good at observing, themselves is not suited to heuristic research. The fact that the phenomenon under study is the practice of yoga, which is a study of 'the self', means that I have acquired from my yoga practice, some 'tools' that assist self-reflection into the intimate role of 'the self' throughout the research process. My reflexive ability continued to improve as the research process progressed. I became clearer about my role as a researcher and of the need for the women's stories to be heard.

Reinharz (1992 in Henderson 1998, 167) describes the process of the researcher learning more about themselves in the process of studying others as the 'epistemology of "insiderness"'. This certainly reflects my own experience. My appreciation and understanding of yoga philosophy and practice continue to develop, and thus contribute towards a greater understanding of the subject matter, the women's experiences, and indeed myself.

## 4.4 The interview process

### 4.4.1 *Semi-structured interviews*

In-depth interviews allow each participant to tell their own story (Veal 1997). Semi-structured interviews were adopted to enable a comprehensive understanding of a range of issues from the point of view of the subject. This method is preferable when there is only one chance to interview respondents (Howe 1991; Henderson *et al.* 1999) (see Appendix B for the interview guide). Each interview was guided by a list of questions, allowing the participants to deviate from the questions so that the conversation could flow. The questions were non-directive and general, with the use of probing to further draw information and meaning from the participants. Occasionally the participants strayed from the topic, but it was a relatively easy task to refocus the discussion.

Details of age, education, occupation, marital status and why the women began practicing yoga were important to establish a profile of those involved in the study, and moreover to determine whether the study encompassed a group of women with a particular *habitus*. Further questions were designed to encourage the women to think about their experiences of practicing yoga, and to explore how they felt yoga had influenced their physical, mental and spiritual well-being. Other questions enquired about what their practice meant to them and whether their experiences of yoga had impacted on other aspects of their lives.

Priest (1996) argues that the power of participation lies in the ability of the researcher to learn what is important to the group or culture via their own observations of involvement in the phenomena under study. As an Iyengar yoga practitioner with first hand knowledge of the nature of the experiences central to the focus of this study, I was in a position to share experiences with the women whom I interviewed. In particular, due to the subtle nature of some of the effects of practicing yoga, my own experiences meant the women were comfortable telling their own stories because they knew we shared knowledge about the more refined and embodied aspects of practice. Strauss (2005) also found having a personal involvement with yoga meant participants in her study were more comfortable sharing their experiences of yoga with her. Knowing the language of the interviewees enabled a sharing and comprehension of

their experiences (see also Howe 1988). A particularly good example is the use of Sanskrit names to describe the yoga postures or yoga philosophy in our conversations. As Poole (2001) observed, participants' perceptions of reality can then be conveyed by their use of 'language' during the interviews.

#### *4.4.2 Interviewing technique*

I incorporated in part an active interviewing technique suggested by James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (1995). Active interviewing requires the interviewer to share background information or personal experiences with respondents to provide concrete contexts or reference points for respondents to contemplate and explore in terms of their own situations and experiences (Manning 1997; Dupuis 1999). Thus, the interviews were at times conversational in style. Ideally interviews evolve as a mutual disclosure, involving a sharing of information and insight in the meaning-making process, as meaning is revealed between the interviewer and their participants (Holstein & Gubrium 1995). This process is reflected in remarks made by one participant during her interview:

If you had said to me the benefit of yoga to my spiritual life... I'd have probably said to you... that's not what I get from Iyengar yoga, but maybe it's more subtle. It's there, but it's not in your face and so maybe I wasn't ready to see it as opposed to it actually not being there... it has only come to me because I'm talking to you (Lois).

I also applied listening techniques acquired from attending classes at the Newcastle branch of the School of Philosophy (also see Chapter One). In addition to conducting the interview with a view to contributing and sharing my own experiences, I was also made aware of the importance of focusing on listening to what the participants had to say. The techniques helped me to appreciate 'just listening' to the conversation. This meant at times there was no need for me to intervene if the women were comfortable telling their story. Instead my experiences and viewpoints were shared if I was asked what I thought or if some question needed clarifying, or when, for example, a couple of the women were less forthcoming with their stories. A focus on listening ensured I stayed with the present moment, rather than being distracted by trying to think about how I could contribute to the conversation.



#### *4.4.3 Research journals*

Extensive records should be kept in order to substantiate the study's methods and approaches, and to ensure the research is reliable (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The writing of journals is a positive process to create meaning out of the complexity of daily lives; a place where thoughts and ideas can be produced and analysed (Garrett 1993). I recorded my thoughts and notes about meanings, methodological and theoretical assumptions in eight journals. Although the written information was at times disorganised, making the interpretation of some notes at a later date both difficult and confusing, I nonetheless found these journals most useful in clarifying my ideas, relating my ideas to the relevant literature, and in making sure insights were recorded as they arose from my consciousness.

Howe (1988) also cites the usefulness of observation during face-to-face interviews by recording non-verbal impressions of behaviour. At the end of each interview observations were made, including personal impressions of how the interview went, and factors that had impacted on the quality of the interview. These impressions were recorded in the journals to assist further analysis and interpretation of the data.

### **4.5 The sample**

The research focused on a sample of 35 women who had a regular yoga practice of Iyengar yoga. Midlife women were initially chosen for the project because I had intended to interview women from the mid-aged (aged 45-60) cohort of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH). In anticipation of drawing information from the larger study, a set question was included in the ALSWH second questionnaire, distributed to 16, 000 mid-cohort women in 2001. However, due to an over allocation of research projects amongst this cohort of women, access to potential participants proved difficult, and it was decided to interview women from Iyengar schools in New South Wales (NSW).

I am a member of the B.K.S. Iyengar Yoga Association of Australia, which supported the study. There were eighteen certified Iyengar yoga schools listed in the records of the B.K.S. Iyengar Association of Australia. A poster outlining the nature of the study

(see Appendix C), a letter of support from the B.K.S. Iyengar Association (see Appendix D) and an introductory letter (see Appendix E) were sent to each school. The poster provided a contact number and email address for anyone who was interested in requesting further information, or who wished to express an interest in participating in the study.

For the purpose of this project, the women needed to comply with three main criteria. First, they were to be aged 45-60. Second, they had been practicing Iyengar yoga for a minimum of two years. Thirdly, they practiced yoga at least once a week, either by attending a yoga class or by conducting their own independent practice. These three requirements were listed on the information poster. Pilot interviews were conducted with two Iyengar yoga teachers (mid-aged) and two younger yoga teachers. The BKS Iyengar Association of Australia reviewed the interview questions. A review of the pilot interview procedures and transcripts was undertaken to refine interview content and procedures. Very minor changes were made to the interview schedule and the wording of the questions.

Thirty-five women contacted me either by phone or via email. These women were then contacted by telephone, and given a brief explanation of the study. All of these women agreed to be interviewed. An appointment was made at a mutually agreed time and place and an information sheet was mailed out (see Appendix F). Therefore, convenience sampling (Patton 1990) through self-selection was used to attract participants who had a long-term regular yoga practice, and who felt comfortable talking in some depth about their experiences.

As indicated above, my interview technique incorporated some practical techniques gained from a philosophy class. I also incorporated some of these techniques in my interview preparation. Prior to each interview I took five minutes to pause physically and mentally by connecting with the senses. This practice helped me to centre, and enabled me to enter the interview with a clearer and calmer state of mind than might otherwise have occurred. It created the mental space needed to separate the interview from the other activities in my day and reminded me to slow down, to be patient and to

listen. I found this a particularly useful practice as the majority of the interviews took place in Sydney, which required me to drive to unfamiliar places in busy traffic.

At the interview, I began by explaining the nature of the study and asking whether the subject had read the information sheet and if they agreed to be interviewed. Participants signed a consent form (Appendix G). Permission to tape the interview was sought. All of the women agreed to have their interviews taped. Only one interview failed to record. In this instance, detailed notes were made immediately after the interview. These notes were sent to the respondent then to check and revise. As mentioned, notes were made after all of the interviews, detailing the main points that arose, and my own observations about the conduct of the interview, highlighting any factors that affected the interview process.

Interviews were undertaken from April 2002 to December 2002. Of the thirty-five women interviewed, 34 met the age group criteria of 45-60. One participant was 65. I decided to interview her, even though she was not in the required age group, because she had expressed interest in the study very early in the recruitment phase. Thirty interviews took place at the women's homes. Three interviews took place in cafes chosen by the participants, and one chose to be interviewed in the foyer of the University of NSW Library. One participant came to my own home to be interviewed. The shortest interview was thirty minutes; the longest interview two hours. Generally, the interviews lasted forty-five minutes to one hour.

#### *4.5.1 Interview context*

Green (1991 in Garrett 1993) describes how the settings where interviews take place may affect the gathering and nature of data. To overcome any potential problems it is important to try to understand the interview environment, so that appropriate modifications to the interview process can be made if possible. Ely *et al* (1991) outline a number of challenges researchers face when conducting interviews, including external disturbances. Three interviews were in fact made more difficult by distractions (e.g., the presence of children and pets, external noises and general interruptions). In these interviews I was conscious of the concentration required to

listen to the conversation and tried to remain present with what was being said, and not to let my mind be agitated by the disturbances. However, I was aware that my concentration sometimes wavered. One interview was suspended as the participant invited her husband to come and join us for tea and cake. Although this was a very sociable gesture, the break in the middle of the interview again meant the flow of conversation was broken. Most interviews, however, took place in reasonably quiet settings, with few or no distractions. The difference in conducting these interviews was noticeable, and the conversations were more fluid and engaging for longer periods.

Ely *et al* (1991) also cite the potential for interviewees to be resistant to participate in the discussion. Three participants were less forthcoming than others with their stories. This was reflected in the shortness of their responses, particularly when they exhibited some discomfort at a couple of the more personal questions. For one participant, reluctance to engage in some of the questions was a reflection of her life experiences at that time. This participant, who had had a mastectomy, felt she was still coming to terms with what that meant to her as a woman. She said of the interview process: 'It can be a bit confronting, sort of something you're working through'. A couple of participants were uncertain in some of their responses that perhaps reflected, in part, the relatively limited amount of yoga experience they had compared to other participants, and their lesser ability or desire to communicate how their practice had influenced their lives.

Even after the conduct of the pilot interviews I was aware that at times during the first few interviews I was anticipating certain responses. This can be a specific challenge for the researcher (Ely *et al.* 1991). In those instances, I needed to remind myself to listen with an open mind, and not preempt the women's responses. At a couple of interviews I experienced a feeling of unease, for example, when responses were different to my own values and experiences. I either felt I hadn't understood what was being said, or the interviewee had challenged my own beliefs. On these few occasions, I reminded myself that each woman's story was her own. It required bringing myself back to being in the present moment and to just listen, so I could allow their stories to be heard in an unbiased manner.

On the whole, the interviews took place without difficulty. The women were more than happy to share their experiences with me. In fact, most really enjoyed the opportunity to talk about a part of their lives that obviously meant a great deal to them. It was a real pleasure to hear their stories, and it was a privilege to be given the opportunity to listen to the wisdom and the insight arising from their experiences with Iyengar yoga.

Participants were encouraged to contact me if they wished to further discuss or add to the data. Only three women sent further information to me via email during this stage. Participants were sent a letter (see Appendix H) and copies of their interview transcript for comment and change, should they feel they had been unfairly represented or wished to add to their initial responses. Several women made minor additions to their interview transcript and returned the transcript and amendments to me.

#### *4.5.2 Participants' profiles*

The writing of participants' profiles is an important phase in the research process (Dupuis 1999). It allows the reporting of as much information as possible about the individuals interviewed, and provides important background and context to other findings. The participants in this current study are predominantly 'middle class' women who have completed tertiary education. The participants' demographic characteristics are compatible with the profiles of women practicing yoga in other research (see Chapter Three). The specific profile of the participants may also reflect the nature of the recruitment process that focused on women with a long-term practice of yoga. This would increase the likelihood that perhaps women of a particular *habitus* expressed an interest in participating in the study. Information about the participants is found in Appendices I and J. A more detailed discussion of the women's profile and *habitus* is presented in Chapter Five.

#### 4.6 Data analysis

The transcripts were analysed inductively to seek patterns and themes based on the data (see Manning 1997). Thirty-four recorded interviews were transcribed (as noted earlier one recording failed). The coding process began after the first interview when I summarised what I considered the key themes from that interview. As the interviews progressed, words, ideas and experiences from my own involvement in yoga were instantly recognisable in many of the women's stories, while more diverse and shared experiences amongst the women were also revealed. As Garrett (1993) suggests, the analysis of research seeks for something already partially formed in the mind of the writer. As such my own experiences were interwoven into the process of data analysis. I became very familiar with the women's stories during the process of transcribing, reading and rereading each of the interviews. I read each interview several times to ensure that I had recorded all of the themes arising from the interviews. This stage of the analysis reflected open coding (e.g., Strauss & Corbin 1990). My two research supervisors also independently reviewed the data and we collectively discussed the data at some length.

This intensive engagement with the interviews reflects the importance I gave to becoming immersed in the data, and pulling the data apart in a process of examination, comparison, conceptualisation and categorisation (Glaser & Straus 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2000). The benefits of an inductive approach include the establishment of a set of themes grounded in the data, rather than based on preconceived ideas, which may or may not be relevant (Brennan & Stevens 1998; Henderson *et al.* 1999; Crooks 2001). The codes revealed that a wide range of experiences arose from the women's practice of Iyengar yoga. These codes were grouped into themes to identify the meanings of the phenomena under investigation. Key themes developed included: physical well-being, physical acceptance, functioning body, feminine practice, mind-body connection, mental and emotional well-being, awareness, being in the present moment, 'being' and 'becoming', time and space for 'the self', coping mechanism, life 'tool', practice, stillness, connection and other, philosophical and spiritual meaning.

Coding and analysis of the interviews revealed that many of the women's experiences were reflected in aspects of Giddens' 'project of the self' and 'the Self' depicted in classical yoga. Insights into the women's experiences provided a very strong impetus for me to critically compare Giddens' work with the broader concepts of the Self presented in yoga philosophy (see Chapter Two). In doing so, the initial codes were re-organised by applying the key concepts outlined in Table 2.1, using a process of axial coding (e.g., Strauss & Corbin 1990). Subsequently, the progressive nature of yoga's transformation on an individual was the basis for arranging the data into each of the chapters, beginning with the physical realm, progressing to the more subtle realms of the mind, and finally the spiritual realm.

Garrett (1993) describes three vital elements of the writing process: time, the computer, and the unconscious. These three elements were relevant in my own experiences of 'the thesis'. More specifically, Garrett (1993, 33) considers part of the writing process to be 'dependent on the unconscious and the ways in which the unconscious self has been shaped'; the imagination constantly sifts and rearranges the data, generating patterns, questions and insights. At times, it felt 'insights' would appear, sometimes while walking on the beach or during a quiet moment while practicing yoga. Progress required time and patience, and acceptance that some days were more productive than others. Time itself allowed ideas to formulate and a better understanding of the data to develop.

#### **4.7 Methodological strengths and challenges**

Although the benefits of the researcher having an in-depth understanding of the phenomena being studied have been identified above, being closely involved with the research material can have its drawbacks. As the practice of Iyengar yoga is such an integral part of my daily life, it is possible I took aspects of knowledge produced for granted. In this instance, the role of my two supervisors, whose knowledge of Iyengar yoga was limited, was essential to counteract possible gaps in the knowledge as the thesis was written.

A second issue related to the possible limitations of my viewpoint when drawing from the data produced by the interviews. This process took time as I became aware and

identified the nature of any bias. It required ongoing checking and analysing of themes and categories that arose from the data. Initially, there was a tendency to be drawn to and recognise themes that identified with my own personal experiences of yoga. It was only with time and reflection that I was able to see my bias, and reread the data and reorganise themes and categories that enabled all of the women's voices to be represented in a more inclusive way.

My own yoga practice was also a useful 'tool' throughout the research process. It enabled me to centre both physically and mentally, and detach mentally from the writing process. This practice created a mental space that ensured when I returned to the data there was a greater likelihood of analysing and writing in a way that was more open and objective. These considerations are an essential part of the research process, because the extent of the researcher's bias ultimately influences the credibility of the research findings (Patton 1990).

#### **4.8 Ethical considerations**

The current study was subject to clearance from the University of Newcastle Ethics Committee. In order to gain approval from the Committee, I addressed a number of ethical considerations. As identified in previous sections of this chapter this included sending the women an information sheet, acquiring informed consent from the women before being interviewed, advising that interview participation was voluntary, and advising the women that they could decline to answer any question and withdraw from the study at any time. All of the women were advised their transcripts would remain confidential and access to data restricted to the researchers (myself and my supervisors). Pseudonyms were used in all cases.

As mentioned, the participants were sent their interview transcripts to give them the opportunity to alter or to request the deletion of any data. Later in the research process they were also sent a letter and their quotes and personal information to review how their data had been interpreted (see Appendix K). Twenty-five of the participants responded. The majority of the comments were positive, and in particular several had enjoyed being able to reflect on how their experiences and yoga practice had evolved since the interview had taken place. Only minor changes were made as a result of this



process. Allowing the participants to read what has been written about them before releasing a document ensures that they have an opportunity to agree or disagree with the interpretation of their data and thus inform the research process. Several of the women commented how they had enjoyed the opportunity to talk about their experiences of yoga and this had revealed certain truths to them in the process. The women involved with the study will be sent a summary of the main study findings.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

This chapter explained the research methodology and its context and setting. It discussed the appropriateness of choosing a qualitative methodology as the most effective way to capture the experiences of the participants, enabling their own stories to be heard. The detail of information obtained from an in-depth interview process was integral in revealing the nature and effects of the women's practice. The process allowed the participants to speak about their subjective experiences of practicing Iyengar yoga in such a way that the meaning they assigned to their practice may be better understood.

Due to my own intense involvement with the research topic, the chapter also examined the strengths and weaknesses of the researcher having a close involvement with the phenomenon being studied, and, ultimately the data being examined. The research process was closely monitored so that it was possible to reflect on and document sources of bias and possible techniques that may have affected the interpretation of the data. This required my continual engagement in a reflexive process of self-monitoring and inquiry, particularly during the interviews and the data analysis and writing phases.

The presentation and discussion of the empirical data collected during the interview process is presented in the next four chapters.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **‘THAT SORT OF PERSON’**

The influence yoga has, is not independent of people as individuals and the reasons they do yoga. In other words, you couldn't prescribe Iyengar yoga to a random population and expect the results that we as practitioners get. We come to and continue yoga because it matches in some way our pre-existing values, goals, emotions/personality, spiritual values. Of course yoga then works on us and we work with it and change/develop in some or all of the areas. It's sounding a bit elitist, but I don't mean that, what I mean is it's not just yoga that does the whole job. I think the thing that yoga gives us are the tools to affect change in all areas of our lives, but there needs to be a willingness to work hard over a sustained period and not desire a quick fix. (Naomi)

### **5.1 Introduction**

The opening quote was sent to me via email shortly after my interview with Naomi. What she wrote encapsulates the focus of Chapter Five. Naomi suggests that perhaps to some extent, the practice of Iyengar yoga appeals to a certain type of person. The practice attracts women with similar lifestyle beliefs and values. Practitioners align existing values with those associated with the practice of yoga in a two way process that works on and continues to affect individuals. Ongoing changes result from the practice of yoga, together with the existing values and beliefs that practitioners bring to their practice.

This chapter then, investigates the appeal of yoga to the women interviewed for the study. The women's demographic characteristics and broader lifestyle values and interests are examined to consider whether their reasons for commencing yoga build on existing life philosophies and interests. The discussion examines to what extent the participants' practice of yoga is an identity affirming process that reaffirms who they are and their chosen lifestyles.

## **5.2 A homogenous group of women**

All of the women interviewed lived in NSW. Twenty-five women were interviewed in Sydney, six women in the Kangaroo Valley, two women in Newcastle, and two women in the Blue Mountains. The women were either certified Iyengar yoga teachers and/or regular students at one or more of twelve different Iyengar yoga schools located in one of the four locations where the interviews took place. Twenty-seven women lived in urban centres (Sydney and Newcastle), and eight women lived in rural properties or in smaller towns surrounded by national parks (Blue Mountains and Kangaroo Valley).

Where possible the women's demographics are compared with Australia's national demographic data provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). In other instances the women's data is compared with the findings of an Australia wide study of women, the ALSWH. The ALSWH data was more suitable in most instances because of the specific focus and information available on mid-aged women, therefore, providing a more accurate comparison with the participants in the current study. ALSWH data is described as 'reasonably representative' of Australian women in the mid-aged group when compared with national census data (Lee 2001, 2). Where possible the findings are also compared with specific yoga studies.

A highly homogenous group of women emerged when the participants' demographic information was collected. All of the women were Caucasian. The predominance of Caucasian practitioners is comparable with Badell's (1998) American study of Iyengar yoga practitioners, which reports 93% of participants were Caucasian. Sarah was the only woman whose age did not fit within the intended age range of 45-60 initially set for the current study (see Section 4.5). Sarah was 65 at the time of the interview. The rest of the women were aged 45 to 60 (see Appendix I). The average age of the women was 52.

The participants' education level is high, with 88% having completed education beyond secondary school level (See Appendix I).<sup>1</sup> Twenty-five of the women had completed University degrees or teaching qualifications. Six women had continued their education with professional and/or vocational training at accredited institutions. Five women had not continued study after secondary school level, although all had completed training within their place of work.

Vicky and Sarah considered themselves 'retired'. However, both worked part-time: Vicky was self-employed (jeweller) and Sarah was employed in academic research (environmental management). Of the remaining thirty-three women, thirteen were self-employed: free-lance journalist, publisher, organic business, winery/farm, artists (2), film editor/producer (2), and yoga teachers (5). Five women were teaching at TAFE or school. Seven women worked for social, environmental and community organisations. Other occupations were health, administration (3), and one personal assistant. Two women were studying full time at university and a third was studying part time in addition to teaching at TAFE. Only Denise did not work outside the home and she described herself as a 'house manager'.<sup>2</sup>

According to a *Yoga Journal* survey, a high percentage of yoga practitioners in America work in the 'helping' professions (see <http://www.yogajournal.com/advertise.cmf>). In the current study, 80% of the women worked in what could be identified as 'helping' occupations, or those occupations Heelas (1996, 162) describes as 'expressive' or 'creative'.<sup>3</sup> Heelas (1996) more broadly associates this group with left wing politics, higher education, environmentalism, and alternative lifestyles. 'Expressive professions' aptly describe the occupations of the majority of the participants in the current study.

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<sup>1</sup> This compared with the findings of Badell's (1998) study, where more than 90% of participants were college educated.

<sup>2</sup> This group of women is not representative of employed mid-age women (97%), when compared with the ALSWH data, which reports that 74% of mid-age urban women and 65% of rural women work (Brown et al 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Strauss (2005) also reports that most of her yoga participants worked in the 'helping' professions.

Twenty-two women (63%) were married, lived with or were with a partner (see Appendix I). This figure is significantly lower than the percentage of mid-aged women who were married or living with a partner (80%) in the ALSWH study (Brown, Young & Byles 1999). In the current study 37% of the women were married compared with 75% in the ALSWH study (Brown *et al.* 1999). Twenty-six percent of the women were living in a de facto relationship compared with the ALSWH study that reports less than 10% of mid-aged women in urban and rural areas live in a de facto relationship (Brown *et al.* 1999). Perhaps the high percentage of de facto partners and single women in the current study is indicative of a group of women who are independent, value their autonomy, and exhibit 'liberated' values in their work and lifestyle. Twenty-five of the women had children (see Appendix I). Fifteen had one or more children still living at home (43%).

### *5.2.1 Interest in alternative health therapies*

The demographic characteristics of participants in the current study correspond with both Badell's (1998) and Eisenberg *et al.*'s (1993 in Clark 1999) studies which identify users of complementary therapies as mainly urban, female, well educated, with middle to high incomes. Heelas (1996, 137) argues that those well-educated people who have become disenchanted by, or react to, mainstream society, are more likely to embrace lifestyle alternatives. From a feminist perspective, Gayford (1999, 29) describes the rise of alternative therapies among women as a shift towards health practices that are more feminine and holistic.

Twenty-eight (80%) of the interviewees reported using alternative health care in addition to practicing yoga as a component of their overall strategy for maintaining their well-being (see Appendix I). This represents a markedly higher use of alternative health therapies than the 12% of women reported in the ALSWH study (Brown *et al.* 1999). The findings imply that the participants are interested in holistic approaches to their health, are proactive about, and hence take responsibility for, looking after their well-being. As Naomi's quote (page 96) indicates, these women are not expecting a quick fix, but are prepared to work hard over a sustained period of time.

Meditation is another Eastern tradition practiced by five of the women. Meditation techniques were learnt independently from their yoga teachings. Hannah was a Buddhist and had practiced meditation daily for six years. Sally meditated regularly. Lois had seen her husband benefit enormously from meditation and she was committed to attaining a daily meditation practice. Vicky had attended a number of *Vipassana* meditation retreats and she felt they embraced similar ideals to yoga. Naomi had learnt her meditation technique from *Ananda Marga* and also meditated regularly.

Heelas (1996) argues that in general terms those most likely to be involved with 'New Age' and 'expressivist' activities such as yoga, share a particular world view and lifestyle. The practice of yoga supports and affirms these women's identity and how they choose to live. They had the option to choose from a range of possibilities in terms of defining the 'right' lifestyle for them. For example, Harriet had been practicing yoga for more than ten years and demonstrated a long-term commitment to her health. She is vegetarian with a long-term interest in the natural environment, working in community services. Yet she said of other 'alternative health' modalities, 'I definitely don't use... any other non-conventional health care... basically I reject alternative health care'. In brief, the majority of participants demonstrated a concern for their overall health that to varying degrees embraced a range of 'alternative' lifestyle choices.

### **5.3 Involvement with Iyengar yoga**

Thirty-four women attended at least one yoga class each week (see 'Student' in Appendix J). Sixteen women attended two or more classes a week. Only Wendy did her own yoga practice all of the time. Wendy annually visits the Iyengar Institute in Pune, India, where she studies yoga with the Iyengar family. Isabel, Sally, Val and Evelyn have also studied in Pune.

### *5.3.1 Fully-engaged yoga practitioners*

Heelas (1996) devised three categories to describe the intensity of participation in a New Age activity: fully-engaged, serious part-timer and casual part-timer. In his opinion, yoga as it is practiced in the West is a New Age activity. In this instance, his terminology is useful in distinguishing the participants' level of commitment to their yoga practice.

'Fully-engaged' describes those who devote their lives to their quest; teaching or working in the practice of interest, with practice influencing other aspects of their lives (Heelas 1996). Nine women in this study are depicted as fully-engaged Iyengar yoga practitioners. Six women taught Iyengar yoga. For Wendy, Evelyn, Isabel and Sally, teaching yoga was their main occupation. Wendy, Evelyn and Isabel had been teaching yoga for 26, 29, and 28 years respectively. They represent part of a group of people who became the first generation of certified Iyengar yoga teachers in Australia in the 1970s. Gillian taught a couple of classes a week. Val taught a couple of weekly yoga classes in addition to her full-time job. Linda and Leonie were participating in Iyengar teacher training. Kelly had undertaken an Iyengar Introductory teacher-training course.

Heelas (1996, 118) describes a fully-engaged practitioner as someone who maintains 'more austere or challenging and time-consuming' disciplines. Sally, Leonie, Holly, Vicky, Wendy, Gillian, Isabel, and Evelyn had a substantial personal practice. Val, Kelly, and Linda were experienced practitioners and had practiced yoga for 12, 25 and 15 years respectively. They attended three to four yoga classes a week, relying on their classes to maintain the core of their practice, although they did some personal yoga practice at home. This group was disciplined and committed to maintaining a regular practice, even when their normal routine was interrupted, for example when they went on holiday. Wendy said:

Even if I just do fifteen minutes breathing... ten minutes standing postures. It still works well. It's a different sort of practice. So there're not too many things that get in the way of... practicing something during the day, but the length of practice and depth of practice will change (Wendy).

Only a few of the long-term practitioners maintained a regular practice of *pranayama* (Wendy, Isabel, Evelyn and Sally). According to the experiences of the women interviewed, progress to integrate a regular *pranayama* practice was slow. Although this issue is not a central focus of this thesis, the slow uptake of *pranayama* practice as part of an Iyengar yoga practice is worthy of further consideration (see Section 5.3).

The fully-engaged yoga practitioners were more likely to embrace the wider philosophies of classical yoga, for example, reading some of yoga's ancient texts, and incorporating aspects of yoga's philosophy into their lives. The participants who were teaching yoga or had completed or were undertaking Iyengar teacher training had some knowledge of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*. Wendy and Isabel both expressed an interest in reading yoga texts and books more regularly as part of their overall commitment to integrate yoga's broader philosophy. As a trainee teacher, Linda observed very little was said in her class linking *asana* practice to the wider philosophy of yoga. From her perspective, most of the class content was linked to the experiential nature of yoga.

Linda, Leonie and Evelyn were fully-engaged practitioners. All three referred to feeling 'guilty' about the amount of time practicing or teaching yoga took them away from their family. Linda spoke of a constant battle in trying to balance the needs of her partner, her children and her yoga practice:

And especially doing teacher training 'cause I'm already taking quite big chunks of time and that's something that I constantly weigh up... I'd like to do more [yoga practice]. I'd like to go to all the other morning practices for instance, if I didn't feel that I was somehow letting 'the side' [her children] down. (Linda)

Evelyn also felt guilty about the amount of time teaching yoga took her away from her family. This issue had been an ongoing concern for her. She noted that there were certain expectations from her teachers with respect to the amount of daily yoga practice, and the times those practices should be undertaken. Evelyn found when she allowed herself to be



more flexible in her practice times, in a way that fitted around her family's needs and commitments, she felt better about and stressed less about her practice. Evelyn mentioned an incident that occurred while being assessed for an Iyengar teaching certification. She felt 'ostracised' by the assessors who criticised her for placing her family before yoga: 'They said that my family came first in my practice... that yoga always comes first, comes before your family'. The situation demonstrates that Evelyn, like many of the women who participated in this study, is juggling the demands of yoga, family life and work. There was a constant dilemma with respect to how a disciplined practice of yoga was to be managed alongside her family's needs and demands.

Evelyn and Isabel both stressed that they had made their children their priority, especially when their children were young. Only as they gained more independence from their mothering role had they redirected a greater focus on their yoga practice. Isabel said:

I knew I made a conscious choice... bringing up my children was the most important thing during those years. If it meant that I couldn't practice yoga, there was always time and there is time... I think I made the right choice, because I have got three wonderful daughters all of who do yoga. (Isabel)

For these women, their yoga practice had been adapted so that they continued to participate in a contemporary lifestyle, which included working and raising families. Given the family commitments of these women, it is not surprising that they felt torn between meeting the demands of family and expected commitments to their yoga practice. It is clear yoga's evolution in the West is affected by the reality of such issues. The issue has broader implications regarding the intensity, nature and time of practice. The juggling of family, work and yoga is also an issue highlighted by women with a less committed yoga practice.

### 5.3.2 *Serious part-timers*

Heelas (1996) describes ‘serious part-timers’ as practitioners typically working in conventional careers, while at the same time committed to a regular practice. This description accounts for the other twenty-four interviewees. Heelas (1996, 118) also suggests that the nature of practice for a serious part-timer is often a means to handle a mid-life crisis or a strategy to deal with a physical illness. This was indicated by some of the women who fitted into this category.

For 14 of the 24 women in this group, the yoga class was the only time of the week they practiced yoga regularly. Half of this group (12) attempted at least some personal practice at home, although for some, their efforts were sporadic. Most managed to practice for fifteen to twenty minutes every day or every other day. Eggins’ (2002) describes this kind of practice as ‘maintenance’ yoga. For these women, the most common reason for doing a ‘maintenance’ practice was to alleviate their physical ailments. Pamela, Clare, Sarah, Hannah, Fiona, Phoebe and Mary all found practicing a little yoga daily improved their specific physical conditions. For example, Pamela said, ‘I do probably only twenty minutes... I do all the things to limber up my lower back because I’ve had that lower back problem’. Hannah, Phoebe and Fiona practiced between half an hour and three quarters of an hour, approximately three times a week.

The only time this group of women regularly practiced *pranayama* was when it was taught under the guidance of their teacher in class. Holly had been practicing yoga regularly for fifteen years and practiced daily for ten years. She said:

I don’t feel very experienced with *pranayama*. Sometimes I will just sit a bit at the beginning. Usually following perhaps things we have done in class... I feel a bit timid around *pranayama*, it feels like a big area that hasn’t quite arrived in my life yet. (Holly)

B.K.S. Iyengar stresses that the practitioner’s yoga practice should progress from the gross (*asana*) to the more subtle (*pranayama*), and that an accomplished level of *asana* practice should be attained before attempting the practice of *pranayama*. However, the

importance of introducing the Iyengar yoga student to breath awareness from an early stage, as progressive preparation for the more advanced breathing techniques, has been noted (Lillas 2004). Whereas Lillas (2004) notes that some Iyengar teachers are neglecting the practice of *pranayama* in their teaching, Eggins (2002, 28) found that interviewees in her study were critical of Iyengar yoga's strong focus on the physical aspects of yoga. However, these situations reflect the approaches of some Iyengar teachers, rather than the teachings of B.K.S. Iyengar himself.

Fiona was the only serious part-timer who had actively engaged in the broader teachings of yoga philosophy. The yoga school Fiona attended offered courses in Indian philosophy. She found that attending courses had expanded her knowledge about the potential depth of yoga philosophy and its relevance to other aspects of her life. Most of the other serious part-timers had a yoga book in the house, but used it primarily for *asana* practice, rather than to embrace yoga's philosophical perspectives.

Many of the women in this group identified a number of constraints that prevented them from establishing a more regular yoga practice. According to Phoebe, Jackie, Alice and Lesley, the way Iyengar yoga was taught discouraged them from initiating a yoga practice at home. Phoebe compared her experiences of Iyengar yoga with her experiences of practicing *Hatha* yoga. She felt her previous *Hatha* yoga teacher encouraged practicing yoga at home, whereas she found there was an impediment to practice with Iyengar yoga because of the need for a mat and other props. However, she had also observed a change in attitude at her yoga school towards the uptake of a home practice.

Jackie felt she needed more guidance with respect to what sequence of postures she should practice at home. In response to initiating a more comprehensive home practice, Lesley said:

It's not so much a matter of time... because with Iyengar yoga where you've so much equipment... it's kind of space... if I had a little yoga [space] at home with the ropes and stuff I think I'd do it a lot more. (Lesley)

Alice was also not confident she could safely replicate a practice at home. She perceived her own practice would create bad habits and aggravate her injuries, especially without yoga props and the assistance of her teacher. Eggins (2002) also highlights a need for Iyengar teachers to do more to encourage students to commence a home practice of yoga. Within the practice of Iyengar yoga there is a need for more research in this area.

Those serious part-timers who had children living at home identified responsibilities to their children as impediments to their ability to practice yoga at home or attend as many yoga classes as they would like. This situation was intensified because most of these women worked outside the home and were also responsible for most of the organisation around the house. These combined factors constrained their ability to find the time to practice yoga at home. Tamara said:

It's hard to get that uninterrupted time and that little space where you can do it [yoga] uninterrupted... I'd like to do more but it is just things that are happening at home... it's not very conducive. (Tamara)

Many of the women who relied on an organised yoga class for their weekly or twice weekly practice also noted the 'lack of self-discipline' as another reason they did not practice yoga as much as they would like. For example, Lois aspired to practice yoga more regularly. She said, '... if I can just be more self-disciplined. I've just got to do it. I mean yoga... it's so whole'. Lois's words resonate with a number of the women who had not yet established their own personal practice. These women did not have the same commitment, or were not able to give the same commitment to their yoga practice as the fully-engaged practitioners. What is significant about the serious part-timers is that even when juggling commitments of work, family and home, their yoga practice was a very significant factor in their lives, albeit to varying degrees, depending on whether they practiced once or several times a week.

Heelas' (1996, 118-9) third category is the 'casual part-timer' that characterises those people who are motivated by their consumerist outlook or satisfaction of their curiosity. This category's criteria did not describe any of the women in this study.

#### 5.4 'Finding' yoga

The participants were asked if there was a story behind how they first 'found' yoga. The most common 'story' for starting or returning to yoga on a more regular basis was related to physical needs although for several women a number of factors intervened (see Appendix J). An exact figure is difficult to determine because several women had initially started yoga when they were teenagers and in their twenties, with practice being continued intermittently since that time. However, when they later returned to yoga on a more regular basis, primary motivations identified were linked to physical needs. Twenty-three women (66%) began or recommenced yoga for one or more of the following physical reasons:

1. To improve their flexibility and overcome physical stiffness;
2. To assist a specific physical injury or condition;
3. To participate in a non-competitive physical activity.

Pamela decided she would try yoga after attending a meditation class, where she realised she could not sit cross-legged on the floor. Several women described themselves as having 'stiff' bodies and wished to improve their flexibility. Phoebe and Lisa said, 'I'm very stiff'. Several women started yoga to alleviate specific physical conditions. Physical conditions varied from chronic conditions that dramatically impacted on the quality of their daily lives, to less major conditions, such as injuries obtained from other sporting activities.<sup>4</sup>

Terrie, Grace, Linda, Elaine, Jackie and Harriet were attracted to yoga because it was a non-competitive physical activity. This observation concurs with Deem and Gilroy's

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<sup>4</sup> Rehabilitation of an injury or physical condition is also identified as the primary motivations for starting yoga in Badell's (1998), Dragon's (1998) and Thomas *et al*'s (2000) studies.

(1998) study which shows that a high percentage of women reject competitive sports as a means of getting fit, instead preferring non-competitive activities. Terrie and Grace disliked team sports and competitive activities:

I've always been not very good physically at sport... I could swim and I could walk... but I could never throw a ball... not competitive sports... I've always been fairly uncoordinated. (Terrie)

I'm not interested in competitive sports. I'm more a loner, and I think yoga had appeal because I wasn't having to contend with someone else next to me who could do everything, and me feeling wow I'm really hopeless at this. (Grace)

Although aerobics classes can be described as an individual activity, for several women, the competitive nature of an aerobics class manifested in the individual competitiveness of the class participants. Female participation in aerobics is associated with the 'changing aesthetic of the female form', which could explain its competitive nature (Lloyd 1996, 83). Jackie also disliked the gym environment. She said, 'I have tried the gyms. I can't stand them; they're appalling places'. Alice and Fiona had attended gyms in the past, which they compared with their yoga experiences:

While I was at the gym it was like the latest leotard... by the time I got to yoga... there's no competitiveness, no looking at other people. (Alice)

There seems so much of the gym scene... on that physical appearance... that was why I think Iyengar yoga was appealing. (Fiona)

Clare enjoyed competitive sports. She differentiated her yoga practice from other physical activities, in that with her yoga practice the only person she challenged was herself. Iyengar yoga was thus perceived as a preferable non-competitive alternative to remaining physically active in the middle years (c.f. American Sports Data 2003). In fact, several women identified a long-term interest in non-competitive activities, where yoga was seen as a natural progression. Alison and Evelyn had done ballet. Grace, Jackie and

Naomi had danced at various times in their lives. Alison had also practiced Tai Chi and Qi Gong. Holly had always enjoyed movement, and had first tried yoga while at drama school. Clare did not start yoga until 1998. She had participated in physical culture for many years. Grace had also done Pilates.

Many of the participants continued to partake in physical activities in addition to their regular yoga practice (see Appendix I). Terrie, Val and Wendy walked as a means of 'getting around'. Phoebe walked to work every day. Grace, Isabel, Naomi, Lesley, Alice and Harriet enjoyed walking regularly in the bush or by the ocean. Lisa, Morag and Sarah walked their dogs every day. Lesley's outdoor work was physical and once or twice a week she said, 'I walk up a hill and that gives me that aerobic type activity'. Leonie, Mary, Phoebe and Tamara swam regularly. Denise, Vicky, Simone and Tamara played tennis weekly. Jackie and Naomi attended a dance class and Clare did physical culture. Gillian and Morag did physical work, maintaining the gardens and land on their rural properties. All of these activities took place on a regular basis. Other activities were undertaken less regularly, for example, Evelyn canoed and Phoebe went cross-country ski-ing.

These findings portray a group of women who for the most part had been physically active for much of their adult lives (c.f. Dragon 1998). Sally, Holly, Lois, Val, Vera and Fiona did not do any physical activity other than their yoga practice on a regular basis. Fiona, Val, Sally and Holly practiced yoga several times a week. For Lois and Vera, their weekly yoga class was their only regular physical activity. A general trend identified was that as the level of commitment to yoga practice intensified, the amount of other physical activities undertaken diminished. For Val, Wendy, Evelyn, Isabel, Gillian, Sally and Holly, their daily yoga practice was the most important aspect in their daily physical routine.

Overall, albeit to varying degrees, all of the women were proactive and disciplined in maintaining a regular programme of physical activity. In keeping with the characteristics identified with being fully-engaged and serious part-timers, they were serious and

committed about taking care of themselves. These findings reflect those in Strauss' (2005, 138) study, which reports that yoga is a practice for middle class participants who place significance on maintaining personal health and well-being.

#### *5.4.1 Long-term interest in yoga*

As mentioned above, several women had been involved in or introduced to yoga from an early age. Leonie, Terrie, Naomi, Lois, Hannah, and Grace practiced yoga when they were teenagers or in their early twenties. They said of their experiences:

I have been practicing all my life. (Leonie)

I've always had a great interest... even when I was at school I bought a yoga book.  
(Grace)

Yoga was just something I did. (Terrie)

Naomi had practiced different styles of yoga since her twenties. It was not until she was pregnant that she attended an Iyengar yoga class and connected with the Iyengar style of teaching. As a teenager, Kelly was introduced to yoga through her mother's participation in yoga classes. Fiona had first experienced yoga in the 1980s. Kelly and Fiona returned to a practice of yoga later in their lives as a way of alleviating the stress of specific emotional situations. They 'knew' from their previous experiences that yoga could assist them through the difficulties they were facing:

About three months before my father died... I just knew that I was going to spin off the earth... I needed something and I had done yoga before. (Fiona)

I was in a lot of trouble with depression... I went to yoga... it helped the depression... gave me a structure to help myself. I felt that I was helping myself with my mental health. (Kelly)



Over time, the mental and emotional benefits attained from practicing yoga became increasingly important for all the interviewees (see Chapter Seven). These scenarios indicate that the practice of yoga had a long-term connection with the identity of these women. For many, their experiences of yoga spanned much of their lives, even though in some cases their practice had been sporadic.

The number of years these women had practiced yoga at the time of the interview ranged from two years to thirty years (see Appendix J). Twenty-five women (70%) had practiced yoga for more than ten years. Fifteen women (43%) had experiences of yoga that spanned twenty years or more. Seven of the women had been practicing for five years or less. This is significant because the women had incorporated alternative ways of identifying and looking after themselves for a significant proportion of their lives (c.f. Badell 1998; Clark 1999; Strauss 2002). For the study's participants, practicing yoga was a significant lifestyle choice that highlighted the importance of aspiring to a certain level of physical well-being. The fact that they had maintained a regular yoga practice for a minimum of two years, also demonstrates a substantial level of intrinsic motivation (c.f. Badell 1998). These findings are significant when compared to Dishman's (2000) reporting that 50% of participants who commence a regular commitment to a physical activity last about six months before their efforts diminish. Other studies show that inactivity tends to govern the lives of most women (Henderson, Ainsworth, Stolarczyk, Hootman & Levin 1999; Markula, Grant & Denison 2001).

## **5.5 Reaffirming their identity**

### *5.5.1 Seeking a healthy and 'balanced' lifestyle*

All of the participants identified positive experiences from their practice of Iyengar yoga. Improvements in physical health were attributed directly to their practice. This fact is significant when understanding their sustained efforts to maintain an ongoing practice. The justification for the regular undertaking of an activity like yoga is more likely to be maintained when a positive difference is made in the lives of those who practice (c.f. Heelas 1996, 182). Yoga 'works' for this particular group of women.

In keeping with the participants in Strauss (2005), Thomas *et al* (2000) and Dragon's (1998) studies, the majority of women indicated the importance of maintaining a 'balanced' lifestyle. De Michelis (2004, 185) argues that a balanced lifestyle in modern life has become 'a holistic practice, while preventative medicine and health-orientated lifestyles are also promoted'. Similarly, for the participants in this study, yoga was part of an overall commitment to take care of 'the self', which embraced other healthy lifestyle behaviours such as a wholesome diet, exercise additional to their yoga practice (see Section 5.4), getting enough sleep and utilising alternative health care (see Section 5.2.2). All of the women incorporated, to varying degrees, lifestyle behaviours that they described as 'healthy' and 'balanced'. Their yoga practice was integral to their strategy of maintaining a 'healthy' and 'balanced' lifestyle. Similarly, in Thomas *et al* (2000) and Badell's (1998) studies, the majority of practitioners (94% and 96% respectively) found maintaining good health was an important reason for practicing Iyengar yoga.

By way of example, most of the women made a connection between yoga and vegetarianism. Vegetarianism is an essential ethical discipline of *ahimsa* (non-harming) in classical yoga. There is much written on the benefits of eating a vegetarian diet in many yoga texts. To varying degrees, maintaining a wholesome and healthy diet was an integral part of daily life, which for many meant a predominantly vegetarian diet. Harriet, Holly, Naomi and Wendy have been vegetarians for a long time. Some of the women had been vegetarian in the past, but had resumed eating fish because they perceived it was beneficial for their health. Alison said, 'I haven't eaten meat for many years although I eat fish, so I'm not strictly vegetarian but it all seems to work with the yoga'. Some of the women ate small amounts of red meat. Gillian indicated that she only ate organic meat, and added, 'I was a vegetarian for twenty years'. Although Pamela preferred vegetarian cuisine she found it difficult to cook a vegetarian diet that suited her family. She said, 'I probably would be a vegetarian if it was easier for me... I find it hard to cook vegetarian things that everybody likes'.

Mary was the only woman who smoked regularly. She said ‘I’m also a smoker which I find helpful for pain control and as it’s not going to kill me, I’m not that concerned’.<sup>5</sup> Annie smoked marijuana at weekends. This was a long-term habit she shared with her partner. The rest did not smoke or use recreational drugs (c.f. Thomas *et al.* 2000). A couple of the long-term yoga practitioners did not drink any alcohol. Most of the others however, enjoyed a glass of wine at dinner or socially. The results indicate that the majority of interviewees maintained a healthy lifestyle that demonstrated a significant level of self-responsibility. The participants are representative of a trend amongst baby-boomer middle classes to take an active role in becoming more self-reliant in the development of healthy habits and lifestyles (c.f. Badell 1998).

### *5.5.2 Sharing their experiences with others*

Some women were initially invited to try yoga either via a family member, or a friend (see ‘Family’, and ‘Friend’ in Appendix J). Wendy, Elaine, Linda and Vera initially started yoga because their respective partners or husbands at the time were already practicing and had encouraged them to participate. Kelly, Jackie, and Isabel were influenced to commence yoga because of their mother’s involvement with yoga. Isabel saw the benefits yoga gave her mother and this had encouraged her to start. Annie had been inspired by one of her aunts, who as a child she remembered was ‘so glamorous and she used to do yoga’.

The significance assigned to their yoga practice is evident in the participants’ keenness to affiliate experiences with others. Several women emphasised that it was important that yoga was an activity they could share with others. Sally and her partner were yoga teachers. Lisa, Val, Naomi, Gillian and Harriet practiced yoga with their partners and indicated this was something special they shared:

It’s a thing that we do together so it is another dimension to our relationship, which is really wonderful and as well as that it reinforces... doing it (yoga). (Harriet)

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<sup>5</sup> This is markedly lower than the reported 18% of mid-aged women who smoked in the ALSWH pilot survey of 272 mid-aged women Lee (1999).

It's nice to go off and do something together. (Elaine)

Tamara had encouraged her husband to attend a yoga class: 'I persuaded my husband to try... he goes to one particular teacher and finds that it's good for him'. She also wished her children could practice yoga. Harriet had taken her son to a yoga class, to give him some understanding of what yoga was because it was an important component of her life. Isabel's three daughters were all involved with yoga. This was a relationship she cherished:

I have three daughters all of whom are very seriously into yoga... the sharing of it with them is very precious... to share [yoga] with my children has been a real, real joy.  
(Isabel)

She also expressed disappointment that her husband had never taken an interest: 'Even though he is supportive of it, he doesn't want to know'. Morag had also unsuccessfully tried to get her husband to participate in her yoga class. She said, 'I would love to get my husband to do it [yoga]... I keep asking him'. Leonie and Linda found that their partner's understanding of their involvement with yoga improved substantially once their partners attended regular yoga classes. Evelyn had practiced yoga for many years. The sharing of her experiences and knowledge of yoga with her family had been significant during times of crisis. Wendy spoke of using concepts of yoga's philosophy to help her explain certain life values and concerns when parenting her teenage children.

Many women described a feeling of connection with other participants in their yoga class (c.f. Dragon 1998). There were a couple of different ways this 'connection' manifested. For some, the social dimension was an important motivation for ongoing participation in classes. Similar findings are reported in female participation in other leisure activities (c.f. Freysinger & Flannery 1992; Henderson 1998; Wearing 1998). The social aspect was collectively important for the six women residing in Kangaroo Valley. All six women had a strong social connection with their class participants. For the five women

who lived in properties outside of the village, their yoga class was an important time to be with others.

Mary noted that, although the primary reason for her practice was to take care of her physical condition, she found the sharing with other people in the yoga class an important motivation to continue her practice. She said, 'It's a time I can focus with others... I'm sharing something that normal people can share... that's important'. Pamela had 'quite close' relationships with the people in her class and said it was a nice way to meet people. Social connections were important to some women in other interview locations. As a single woman, Kelly felt safe and comfortable with the people from her yoga class and liked the fact that she could go out without the threat of 'pairing up'. The long-term practitioners noted that over time they developed important friendships with people they had met in their yoga class. Evelyn said, 'Most of my really close friends have been people that I've met from yoga'. Linda reflected that, over time, the people she practiced yoga with had become more important to her as friends. Sally, a long-term yoga practitioner and teacher, felt the kind of people she chose to mix with had changed over time. She reflected that she 'never suffered fools gladly', but had become more selective, and less patient with people who, she said, had 'heightened egos'. Similarly, Naomi did not allow too many people into her life that 'trivialized' or 'disturbed' what she was trying to achieve in her life.

The experiences of the women, although diverse, demonstrate a strong conviction of yoga's potential benefits that they cherished sharing with family and friends. Their behaviour also represents a seeking of recognition and validation for their chosen 'lifestyle' and life values. This is demonstrated not only in their quest to have friends and family members affiliate with and support their interest in yoga, but also in the connection they experienced with other participants in their yoga class. This is significant as several women expressed a strong connection with those they did yoga with and, for many, friendships evolved. Yoga was integral to these women's identity because it supported values central to their chosen lifestyle (see also Haggard & Williams 1992; Ragheb 1996; Callero 2003).

### 5.5.3 Broader 'connections'

More subtle experiences of connectedness also arose from their yoga class. Linda felt a connection arose from the sharing of similar experiences with other yoga class participants. She said:

You share so much with fellow yoga students... just being in the same room doing the same poses means a great connection, even though you may not speak to each other hardly at all. (Linda)

Kelly, Annie, Jackie and Sarah also experienced a similar connection with their yoga class members. Annie said, 'There's that connection though I feel quite strongly... the teachers... the people who go there... even though it's not a social thing'. Sarah said:

... everyone is very pleasant, but there's none of that sort of compulsion to be friends... We've absolutely no desire to socialise... and the fact that you relate in a way that is beneficial... without any of those social compulsions... I'd never experienced anything like that ever before in my life and in fact I quite like it. (Sarah)

Jackie too felt she experienced the best of people in her yoga class. Only Holly spoke negatively about having kind of a 'social agenda' with the participants of her yoga class. She was disappointed there was little sense of 'social cohesion in the group', which she described as 'a very private experience that individualised people's worlds'.

Generally, the women's sharing of experiences with other yoga class participants affirmed and validated their conviction both to yoga, and to their broader life philosophy. Lisa described her fellow class members as being like-minded individuals who shared a similar social conscience. She joked when suggesting that, 'You did not get many George Bushes doing yoga!' In her opinion, she felt that people who practiced yoga were more likely to have a 'more balanced perspective of the world', sharing similar life views towards the social and natural environments.

Lesley connected her yoga practice with her broader life philosophy. She described herself as a person with a 'strong social conscience' before she started practicing yoga. Lesley elaborated:

I think that it's very much yoga would fit into my life... in the kind of lifestyle that I have. I mean a lot of my social life... centres around my beliefs. Like on the weekend I was at a film and it was a fundraiser to help refugees... a lot of the people I know are involved in those sorts of things. (Lesley)

Some of the women employed in community or environmental organisations in particular identified a desire to contribute their skills in the community. Of significance was their strong sense of social responsibility, and their desire to make a difference through their work and positively contribute to alleviating social injustices. For example, Leonie said, 'I'm very socially conscious, so we do a lot of community work'. She also expressed concern that the cost of yoga classes restricted certain people from benefiting from its practice. She said:

[Yoga] costs a lot of money and I've been really fortunate to have the money. I think often the people who could benefit from it most could be really assisted by having a bit of financial support around it... I'd quite like to work with people who wouldn't normally get to access something like yoga. (Leonie)

Evelyn was also concerned about how the cost of yoga classes restricted certain people from being able to attend classes. She responded to this situation by not charging too much for her classes. She explained, 'One of the reasons I taught at evening centres and things was that it was really cheap for people to come'.

Here again the findings indicate that a significant number of the women in the study sought to affirm already established beliefs and values through their yoga experiences. As Paranpje (1998, 145) suggests, the collective sharing of similar beliefs and values can provide valuable support for and justification of a person's identity and belief system.

The women were able to reaffirm their identity and what they were trying to achieve in their lives, through the identification with others with similar values and lifestyles (c.f. Strauss 2005, 101). Many of the participants in the study appeared to exhibit a greater sensitivity to existing socioeconomic and political imbalances than many others with a similar level of education and socio-cultural status (c.f. Strauss 2005).

Kohn (2003, 64) argues that the trend towards conserving the environment is significant, because it embraces a shift away from a total preoccupation with 'the self'. She continues that those who 'believe in the earth', are those who have 'more or less figured out how to be happy – with regular visits to the therapist, the yoga class, the gym and the life coach' (Kohn 2003, 64). This trend identifies some middle class baby-boomers who place significance on making a positive contribution to the ecological health of the planet (see Strauss 2005, 138). Similarly, the majority of the study's participants expressed a specific concern and connection with the natural environment (see Appendix I). By way of example, several ate organic food because it combined their social and environmental concerns to live in a conscientious way:

[Organic diet is] a very important thing for me... it's a health thing as well and the organic thing, it's ethical... because non-organic agriculture ruins the earth and eating meat cuts down forests for grazing land and so it's all sort of tied up. (Naomi)

I get organic food delivered and I'm pretty committed to that. And that's part not only for my own health but part of my commitment to the environment, to support those kind of industries. (Lesley)

This tendency was strongest amongst the eight women who lived in less populated areas where their lifestyle also represented a choice to live more in tune with the natural environment. However, even amongst the women who lived in urban centres, many spoke of having a long-term connection with the natural environment. Alison had previously worked in bush regeneration. Others enjoyed activities such as bush walking or simply taking time to be in the natural environment:



I've always got a lot of strength in the natural environment. (Terrie)

Before you go into yoga, you're probably basically *that sort of person*, before I went into yoga I appreciated the environment. (my emphasis) (Evelyn)

I've always been appreciative of the natural environment (Harriet)

I've always considered the environment fairly central. (Sarah)

In general terms, these findings imply 'that sort of person', a particular kind of mid-aged woman, is attracted to and maintains an ongoing Iyengar yoga practice. However, in trying to assess the extent to which these women experience a transformation of 'the self' as a direct result of their yoga practice, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of the issue. Heelas (1996, 182/3) argues 'that sort of person' is attracted to alternative practices because they are individuals 'who are half-way – or more or less – “converted”'. The participants in the current study to varying degrees are accepting of what yoga has to offer because it supports their existing values, assumptions and aspirations (c.f. Heelas 1996, 197).

Naomi's opening quote set the scene for this chapter. Naomi suggests that the principles and practice of yoga support her existing life view. When asked about whether yoga had caused any shifts in her life, she said it magnifies those things that she was trying to do anyway. The above discussion shows that even though the life paths of these women are different, for most of them yoga affirms where they already felt they were headed in life. This is especially so in the long-term practitioners, although not limited to them. Alison had practiced yoga for 5-6 years but also linked her decision to practice yoga with existing life values:

[Yoga's] sort of reinforced... things that I was coming to anyway... it's supported who I am; that's not to say that I won't change. It helps me craft and make those changes... I'm very grateful that I have that and I can use it and I know I can work it to my benefit. (Alison)

The interviewees' experiences exhibit many similarities with the participants in Dragon's (1998) study, where she reports that her participants have certain characteristics that enable them to seek more than a purely physical dimension from their yoga practice. Only Vera and Clare, who were relatively new to the practice of yoga (2-4 years), were less clear about whether there was a connection between yoga and their worldviews and beliefs.

As Heelas (1996) and Irigaray (2002) suggest, the complexities of life in general, including cultural and social influences, make it difficult to determine the extent to which experiences of yoga influence these women's lives. Experiences cannot be comprehensively defined by one theory, but rather, involve many possible variables, 'both on the side of the transformational techniques... and on the side of assumptions, values and personalities of those attracted' (Lofland and Skonovd 1981 in Heelas 1996, 197). In describing the complexity of their own experiences, a number of women referred to 'the chicken or the egg', when at times they were unable to determine to what extent yoga had led them to change aspects of their lives or whether other aspects in their lives had influenced their yoga practice. As Lois put it:

The answer is that it's definitely been affected, but did I start doing yoga because I'm noticing those changes... there's an association. I think that goes hand in hand with sort of the way I view other things... I can't say that I view them differently because I do yoga, or I do yoga because I view them differently. (Lois)

Annie, Evelyn, Naomi, Harriet, Jackie, Simone and Lois specifically reported that at times they were unable to determine to what extent their lives had been influenced by yoga and other life events, such as having children, aging and life experiences generally (see also Freysinger 1995, 63). Jackie felt any changes in her life were about having 'insight'. For her, change was ongoing, closely integrated with other aspects of her life. Annie also found it hard to distinguish what had shifted in her life because she had been

doing yoga for so long - it was hard to remember what her life was like before she practiced yoga.

## 5.6 Discussion and conclusion

Two categories of yoga practitioners were incorporated to differentiate the nature and intensity of the women's practice: the fully-engaged and the serious part-timer (see Heelas 1996). Women from both categories demonstrated high levels of discipline in maintaining a regular practice of yoga over a sustained time period. They are a very autonomous and independent group of women. As Mestrovic (1998, 216) suggests, Giddens 'project of the self' is tailor-made for 'that type of person' because the central components of his theory are integral to the leisure class lifestyle. Indeed, Giddens (1991) would possibly describe the practice of yoga in the West as one of many strategies of 'expertise' available when time is short, as some of the women juggle their yoga practice alongside the demands of work and family.

It seems clear that the current study attracted 'that kind of woman'. Congruent with research on users of alternative therapies and modalities, the current study appealed to a particular group of middle-class, educated and professional women, the majority of whom worked in the 'service', helping' and 'creative' professions. They are baby-boomers, educated in liberal, humanistic values, who express broader concerns for social and environmental issues and who are 'culturally primed' to embrace the alternatives that yoga has to offer (c.f. Heelas 1996, 172).

As noted, the participants' prior values and assumptions make it more likely that this particular group is open and attracted to what yoga has to offer. To varying degrees, they are seeking out lifestyles that support identities that differentiate them from mainstream society (c.f. Heelas 1996, 139). Yet these women have not renounced their comfortable middle class lives, either for or as a result of their yoga practice, but have integrated their practice alongside other aspects of their lifestyle. Their *habitus* further creates the opportunities and choices for them to assign importance to 'projects' of self-development

and personal progress, demonstrated through their sustained practice (c.f. Freysinger 1995, 62). They practice yoga for personal reasons that are concerned with healing and perfecting of ‘the self’ (an individual pursuit), yet they simultaneously express a concern for the broader community and environment. For example, several women put great emphasis on sustaining a ‘right livelihood’, by working in a profession that supports certain values while at the same time giving importance to personal development (c.f. Heelas 1996; Strauss 2005).

Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of *habitus* describes the identity and the pre-existing socio-cultural influences of the participants in the study. As shown in the discussion, the demographic characteristics, lifestyle behaviours, life aspirations and values, and world-view of these women support Naomi’s opening quote that proposes that a particular type of woman is attracted to practice Iyengar yoga. *Habitus* aptly describes this group of women’s use of their yoga practice to mutually shape ‘the self’ and their socio-cultural environment (see also Strauss 2005, 21).

Thus, as Henderson (1994, 3) notes, understanding a person’s values and identity are essential prerequisites for examining meanings attached to any phenomenon, in this instance the practice of yoga. In the next three chapters, the extent to which the practice of yoga has transformed the lives of the women participating in the study is examined. The first of these, Chapter Six, explores the physical aspects of the women’s experiences of practicing Iyengar yoga, and the role of awareness in their perceived physical transformation.

## CHAPTER SIX

### LISTENING TO THE BODY

Your body speaks to you... if you practice... there's no escaping it. You can't really just push through; and the older you get, perhaps the more inclined you are to listen... the dialogue becomes a little bit clearer between you and your body and your mind. (Wendy)

#### 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the physical benefits and the physical transformation that occur as a result of the participants' ongoing yoga practice are explored. Wendy's quote at the head of this chapter suggests her experiences were embodied, implying a connection between the body and the mind. How does the practice of Iyengar yoga transform the participants' experiences of their bodies? How does this transformation reflect the underlying principles of 'becoming', central to Giddens' 'project of the self', and the 'being' of classical yoga's path?

#### 6.2 Improvements to physical well-being

All of the participants identified positive physical outcomes attributed to their yoga practice. The main physical benefits arising were: improved strength, greater flexibility, and positive outcomes associated with specific condition/injuries (c.f. Badell 1998; Dragon 1998). Harriet's comments are typical of those women identified as serious part-timers - those who were more reliant on attending a yoga class for their regular practice:

I've a strong sense of bones... bone strength as well as muscular strength... if I weren't doing it [yoga] I would have no upper body strength at all... and it's flexibility obviously, and easing freedom of movement, being able to move my body in ways that I couldn't otherwise. (Harriet)

Many participants identified the importance of improvements to physical flexibility and strength. Phoebe said, 'If I didn't do yoga I could imagine getting to a point where I would just be not able to function because I wouldn't be able to bend at all'. Harriet also

makes a specific reference to upper body strength. Certain yoga postures are shown to be advantageous for osteoporosis, which affects more women than men (Sparrowe & Walden 2002; Francina 2003; Sparrowe & Walden 2004). This knowledge was a significant motivation for practice for a number of women in the study.

Of the women who began practicing yoga to alleviate specific physical conditions, all experienced improvements. Mary suffered from an upper back and neck condition. She experienced a lot of pain and would often wake up with a headache, but found that the effects from practicing yoga helped her to control the pain. Several other women found that their yoga practice alleviated their back conditions. For Morag, it was the only modality that worked, after persistent searching for some relief of the pain:

I'd very bad back problems and I tried everything. I went to doctors first and then I went to osteopaths and chiropractors and acupuncturists and physiotherapy and naturopaths... I couldn't relieve the pain until someone suggested yoga, and it was the best thing I ever did. (Morag)

Others, like Morag, also identified the importance of their yoga practice as the primary means of managing specific physical conditions and were committed to an ongoing practice in order to maintain the physical improvements made. As noted in Chapter Five, yoga 'works' for this particular group of women and this fact is integral to their ongoing commitment to practice (c.f. Badell 1998; Hasselle-Newcombe 2005):

I actually had arthritis in my hips and back... I'm just really forced to do it [yoga]. To make it a major part of my life otherwise... I'm very fearful about my physical ability. (Hannah)

I've seen the real benefits physically. I mean if I weren't doing yoga, I'd be going off to an osteopath every week and not improving my condition. (Gillian)

Gillian had worked under the guidance of her teacher for seven years to alleviate a neck condition, demonstrating that for her yoga had not been a 'quick fix'. It had required

patience and discipline over a considerable length of time. Only Denise had reservations about the potential of her yoga practice to completely alleviate her physical condition. Although passionate about yoga, she displayed a degree of skepticism:

I think that it's [her shoulder] better. Marginally better as a consequence. I think my teacher would believe that if one did yoga over a sufficiently long period of time and did it properly and with sufficient dedication then that injury should actually come right... I don't actually accept that is the case. (Denise)

The issue is not that yoga is a panacea to cure all ailments. Most practical yoga textbooks state that the practice of *asana* 'may' help to alleviate specific conditions. The benefits described by the women apply to them as individuals, and the same practice may not yield the same result for anyone else. However, what transpired from the interviews is that all of the women were in no doubt that yoga had a positive impact on their physical health. A committed yoga practice made a positive contribution towards taking responsibility for their health. Such aspirations concur with Giddens' reflexive project. As a 'body technique', yoga's impact on the physical potential of these women was significant.

### *6.2.1 Health maintenance and self-care*

A key motivation for practicing yoga was to remain healthy more generally (c.f. Badell 1998; Dragon 1998; Thomas, Tori, Thomas & Mehta 2000). Lisa likened her yoga practice to 'taking your medicine daily'. Several women, including Lesley and Kelly, considered their yoga practice necessary for overall 'body maintenance':

Yoga gives me mobility. I'm 54. I know a lot of people my age... struggling... it's a maintenance thing. (Lesley)

Yoga is a very serious effort to keep myself well... it's sort of like an essential maintenance. (Kelly)

For the majority of women, yoga was an essential component of their overall 'self-care strategy'. Sally said, 'It's yoga or nothing as far as getting my body healthy', and Annie said, 'I'm quite into health... yoga to me is a huge part of that'. For others, yoga was a primary means of self-care in conjunction with other activities or alternative therapies. For example:

[Yoga] it's the only thing that I use apart from acupuncture... I do think that the yoga is the most important part. (Sarah)

It's the core, one of the two cores... it's [yoga's] central to my overall health. (Holly)

Many participants identified aging well as another important motivation to continue practicing (c.f. Badell 1998; Dragon 1998). This concurs with Deem and Gilroy's (1998) findings which suggest that as some women age the anticipation of a decline in the body's functions are a major motivation for participating in a regular physical activity. For example, Vicky stated, '... because of age you get stiffer... I stay more flexible, stronger, healthier'. Sarah was sixty-one when she began practicing yoga. After four years she was amazed at the physical progress she continued to make with her practice. These kinds of experiences contributed to a more positive attitude towards aging. Many became more confident about living a long and healthy life, identifying yoga's contribution to their physical well-being as significant:

I can see myself doing it [yoga] until I die... I'm determined to live 'til I'm one hundred. (Harriet)

I see it [yoga] as a holistic practice that I'll do until the day I die because it's so important. (Gillian)

Others had seen some adverse effects of aging on other family members and considered yoga a preventative to help them avoid the suffering they had observed. For example, Annie said, 'I have an aunty who has got such bad arthritis... I like to think that when



I'm an old lady I... will be flexible, which would be great'. Others associated their yoga practice with the ability to remain active in later life. According to Lois:

I still want to be mowing my own lawns at eighty... that means that I can still do yoga at eighty... age isn't the barrier with yoga... the bottom line is, can I afford not too? (Lois)

The women's experiences are significant, given that research shows that only a small percentage of mid-aged women continue participating in regular physical activity (Henderson, Ainsworth, Stolarczyk, Hootman & Levin 1999). The participants' aspirations to make a lengthy if not life-long commitment to their yoga practice demonstrate its significance in their lives.

### *6.2.2 Improved self-esteem from being physically well*

The relationship between physical appearance and self-esteem is well documented (Poole 2001). Improvements to physical appearance positively impacted on the way a number of the women perceived themselves. For example, Linda liked the physical changes in her body, and observed that 'the flabby bits', once part of her physique were no longer there. Annie said:

I guess it's an aesthetic thing too. I really like being toned... You see lots of women my age that have got like flabby arms and stuff... I'm slightly overweight but I still feel healthy. (Annie)

Improvements to physical appearance contributed to enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence. Grace said, her yoga practice had 'a big influence on my physical appearance and self esteem'. Yet, even though these women were appreciative of improvements in their physical appearance, most pointed out that changes were a 'side benefit', rather than a primary motivation for practice:

I've enjoyed the benefits of being slimmer... It wasn't the reason that I did it (yoga)... It's been a side effect. (Leonie)

You sort of get a bit better shape... That's a great sort of side benefit... a nice healthy shape when you're eighty... gives you confidence. (Hannah)

A range of positive outcomes was attributed to physical improvements experienced from practicing yoga: feeling stronger, more confident, more in control and more empowered. To be in a position where they could manage, control and improve their bodies at mid-life was significant. For Pamela, yoga had given her 'strength and confidence', while Holly noted:

Feeling healthy is the most important thing for me. If I'm feeling physically healthy everything else is fine... if I'm feeling healthy it seems to bring all those bits of my life into some sort of easy way of managing. (Holly)

The women's yoga practice provided a sense of certainty about their bodies as they aged. This is noteworthy when research shows that menopausal women experience some uncertainty regarding their bodies that can be detrimental emotionally (see Walter 2000, 121). For these women, being physically well translated into feeling good about feeling healthy which, in turn, had a positive impact on self-esteem (see also Mishra & Schofield 1998; Poole 2001). For Alice, reaching mid-life had been an uncertain time for her as her physical condition deteriorated. Her yoga practice improved her level of physical health and this had a positive effect on her emotional state. Alice and Tamara associated feeling physically well with feeling more positive mentally and emotionally:

I'm having the fun that comes from feeling physically well, which means I can enjoy yoga; I can enjoy my walks and enjoy my work. (Alice)

It's simply part of your everyday life... keeping your body fit and healthy keeps you feeling good about yourself... if physically your body is well and healthy then... you feel good about yourself. (Tamara)

These women connected taking care of themselves physically with feeling better about themselves and being more positive about their ageing process generally. In this light, yoga's practice can be described as a 'body project', a means to satisfy the importance given to maintaining a certain level of personal fitness and health (c.f. Strauss 2005). Interpreted this way, the women's yoga practice fulfils a very modern function well linked to Giddens' (1991) reflexive project. These women were able to take some control of their physical well-being via their ongoing commitment to their yoga practice in ways that improved their confidence and self-esteem.

### **6.3 A holistic understanding of 'the self'**

#### *6.3.1 Connecting the mind and body*

The mind-body focus of a regular yoga practice cultivated a more holistic understanding of 'the self' amongst many of the participants (c.f. La Forge 1997). Mary linked the cultivation of awareness attained from her practice with a change in the way she perceived her body. She said, 'Yoga has definitely helped in that I've recognised I've got to keep the whole body together... that's probably where it's been most beneficial'. Mary's observations were representative of many women. Fiona and Alison said:

I wouldn't have any other exercise... I need it for circulation... I know that's from yoga and I know that's your whole, all your intestines and stuff like that are affected by the way the spine is sitting, so it's your whole health. (Fiona)

The internal organs are working... the other things... hormonal system and endocrine system... the digestive, it's all connected. So I realise that the yoga works with that, all of those systems. (Alison)

Their yoga practice was associated with expanding levels of awareness that enabled them to feel more connected with their whole body. 'The self' was perceived from within, as well as from without. They came to realise that their body's physiological systems were as important to their health as the physical. As their experiences became embodied;

participants described their mind and body as connected (c.f. Bailey 1997; Dragon 1998; Daubenmeir 2002):

What has changed over time is I'm much more interested in the relationship between the body and the mind and I don't see it as so separate any longer. (Leonie)

Yoga for me is that mind-body connection; that whole stretching inside outside. (Vicky)

What I've come to realise since I've been doing yoga is the inflexibility in my body is also related to the inflexibility in my mind... there's a shift and so I've become more flexible, less dogmatic. (Lois)

As experiences became more embodied, the women cultivated more subtle levels of self-awareness that enabled experiences of 'the self' that were both internal and external. According to the philosophy of yoga, this transformation is described as the internalisation of awareness (Paranjpe 1998). Moreover, as awareness penetrated internally, the effects transferred to other areas of these women's lives (c.f. Bailey 1997). For example, at other times in their lives, many women became more aware of their posture and how they moved. Their experiences depicted a more subtle level of experience of the physical body:

Every now and then I get a bit of a lower back problem... just being aware of that... it's [yoga's] given me an awareness... I'm very aware of my posture. (Lisa)

I think that posture thing... I think it's just having that sort of stronger awareness. It's amazing! (Hannah)

Although the women indicated that physical improvements remained important benefits arising from their practice of yoga, the gradual internalisation of awareness was also central to their overall experiences of yoga. As Phoebe and Mary indicated:

The obvious one is the flexibility side of it, but I think the less obvious is the awareness... being aware of the changes in my body and being aware of the way I sit and the way I stand... What I didn't realise when I started... I observed that people who did yoga had wonderful posture and I assumed that it was about muscle control but I now think it's about awareness. (Phoebe)

Yoga is a practice of engaging body awareness. You're aware of things that you just take for granted... It's precise, much more precise than any other endeavour, in that you've got to be really aware of where that little finger is as well as the big picture. (Mary)

'Being' aware requires connecting with the senses and resting one's attention in the present moment (see Paranjpe 1998). As the examples above indicate, these experiences provide opportunities to observe sensations in the physical body (c.f. Bailey 1997). Through expanded levels of awareness, most women were better able to experience what their bodies were doing in the present moment. Corresponding with Wendy's quote at the start of the chapter, Vicky and Denise described this process as 'listening to the body':

You're really in there, you're actually listening to the way the body is moving... and so you become really aware. (Vicky)

Listening to your body and understanding the messages that you're getting from it in certain poses... there's always that great thing of recognising the subtle adjustments that can be made that can actually make a huge difference to the ease with which you can perform that particular posture. (Denise)

Some women became increasingly aware how different lifestyle behaviours impacted on the physical body. Accordingly, some women perceived their experiences had changed certain behaviours because of an embodied 'knowing'. For example, Val and Alison both gave up smoking because they were able to notice more clearly that the effects of smoking adversely interfered with their ability to practice yoga. When Val increased the number of yoga classes she attended, she was aware at a bodily level that late nights out, smoking and drinking adversely affected her practice. When she stopped drinking and

smoking she experienced an improvement in the way her body responded to practice. Alison said:

[Smoking] interfered with yoga... It was antagonistic... I'm sure that yoga helped me to get through that... the breath was calmer, deeper, stronger... It just permeated through.  
(Alison)

Typically, but not limited to, the fully-engaged practitioners reported they had become less tolerant of alcohol, unhealthy foods, and other external stimulants. Both Wendy and Evelyn identified they could not drink coffee like they used to. Leonie, Gillian and Holly said they no longer had any tolerance for alcohol or the smoke from cigarettes. Gillian believed she had become less tolerant of smoke from other people smoking:

When I'm with people who are just drinking and smoking a lot, while I can have a good time, I've become so sensitive to smoke... The next day I feel that kind of toxic. (Gillian)

Shusterman (1997) describes this process as a cultivating of awareness that enables a person to become more perceptive to sensations in the body, which in turn heightens the ability to observe in what way certain behaviours affect the body. Perhaps, then, as awareness permeates the body, it allows for the possibility to choose whether to engage in a particular behaviour or not. This process indicates a clearer 'dialogue' between the mind and the body. Wendy describes how this process influenced her own sense of 'being':

It starts up a little bit by having to deal with being more aware of how you are in any given time. How things affect you... the energy of life, not drinking coffee or smoking or drinking or whatever it might be. Then I think you come to this steady thing of practice everyday or most days you find it becomes quite clear to you... if you smoke it's going to affect how you are in the day... what I ate and what I drank... I just feel very clearly the effect of it and it's not something I look for. (Wendy)

The fully-engaged practitioners in particular, referred to how their bodies ‘spoke’ to them in a way they could not ignore. Saraswati (1981) suggests that as levels of awareness internalise there is an increased propensity for practitioners of yoga to relate to things internally as well as externally. This process works with and through the body and not just the mind. Wendy acknowledged in the previous quote that the effects were not something she was expecting from her practice. Kramer (1980, 11) proposes that, ‘habits and ways of being leave or modify on their own’. Such changes do not occur by mental force or will power, they are an embodied transformation.

Yet, simultaneously these women’s lifestyle choices are also made possible because of their shared *habitus*. In keeping with Heelas’ (1996) description of converts to ‘New Religions’, these are active, independent women who seek a meaningful and an appropriate lifestyle. The yoga process cultivates a more internal or embodied transformation that takes place alongside lifestyle behaviours defined by these women’s *habitus*. This makes more likely their determination to choose and live by specific lifestyle choices:

I don’t have late nights really... I really have changed from being quite a rebellious person to someone that’s learnt through that way of being... there’re choices... I look after myself well... I’m much more a home person... I’ve got activities but I think they sort of conglomerate with my yoga practice. (Alison)

I’ve taken the encouragement to... tailor the rest of one’s life around being able to have this practice that means... evenings have to have certain length and... certain expenditure of energy or certain behaviours are not possible... I don’t have a wild life, I don’t drink and I don’t stay up late at night and those sorts of things. (Holly)

However, the embodied nature of their *habitus* together with their reflexive capacities appear to ‘work’ alongside an embodied transformation of self that arises directly from their yoga practice. It appears that a very different process to either Giddens’ body project or Bourdieu’s *habitus* manifests via the internalisation of awareness and the embodied experiences cultivated from their yoga practice.

### 6.3.2 *Greater body acceptance*

Embodied experiences were significant for a number of women, as they became more accepting and appreciative of themselves physically. As Wendy's opening quote suggests, this transition may in part reflect that living to a certain age (mid-age) brings about a certain wisdom and acceptance of the body. Greer (1992) and Friedman (1993) also identify that this transition takes place amongst women at this time of life, and so it is likely that to some degree the aging process influences the study participants' perceptions. Yet, changes in these women's relationship with their body are attributed to the embodied experiences that arise from their practice. For example, Wendy and Harriet describe becoming more appreciative and accepting of themselves and others:

I think just more accepting... certain things that women's bodies for instance are better at... or are different at than men... each has their strengths... through yoga and through probably just living and growing older and appreciating the differences. (Wendy)

It has sort of given me... bodily integrity or a bringing together of the physical with being... I'm now comfortable in my body... I know its limitations and I understand what it can do... I'm much more accepting of that, so I don't feel embarrassed by not being able to do certain things because I now understand that there's such a huge range of body types and abilities. (Harriet)

'A bringing together of the physical with being' illustrates Harriet's experience of herself that was more than her physical appearance; she experienced a sense of physicality that she described as 'being'. Embodied experiences cultivated a greater access to feelings of contentment and acceptance in the present. The participants became more understanding and accepting of the nature of their own bodies as well accepting of difference in other people (c.f. Garrett 2001, 337). This had a positive effect on self-perception and the relationship to 'the self':



I'm a lot sort of kinder to myself... I'm much more allowing around energy changes... I don't have to berate myself. It has kind of given me a sense of being able to observe changes in mood, changes in energy levels, changes in motivation and to be more accepting of that. (Leonie)

It has given me a greater appreciation of those differences... I won't now try and put myself through anything... applying that to life in general as well. The importance of being true to yourself, being comfortable with how you might relate to others, like your honesty. (Elaine)

In addition to aspiring towards improving their physical potential, indicative of Giddens' reflexive project, the internalisation of awareness via their yoga practice enabled these women to 'observe' and 'listen' to their bodies from the inside, which then transformed their experiences of 'the self'. In Garrett's (2001, 336) opinion, practicing Iyengar yoga leads to a personal transformation that cultivates a 'new self' that goes beyond the 'body project'. The experiences of the participants in the current study support her personal findings (c.f. Garrett 2001). An important outcome of this process is that embodied experiences overcome some of the social conditioning held about the female body, because experiences draw from an internal sense of self.

### 6.3.3 *The body 'works' and 'functions'*

The majority of women reported a transition from negotiating the body in relation to external appearances, to an increased identification with the 'workings' of the body. For example, Alison identified how her interest in the body had changed from how she looked externally to focusing on how her body 'worked'. Increasingly she assessed the condition of her body by what it could do. Others shared her experiences:

I think it's easier for women not to hate their bodies as much because you actually realise that it works. My body works rather than it's an object that's there for... someone else's edification. (Fiona)

The fact that my body feels strong and empowered is good... if you feel good within yourself and that your body is all functioning... you can express yourself physically, much more freely, with confidence. (Linda)

Both quotes suggest that their transformation was self-affirming. For several of the women, their *asana* practice improved their self-confidence because they experienced their bodies 'functioning' and 'working':

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 because when I go to yoga someone says put your big toe down and you can locate it and you can do it... I function. (Kelly)

It does make me feel much better about just being in control of all the bits... I know all the muscles are working to hold me in that position and I feel good. (Linda)

The skills attained from their practice transformed how these women perceived their bodies. With practice they acquired greater control and ability to 'work' the body. These findings support Arnold's (1994, 44) study of wilderness participation that also reports that the technical skills and physical activity acquired enabled participants to experience their body in an 'active functional way', rather than an aesthetic one. As Barbara Conry (1977 in McDermott 1996, 22) notes, 'The way one is living in his or her body directly affects the way one is experiencing the world'.

Franzoi (1995, 417) argues that regardless of gender, participants have more positive attitudes towards their body functions, 'the body-as-process', than their body parts, 'body-as-object'. For these women, experiencing the body as a 'dynamic process' had a positive impact on self-perception (c.f. Franzoi 1995, 417). Experiences of the body 'working' were empowering because they counteracted notions of physical deterioration commonly associated with mid-life (see also Parry & Shaw 1999; Dennerstein & Helmes 2000; Hunt 2000; Hurd 2000). Moreover, these women overcame some of the negative

attitudes regarding their body image (c.f. Arnold 1994; Cornell 2000; Daubenmeir 2002). For Annie, it was important for her to feel good about her body. She said, 'As a female I think that's a huge thing to feel good about your body'. According to Holly and Naomi:

[Yoga's] helped me to overcome some of my female conditioning around being weak, being quiet, insignificant. I think its allowed me to develop a certain strength and ability to sort of stand... and claim some space. (Holly)

I feel more confident in my body... I literally walk taller not just metaphorically. I think Iyengar especially is so focused on opening the chest that you sort of have to walk proudly to continue that feeling... I'm fairly large breasted. I've always felt a bit sunken chested, like hiding them a bit and now I guess... it's a great deal to do with yoga but it's also to do with age... I don't care what some people think about me anymore... I think that's really good for your self-image to walk proudly. (Naomi)

Both women spoke of feeling more self-confident as their self-perception changed. Gillian and Holly described how their interpretation of a beautiful body had also changed:

The more yoga you do... the less interested you get in what it does to you physically... I used to have a wash-board abdomen before I did yoga now I have a rounded abdomen... more feminine and healthier. (Gillian)

I have always admired good posture... I tend to relate to other people or look at other people's bodies in that way too and like My! Good posture! Rather than a shapely waist or something. So in that sense, yeah, the notion of good or beautiful has changed. (Holly)

However a couple of the participants acknowledged that they were still dealing with issues regarding their body image. Lois said she was 'hanging on' to certain ideas even though she had benefited positively from her experiences of yoga:

I was never really endowed with one of these beautiful bodies... I'm finding that my body shape is changing... Yoga has really made that difference... the whole body image

is sort of a bit of an issue for me... I'm hanging on to a lot of garbage... I can see changes in the body but there's room for a lot more change. (Lois)

As mentioned in Chapter Four, Simone also had issues about feeling positive about her body, which were related to having a mastectomy. Conversely, some women, like Mary, had a strong sense of self, and had been comfortable with their body's image for a long time:

I'm not really into body image... I've never ever really been concerned about it. I know it sounds funny coming from a woman but that's just who I am. (Mary)

For many women, their transformations of 'the self' developed positive experiences that improved their attitude towards their body. They increasingly identified with a sense of 'being' that enabled them to respect their bodies in healthier ways (c.f. Daubenmeir 2002). Similar findings are reported in female participation in certain leisure activities, and outdoor recreation activities, in particular, which are shown to be empowering (see Henderson & Ainsworth 2001; Deem & Gilroy 1998; Freysinger & Flannery 1992; Henderson *et al* 1989; Henderson & Bialeschki 1991), and conducive to overriding traditional female roles in an environment that supports the creation of a new sense of self (see Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw & Freysinger 1996; Wearing 1998; Noad & James 2003).

The yoga class environment was described as a place where experiences of 'traditional' gender differences were removed:

I think it [yoga] gives you a sense of... it's not a sexist activity... a woman can achieve at the same level as anyone else. (Mary)

The other thing about yoga is that the men and women in the practice sessions - there's very little difference between what's available to both and that's not true I think in society. (Sarah)

You see both genders doing the same process and it's not as if the men can do it and the women can't... So it just sort of removes that socialisation. (Holly)

These women embraced the fact that the yoga class was an environment that removed societal norms regarding the physical body (c.f. Noad & James 2003). This reflects the nature of yoga's practice, which as a mind-body exercise, focuses on the body as a process rather than on the body as an object. The nature of this process cultivated a more positive experience of self and of others (c.f. Franzoi 1995). The participants' experiences also support Irigaray's (2002) claim that the embodied nature of yoga's practice can cultivate a way of 'being' that removes the 'social exploitation', which, as previously noted, affects women more than men (see also Franzoi 1995).

It is of interest that simultaneously for some women, their yoga practice also cultivated a greater acceptance of the differences between males and females. The internalisation of awareness for some women developed an appreciation of the difference between male and female bodies in the yoga class in a positive light. Perceptions of difference also related to 'process': a differentiation in the way males and females directed their energy in their yoga practice:

I do see yoga as quite a kind of polar kind of a thing really, around male energy and female energy... what men and women bring to yoga and the way that that gets expressed in the room... my experience with women is that women will push it... but it has kind of got a different dimension to it... the being there, rather than the getting there. (Leonie)

I think there's huge difference between males and females and I never used to... there's a huge difference... let's celebrate the difference... I love being really female and I love the fact that my partner's really male... it feels right... I like feeling really feminine. (Annie)

Wendy describes how the 'difference' between male and female became clearer as her own yoga practice developed. She felt that the cultivation of awareness was more important than a culturally defined difference:

Yoga is about self awareness and you can teach that to both sexes in the same class, but it's about self-awareness and being self aware; it means as a woman I'm different from a man. (Wendy)

Like Annie, Wendy associates feeling 'feminine' with her practice. Becoming more aware transformed her experience of being a woman (c.f. Irigaray 2002). Sally, too, describes how her relationship with herself changed as she became more self-aware through her yoga practice. She said, 'I'm certainly much more connected than I used to be'. The mind-body process of yoga's practice transformed the relationships these women had with themselves as females. Kelly and Elaine said:

If you're a female... you can keep your sense of yourself... I enjoy the physical sense of myself. I mean the fact that you can lift your chest up and you can lift your back up, drive your heels into the ground and you can feel that you've got this sort of energy there that goes right through your body and that's you... you're aware of it... you enjoy your femaleness because you're using the body. (Kelly)

Just in terms of the... place of myself as a woman... just peacefulness of that, as opposed to a confusion about it... a better clarity... a sense of greater strength as a woman, not physical strength particularly, but just overall strength, emotional and physical. (Elaine)

By being more self-aware these women connect with a feminine side of themselves that is embodied through the process of their practice. Perhaps as Feuerstein (2003b, 16) suggests, women bring different qualities to their yoga practice than males that counteract the overemphasis on masculine prowess and competitiveness that have arguably dominated elements of the modern practice of yoga.

Yet, the participants' yoga experiences are complex because both masculine and feminine principles are depicted in their stories. The findings of this study share similarities with Noad and James' (2003, 149) research, where the women redefined their experiences of both masculine and feminine behaviours in a way that overcame some of the negative

female conditioning associated with body image so that a more positive sense of self was experienced (c.f. Noad & James 2003, 144). Integral to their self-transformation was the embodied nature of their experiences.

## 6.4 Embracing a ‘feminine’ practice

This section explores the impact of specific female practices that have evolved to support the three main cycles of a woman’s life (pregnancy, menstruation and menopause).

### 6.4.1 Pregnancy

Wendy, Isabel and Evelyn had maintained an ongoing practice of Iyengar yoga for twenty-five years or more. Their experiences reflect the evolving nature of yoga for women since the 1980s. Evelyn and Wendy were pregnant and gave birth in the 1970s, and they reflected on the lack of available information for pregnant women at the time. As an example, Evelyn taught a yoga class the day after she gave birth. Presently, she would be advised against such a decision, as rest is recommended for at least three weeks after giving birth before resuming a gentle *asana* practice (Sparrowe & Walden 2002, 151). Wendy remembered she had to ‘feel’ her way through the physical changes in her body during her pregnancy:

I was faced with a whole new way of practicing... I pushed a bit hard in the beginning and then found out that I was feeling sick... that was the start... of having to work it out for myself. What was the best practice?... That was the first time I really had to take on board the question of how my body was changing. (Wendy)

Geeta Iyengar’s book, *A Gem for Women* (1990) provides a more prescriptive guide to appropriate *asanas* to practice during pregnancy. Wendy did not have any such book available to her, ‘in those days... you had to work it out for yourself’. Wendy and Evelyn’s experiences of pregnancy reflect the comparatively recent evolution of Iyengar yoga to cater specifically for pregnant women. Six other women (Jackie, Annie, Gillian, Naomi, Harriet, Linda) practiced yoga when they were pregnant. Their experiences

during pregnancy, in keeping with their experiences of yoga more generally, were positive. For example, Jackie attributed her practice to being more aware of her body and her baby:

I enjoyed being in that space of being able to take the time alone and concentrate on the body... being aware of your body and your breathing. (Jackie)

These five women were pregnant in the 1980s, and 1990s, by which time more definitive guidelines for pregnancy were available, transmitted via qualified Iyengar teachers in yoga classes. All of these women benefited from the specific yoga sequences practiced during this time.

#### 6.4.2 Menstruation

During the thirty years Evelyn has been practicing Iyengar yoga, she observed that a specific menstrual sequence had evolved:

In the early stages with the yoga... there wasn't a lot of emphasis on doing open things<sup>1</sup>... that's come with time. It's interesting, having done yoga for so long, the teaching has changed, as Iyengar has changed and experimented. (Evelyn)

The Iyengar method has developed specific sequences for menstruation, where women are encouraged to practice more restful and restorative *asana* sequences (see Chapter Three). The passive nature of the menstrual sequence presents a new way of thinking about menstruation. Its focus contrasts with attitudes towards menstruation in the West, where there is a tendency to act as if nothing is happening, regardless of whether one is feeling tired or unwell. Two thirds of the women had practiced yoga while menstruating. Their experiences were mixed.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Open things' refers to the type of poses that are recommended for menstruation. Poses that open the pelvic area are said to be beneficial because they encourage the abdominal and pelvic muscles to relax as well as improve the flow of blood to the pelvic area (see Iyengar, G.S. 1995; Mehta 1994; Sparrowe & Walden 2002).



Generally, those women identified as fully-engaged practitioners, and those who had been practicing yoga for a longer period of time, were more embracing of the menstrual sequences, and described the practice as beneficial. The menstrual sequences had not influenced the yoga practice of some serious part-timers, and especially those who were ‘newer’ to yoga (practicing yoga for a couple of years), to the same degree. Even Harriet who had practiced yoga for 13 years said, ‘I can only remember [practicing a menstrual sequence] once in the last twelve months’.

Jackie got frustrated when she was required to practice a passive sequence in class. She said, ‘More often than not I get really pissed off when I’m menstruating... I want to do more active things’. Her situation is probably exacerbated because the yoga class was Jackie’s only yoga practice of the week. Within the environment of an Iyengar yoga class, women are normally requested to advise their teacher if they are menstruating and are subsequently instructed to practice an alternative sequence to other class participants. A couple of the women found this quite confronting.

Vera did not attend her class on the days she menstruated because she felt really uncomfortable about being moved to the other side of her class to do a different sequence. She also explained she had no idea why women in her class were given an alternative menstrual sequence to do. Lois also did not attend her yoga class when she was menstruating. She said, ‘I don’t go because I have very heavy periods and I’m quite prone to flooding... it’s purely because I don’t want to embarrass myself’. Sally, a fully-engaged practitioner, said of her experiences of practicing the menstrual sequence:

There wasn’t much sharing because I think for most of us it was a separate experience. It wasn’t a uniting experience. Very much in the classes women who were menstruating were isolated and I think that still happens in a lot of schools to a large extent. (Sally)

In the light of Vera’s experiences, Sally’s observation suggests that perhaps there is a need for more support and education about the menstrual sequence amongst yoga

teachers and practitioners alike. In Gillian's opinion, a certain level of maturity in practice is necessary to appreciate the more restorative practices:

As you become more mature in your practice, what you do realise is, that it's very important to do those restful, recuperative *asanas*. When you're first starting yoga, particularly if you've come from a Western physical oriented background as I had, you think 'Oh no! I really want to go do headstands and vigorous standing poses. (Gillian)

Gillian is suggesting that a beginner student is more likely to prefer the more physically demanding postures that, for example, are in keeping with one's 'body project' rather than be accepting of the restorative value of the more passive *asanas*. Yet, even Leonie, a fully-engaged practitioner described how she struggled with the passivity of the menstrual sequence. She preferred a more active *asana* class. For Sally, it was not until she attended a Women's Yoga Intensive and women's yoga weekends that the process of menstruation stopped being for her one of resistance and separation:

It changed my relationship with my body... it changed my relationship to my cycles... They weren't sort of so separate from me. It sort of became part of me. And the way my practice changed too... I was more interested in getting into the sensation and to that sense of space that you can get. (Sally)

Most fully-engaged practitioners, together with a few of the more experienced serious part-timers embraced the more passive menstrual sequences, and felt it was the right practice at that time. For Val, practicing yoga had lessened the severity of her menstrual symptoms. She spoke of being more in tune with her body, enjoying the 'process' of observing her body when practicing the passive postures. Other women also found that the menstrual sequence was beneficial when they were menstruating:

It's the right thing at the right time... my energy levels are a lot lower as a consequence of that [menstruation] so, it suits me very well. (Denise)

... that's fantastic so that helps me... I do that [menstrual sequence] at home too... I'll try and do some forward bends just to relieve the pains. (Alison)

A couple of women found the combination of practicing yoga together with other alternative treatments had a positive effect on their cycle. Pamela said, 'My cycle is getting better and I used to experience pain but I take remedies... it's hard to tell what's helped'. A number of the women noted that although it took some time for their attitude to change about embracing the menstrual sequences, over time, they found the sequences supportive and nurturing. It provided an opportunity to slow down and rest. Linda said: 'I love it. It's like a kind of present to yourself'. Others said:

It's nice to... feel pampered when you've been given alternative *asanas*... I guess it makes you stop and think, we as women are so busy that we do tend to push ourselves all the time, and don't allow time out... so to have someone say look don't do this, makes you realise maybe we should respect what nature's giving our bodies to do. (Grace)

I love the fact that you do different things when you're menstruating. I think that's really special. (Annie)

I have a more through appreciation that I can slow down... I get a whole new way of looking at that time of the month... it's alright to be slower and calmer and not as energetic... just to renourish yourself rather than run yourself down... that amazed me when I first started Iyengar yoga. There were these different exercises... I thought it was enormously supportive. (Terrie)

In addition, for some women, and in particular, the fully-engaged practitioners, the menstrual sequence enabled them to take some control over their menstrual cycle:

People start to take on their power of I'm feeling absolutely rotten and I'm exhausted and I feel much better if I put my head down there on a block. Once they get into that place, then there's a power that comes in. It's a feminine power that doesn't get spoken about... I think it's really important that we recognise that this is happening and it's available. (Sally)

I like the rigour of Iyengar yoga... particularly about women's bodies... they have made me a lot more respectful of the necessity to be sensitive and protective of a woman's reproductive system... that's more of a Eastern tradition... it's not something that you get in the West... it's the appreciation of listening to what your body tells you and that it's actually good to do quieter things instead of always going for the burn which is a very Western and physically directed attitude. (Gillian)

For these women, the opportunity to practice a quieter more restorative sequence was appreciated. It offered a more holistic and proactive way of dealing with menstruation, which for them had a positive impact. It provided a place where at the level of practice, 'being' was more appropriate than 'becoming'. As a result, these women felt rejuvenated and nurtured. It gave them permission to slow down, recuperate and to take time out to care for 'the self'. This is important, when women in Western society increasingly experience stress and time-pressure in their daily lives.

#### *6.4.3 Menopause*

What became clear from the interviews was that yoga teaching and information regarding menopause is rarely incorporated specifically into the classes of the study's participants. Not all of the women interviewed had begun their transition into menopause, but twenty-seven women had some experience of menopause. Fourteen women experienced symptoms associated with menopause. Most had not practiced any specific sequences, nor had approached their teachers for any guidance. Fiona and Hannah at times felt exhausted after practicing 'normal' class sequences. Both mentioned they would have liked more information regarding menopause in relation to their yoga practice. Sally's transition into menopause had been difficult and she did not feel that the Iyengar community or at least the information provided, had given her the support she needed at that time:

What I had read about menopause... was always afterwards [after she needed the information] that I was reading about it... I don't believe that Iyengar yoga is the

universal panacea to soothe the pain and problems of menopause or anything else for that matter. It can be a support. And I have seen it be a support so many times. (Sally)

As the first wave of female Iyengar teachers and practitioners make their transition through menopause, according to Sally it appears that information and knowledge is still evolving and not as readily available as advice and sequences for pregnancy and menstruation.

For some women, their experiences were more positive. Leonie was determined to make the transition through menopause without medical intervention. She felt strongly about the ability of her yoga practice to help her counter the hormonal and emotional imbalances she was experiencing:

What has been clearest to me is that yoga has been a great mood regulator... I know that my yoga practice changes my mood. And I know that I can use particular sequences for particular benefits. (Leonie)

Leonie had experienced positive results from her yoga practice. Evelyn had also found practicing yoga beneficial as an emotional support. She had experienced mood changes, although she was not completely sure whether this was attributable to menopause and aging, or whether it was a result of being more aware of her thoughts and actions. Kelly experienced depression associated with menopause, but found practicing yoga grounded and balanced her emotionally:

Doing yoga is a balancing thing... to go to a class and be reassured... to go and do something physical and gross and do big movements with your body you feel as if you're trying to do something about it. (Kelly)

A number of women found their experiences of Iyengar yoga gave them confidence to face the transition through menopause. These experiences are closely related to confidence acquired towards aging well more generally (see Section 6.2.1.). As Alison

and Naomi approached menopause they welcomed the role yoga would play in the transition:

That change of life, I'm sort of welcoming it... It will be new territory and I don't feel like I'm scared about it... I've got some sort of... courage but I feel like the yoga also gives me some [courage]... it helps with just taking a bit of risk and moving outside of the familiar. (Alison)

Facing menopause seems pretty easy with yoga in the picture. I feel I'm not going to really come across any hurdles that I can't overcome... I feel like I can face whatever comes around. (Naomi)

For these women, yoga had a positive impact on their self-confidence towards their physical and emotional strength and control over their menopausal transition. Leonie said her own experiences of yoga helped to counteract the 'supposed socialisation around deterioration':

I've got some resilience through [yoga]... it's given me good mental attitude that's really hopeful because I'm not degenerating... I've got yoga, so I've got a philosophy that's ready and I think that's almost more important than anything really... and my body knows that I'm stronger than I was at the beginning of menopause. (Leonie)

For Leonie and others, their yoga practice was supportive and strengthening physically. This further positively impacted on their self-confidence and self-esteem during this life transition. From this perspective, practicing yoga embraces the ideals central to Giddens' (1991) 'body project'. This was particularly evident in the participants' aspirations to progress and improve their long-term physical potential in ways that improved their sense of self. Yet, as discussed the women's experiences of awareness also cultivated a more positive sense of self that led to higher levels of acceptance and satisfaction with the physical self in the present time. Practices during pregnancy and menstruation and to a lesser extent menopause, also confirm that the issues women bring to their practice have influenced the way yoga is practiced in the West.

## 6.5 'Progress' and 'process'

When considering the benefits of ongoing physical activities for women, Deem and Gilroy (1998) note the importance of developing strategies that encourage life-long learning. Many of the participants mentioned that they wanted to continue their yoga practice into later life. Their determination can in part be explained by the group's *habitus*, which as shown in Chapter Five is representative of a highly autonomous and motivated group of women.

However, another factor that may account for yoga's ability to maintain a life-long interest perhaps also relates to the fact that central to the yoga process is the cultivation of awareness, which in turn develops one's potential to observe 'the self'. Fiona noticed ongoing subtle physical changes that arose from her practice:

Yoga practice... it's incremental and you can see after a year or something that oh yes I can get that knuckle down a quarter inch... there's a sense of longitudinal work with your self. But there's also the other thing that each practice is different so one day it works and another day it doesn't. (Fiona)

Fiona's experience captured the essence of many of the women's descriptions of their yoga practice. Experiences of 'the self' through their *asana* practice were constantly changing, and were further dependent on the level of attention and awareness brought to their practice. Given that yoga is a practice in the present time, if attention is in the present moment then each practice is experienced differently. Both the 'process' of yoga practice and the external outcome of their practice contributed to overall motivations for continued practice. Physical 'progress' in the *asanas* was also of an internal nature, as levels of awareness permeated internally, so, even though the same pose was practiced, experiences of the pose were often different. Several women reflected on the transformation of their own *asana* practice:

When I think back to when I was doing say a single standing pose initially... I thought I was doing quite well, and in retrospect I think I was doing terribly badly... the more you progress the more you realise there's a lot more to progress that is still within your range of capability even if you have limits. (Mary)

When you see a new person come to the class you go Wow! I was like that... the contrast was quite noticeable. It made me feel like I'm not a real beginner anymore. I know what I'm doing and I can get to the pose and I actually understand what [my teacher] is telling me... I think that attitude of hard work and focus was really discernable that we've all got it and she [the beginner] didn't. (Naomi)

Naomi and Mary's observations identify the subtle differences to approaching practice between the beginner and more experienced student. Although outwardly, the physical shape of the *asana* looks the same, the internalisation, the awareness, the attitude and focus is discernable to the more experienced student. Although there is 'progress' in the execution of the pose, with attention given to the external form of the pose, 'progress' is also a reflection of expanded levels of internal awareness. Mary and Naomi thought at the beginning they were doing a particular *asana* well, but, as their practice developed, they continued to experience more subtle levels of 'being' in the same *asana*. Morag said of this process:

I think it takes a long time and a lot of practice to streamline and to understand what you're meant to be doing with yoga because right from day one you can do a dog pose, but it might take five years for you to understand what you're really meant to be doing in dog pose and to get every muscle working the way it's meant to. And I probably still haven't got it but I feel that I'm getting somewhere that I didn't understand in the beginning. (Morag)

One of the primary reasons that these women maintained a long-term interest is connected to their perception and experience of yoga practice as an ongoing, evolving study of 'the self'. Leonie said of this:



It's like an onion and I keep peeling the layers away and I'm always amazed that there's more... you peel one away and you think... I've just discovered yoga and... later you peel away another and you rediscover it. (Leonie)

Yet, paradoxically, the cultivation of internal awareness also contributed to experiences of ongoing 'progress'; practicing yoga is a process of 'becoming', where progress is related to an internal cultivation of awareness. Even those women who had been doing yoga more than twenty years felt their physical practice continued revealing aspects of 'the self':

I mean things have not stopped progressing... I know success breeds success and when it makes you feel so much better in how you move and your stamina et cetera... you just want to continue with that. (Isabel)

It's good; all positive never negative. That's unusual too... there's always progress. It's always moving forward and there aren't the negatives. (Grace)

A modern practice of yoga has been described as a personal strategy for living under the conditions of modernity (see Strauss 2005, 19). This supports Giddens' (1991) project of 'unlimited progress'. Self-actualisation places an emphasis on the attainment of external goals and potentials, which, as shown, represents part of these women's experiences of yoga. As Isabel suggests, 'success breeds success', implying progress, and this is an important motivation for this group's sustained commitment to practice Iyengar yoga. However, experiences of 'progress' are also of a more subtle nature than the progress described by Giddens' path of self-actualisation. The women's 'progress' also comes from within. Their experiences are embodied. The process of internalising awareness manifests in ongoing progress in practice that is both internal and external in nature.

## 6.6 Conclusion

All the women in the study identified physical benefits arising from their yoga practice. Practicing yoga became an important strategy for overall self-care that included a desire to age well. Such motivations to practice yoga parallel Giddens' 'construction of the self'. By improving the physical self ('becoming'), to varying degrees these women sought physical mastery of their bodies as a means to attain an ideal, physical self. Perceived physical benefits and 'progress' were integral to their ongoing commitment to practice. Their self-confidence improved as a result of their practice.

The fully-engaged practitioners generally were able to draw from a wider range of experiences that reflected the more subtle levels of awareness than the serious part-timers. Nonetheless for all of the participants, their experiences became increasingly embodied with practice. This transformed the way they experienced the mind and body. They 'reconnected' with a sense of 'being' that was positive and allowed for a healthier relationship with the physical body. Many acquired a new appreciation of their physical body, as they experienced the body as 'working' and 'functioning'. As experiences became more embodied, the women cultivated an awareness of 'the self' that was both internal and external.

Heightened levels of awareness also fostered a greater appreciation of being female. Many participants became kinder, more accepting and caring of themselves in the present time. Their experiences redefined some aspects of both 'traditional' masculine and feminine behaviours in a way that overcame some of the negative female conditioning associated with body image. As levels of self-awareness permeated the body, embodied experiences enabled many of women to 'observe' and 'listen' to the body with greater clarity. It appeared that a very different process to either Giddens' body project or Bourdieu's *habitus* occurred via the internalisation of awareness and embodied experiences cultivated from their yoga practice. In summary, the embodied nature of their *habitus* together with their reflexive capacities exist and evolve simultaneously alongside an embodied transformation of 'the self' that arises from their yoga practice.

In an age when there are pressures on women, and indeed men, to continually strive and progress to reach their potential, representative of Giddens' (1991) project of 'becoming', yoga also cultivated experiences of 'being'. This reflects the nature of yoga's practice, which focuses on the body as a process rather than on the body as an object. It has been shown that the women's experiences draw from both perspectives. Experiences were representative of Giddens' project, shown by aspirations towards sustained levels of physical health and well-being. Simultaneously, experiences of 'being' were cultivated through the practice of being in the present moment. Moreover, experiences also describe a process of internal 'becoming' emanating from the internalisation of awareness. The internalisation of awareness also impacted on the participants' mental and emotional experiences. The nature of this transformation is analysed in Chapter Seven.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE PARADOX OF 'BEING' AND 'BECOMING'

It is important to be aware of the process that leads to the changes... the process must obviously include a changed relation to one's own embodiment, as well as one's relation with others (Garrett 2001, 338).

#### 7.1 Introduction

In Chapter Six, the physical experiences arising from the participants' practice of Iyengar yoga were discussed. The yoga process was also shown to be central to perceived experiences of self-transformation, many of which were embodied, via the cultivation of awareness. In a departure from Giddens' reflexive project, the women acquired skills through their yoga practice that cultivated experiences of mind and body as connected.

Garrett's opening quote indicates the importance of understanding the 'process' that arises from practicing yoga. This chapter further considers how the yoga process transforms the women's experiences. In particular, mental and emotional effects, and changes to their consciousness arising from their practice are examined in relation to experiences of 'being' and individual aspirations of 'becoming'.

#### 7.2 Increasing significance given to mental and emotional benefits

At some point during their interview, all of the women identified a transition regarding their motivations for continuing to practice Iyengar yoga. Initially, physical reasons were primary, however, all of the participants indicated that mental and emotional benefits became more significant over time (c.f. Thomas, Tori, Thomas & Mehta 2000):

Just a stronger belief now... physically and mentally it's wonderful. (Simone)

I realise it's more important... it's more emotional... than just physical. (Evelyn)

If you ask me what it is about your health that yoga has been most useful, it has been most useful around my mental health than my physical health. (Leonie)

When I first started I had no idea that it would be very good for my spirit and mental state. (Linda)

I actually understand the reason now. It's much richer... I've much greater access to good feelings. (Sally)

As discussed in Chapter Six, this transition from physical to mental and emotional benefits is closely related to the embodied experiences from the women's practice. Stoler Miller (1998) argues that yoga is the 'ultimate' mind-body discipline, where mind and body have an equally important role in the process of self-transformation. Given that the majority of women in the study experienced a mind-body connection, the experiences of 'being' and 'becoming' are now explored in relation to their perceived mental and emotional self-transformation.

### **7.3 Experiences of 'stillness'**

For most of the women interviewed, experiences of 'being' were not anticipated prior to practicing yoga, yet significant experiences of 'being' and subsequent changes in self-perception arose. Several serious part-timers identified that the only time they were truly in the present moment was during their yoga class. For example, Grace noticed that in most other activities, her mind was busy and thinking about more than one thing at a time. When she did yoga, it was the only time her mind was completely 'in the now'. Fiona stated, 'I think probably the yoga practice is the only time in the week where I'm absolutely in the present'. Fiona noticed that she had a tendency to think ahead and plan for the future, and this was a behaviour that manifested physically: 'I mean my head is usually forward too'. She acknowledged that she was always trying to get somewhere rather than appreciating where she was.

In Chapter Two, the relationship between cultivating awareness and focusing attention on the present moment was discussed. Iyengar (1993) argues that focusing one's attention in the present moment allows time to be mentally still. Mental stillness is a pre-requisite in order 'to be'. Self-transformation is said to arise from experiences of 'being', experiences beyond the thinking processes of the mind (Paranjpe 1998). The majority of the women in this study associated their practice of Iyengar yoga with experiences of 'being' in the present moment which were linked to experiences of stillness and calmness (c.f. Dragon 1998; Adashko Raskin 2003). The serious part-timers in particular, had strong connections between their practice and feeling calm and peaceful. For example, Pamela said she always felt better when she made the effort to attend her class:

I always make myself go... I know when I come out of yoga... my body will feel better, my mind will feel much better... I feel calm and I feel peaceful... just a lovely feeling of well-being. (Pamela)

Associations cultivated from her practice meant even thinking about yoga calmed Grace:

I consider it important to my whole well-being... for me, the word yoga makes me feel calm immediately. So even though I may not practice all that much, thinking about it makes me feel relaxed. (Grace)

After *savasana*, the meditative practice at the end of the class, was the time when the majority of serious part-timers described their most profound experiences of stillness. Expressions used to describe what these women experienced included: 'stillness', 'relaxed', 'being at peace', 'calm', 'centred', 'connected' and 'at one with the world'.<sup>1</sup> Lisa and Mary attended one yoga class a week. They said of their experiences after a class:

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<sup>1</sup> Csikszentmihayi (1979) describes yoga as one of a number of 'collective rituals' where flow is likely to occur. He describes 'flow' as the wholistic sensation when an activity is done with total involvement. He associates this state with a number of activities when there is little distinction between self and the environment.

I'm just feeling this wonderful, relaxed, light person... it's like you have just put down a huge backpack off your shoulders. (Lisa)

I actually feel quite relaxed and I just want to get in the car and get home and just be quiet... I feel really quiet... I just want to be still. (Mary)

Other serious part-timers shared similar experiences when describing how they felt at the end of their class. Some participants, like Alison, described feeling rejuvenated as well as centred after class (c.f. Heelas 1996, 192). 'Just centring myself through the breath... my focus, leaving the head stuff... I feel there's this renewed energy... it's restorative'. Being 'centred' described experiences when participants felt mentally and physically connected with an internal sense of 'the self' and indeed some felt a stronger connection with others (c.f. Cornell 2000; Garrett 2001).

The experiences of these women are comparable to subjective experiences reported by a group of students practicing Transcendental Meditation (c.f. Travis & Pearson 2000). Travis and Pearson (2000) describe such states as 'pure consciousness', an experience where mental activity is reduced and the mind becomes peaceful. Paranipe (1998, 366) suggests that experiences of inner peace and tranquility are indicative of those who have attained an altered state of consciousness. Indeed, some of the experiences described at the end of a class implied a possible altered state of consciousness. For example:

... relaxation after yoga... you sink into this wonderful cotton woolly [feeling]... it's just lovely... it's almost a high... It's like a fix. (Lisa)

It's like it has given me a dose of, Wow this is good stuff, kind of like on a bit of a high really... Just feeling very calm. (Grace)

Possibly, as Paranipe (1998) notes, awareness of 'the self' reflects a more subtle level of consciousness, indicated by the peacefulness and calmness referred to. Linda, a fully-engaged practitioner, recalled the very first time she experienced *savasana*, associating the 'high' she felt with being on drugs:

The first few times was a bit like taking drugs. The first time is probably the best in a sense, because you really notice, Wow! This feels good. (Linda)

Several of the serious part-timers described similar experiences:

A bit more than relaxed... spacey in the head... Laid back. (Lesley)

I feel often tired and kind of frazzled when I go in and when I come out I feel a bit floaty and euphoric... I feel generally energised and happy. (Naomi)

It makes me feel so good. I love it... some days I can come out and almost feel like I'm walking on air and that's a wonderful feeling. (Denise)

The serious part-timers in particular, reported that their experiences of 'the self' were different at the end of their class than at the start. Yoga philosophy also suggests that 'being' reflects experiences of an altered state of consciousness. Paranjpe (1998, 365) argues that 'these states are beyond verbal description', perhaps explaining the use of words like 'high', 'a fix', 'floaty' and 'euphoric'. The findings are comparable with Cornell's (2000) yoga participants who referred to similar experiences as 'the source of being'. It was common for the serious part-timers to remain conscious of their heightened levels of awareness for about a day. Twelve of the serious part-timers who participated in an evening class found that they slept better after their class:

It always feels nice. I always sleep really well. (Tamara)

I often have difficulty sleeping, and the night of the week when I never have difficulty sleeping is on the Wednesday night after doing my yoga class. (Phoebe)

I really didn't think that I would enjoy a night time yoga class, but I do I find that it does help me sleep better. (Simone)

I sleep better and just everything, the stresses in my mind are lessened. (Grace)



The women's experiences depict a different process to Giddens' (1991) reflexive project. Rather than coming into the present moment to plan for the future, for these women, experiences of the present moment were associated with a stilling of the mind and mental thought processes. It was an embodied experience, a state of 'being'. B.K.S. Iyengar (2005a, 16) argues that through practice, it is possible to access an inner space where there is an end to duality (i.e., experiences of mind and body as separate), and one experiences unity and stillness. Indeed, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* describes the aim of yoga as 'the cessation of the modifications of the mind' (Whicher 1998b, 152).

The fully-engaged practitioners identified less distinct changes in their level of consciousness arising from their practice. Perhaps due to their commitment to practice yoga regularly, they maintained a finer level of awareness throughout the day. For these practitioners, heightened levels of self-awareness were more comprehensively integrated into daily life. Gillian felt that because she practiced yoga daily, 'the awareness' was with her all the time. She said, 'It's like your family or something, it's with you all the time'. Wendy said:

Being at one with, at peace with, what you're doing and sometimes that can be quite intense when you're on a particular day, when the air's fantastic and you've gone for a walk and you're up the top of a mountain or whatever it is... I like to be available for those moments... to be able to really take it in... to be able to take in more and be in the present. (Wendy)

For Wendy, yoga was 'hugely' important to her in the way it defined how she interacted with the world on a daily basis. Such 'moments' required 'being' in the present moment and connecting with the senses. These moments of connecting with the senses do not occur if one's attention is focused on the past or on future thoughts. 'Being' present opened the possibility for 'new' experiences. Leonie described such experiences as a 'gratifying practice in the present time'. Most of the fully-engaged practitioners appeared to maintain a certain level of self-awareness throughout the day. The following sections examine the extent to which the participants' experiences transformed daily life.

### *7.3.1 The creation of space and time*

The practice of Iyengar yoga cultivated experiences of ‘being’ in the present that were differentiated from habitual tendencies of mental ‘busy-ness’ (‘becoming’). ‘Being’ in the present moment transformed these women’s experience of time. Phoebe and Clare noted that after their yoga class they were more present in their activities, and were able to function at a slower pace:

If I was at home I would probably be go, go, go and running around, but after [yoga], it does slow me down and I don’t have to rush everywhere. (Clare)

I’m often more reserved, more thoughtful and slower, whereas I’m normally somebody who speaks quickly and walks quickly and moves quickly, and so that affects the way I interact with people. (Phoebe)

With practice, these women found relief from their usual experiences of time as rushed and fast paced. As they became more proficient at yoga, they were better able to incorporate the yoga techniques learnt and bring their attention into the present moment, thereby creating some mental ‘space’ in their day. Naomi and Linda found that the mental space created by their practice created opportunities to experience another perspective on life:

... gets me out of the busy mind state... breaks that whole cycle from worry and thinking and all that sort of stuff. So it quietens my mind and gives me a space to sort of start again in a completely different space. (Naomi)

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. (Linda)

For many of the women in the current study, the practice of yoga provided opportunities to slow down. For the majority of participants, their yoga practice was described as a distinct place where they could take time out (c.f. Hasselle-Newcombe 2005; Strauss 2005). This is significant when research shows that many women desire more time for self as a means to balance the demands of work, life and family (see Fullagar & Brown 2003; Warner-Smith & Cartwright 2003; Brown & Warner-Smith 2005). (See Section 7.5)

For the serious part-timers in particular, the physical space of the yoga class was also significant in attaining a more unified experience of time and space:

It's comforting... the routine of being able to rely on consistently going and enjoying the space... You just suspend your responsibility in the world for an hour and a half. You don't have to take responsibility for the world but for your own actions within that microcosm. (Jackie)

Yoga provides an opportunity to sort of be still for an hour and a half and just be in the present and not worry about all these other things... The difference in yoga [class] is that you go in, you shut the door, you're there for an hour and a half... you're making an appointment to go to that place. (Denise)

For the fully-engaged practitioners, a similar physical and mental 'space' was created from their daily practice on their yoga mat (c.f. Lloyd 1997b, 11). Leonie said of her experiences, 'I have got this kind of space that I can go to which is my practice'. The physical space provided a safe and non-judgmental place to practice yoga. 'Space' also referred to the mental space 'to be' in the present moment. Wendy said of her experience: 'I just take in so much more... I've just that little bit more time and space'. Sally said, 'The practice is much wider than it used to be... my ability to just stop and be with myself for one moment'. 'Space' connected them with 'the self'. Evelyn said of her *asana* practice:

You could be there for half an hour, the time has gone and it's as though there is space, and you just stay there... which is really interesting... it's wonderful, you get this feeling of space. (Evelyn)

Baier (2001) argues that both space and time are integral to experiences of unity and connection in the practice of *asana*. As shown from the experiences described, the practice of yoga creates space temporally and emotionally. These experiences arise from 'being' in the present moment. As already mentioned, 'being' connects 'the self' to experiences of stillness (see Paranipe 1998, 222). When, as Deem and Gilroy (1998) and Godbey (1997) suggest, many women in contemporary society experience feeling rushed, activities that create opportunities to find 'space' to be still are significant.

#### **7.4 'Letting go': A practice of detachment**

Most of the participants linked their yoga practice with experiences of detachment (*vairagya*), when they were able to experience being 'an observer' of their actions. From a yoga perspective, such experiences can be described as 'an observer' or a 'witness' or 'an uninvolved witness' of one's thoughts and emotions (see Sarasvati 1981; Paranipe 1998). Coming into the present moment and connecting with the senses provided the opportunity to observe their mental and emotional states with greater clarity:

I've the usual angry reaction there but I can choose to take three deep breaths if I want to and just calm down and think more positive thoughts about the situation than to beat up the anger force. (Lisa)

When you're standing in a bank queue, you try and stand up straight and try and do some deep breathing rather than getting angry... It teaches you to accept things more. (Pamela)

Rather than reacting to, or repressing, emotions such as anger, these women were at times able to detach themselves emotionally from certain circumstances. Many spoke of being able to choose whether they remained with and held on to a particular emotion or attitude or mentally 'let go'. Their yoga practice facilitated an awareness of feelings and

emotions, which heightened their ability to let go at will (c.f. Thomas & Thomas 2004; Hasselle-Newcombe 2005):

I was certainly more reactive when I was younger... it's [yoga] a practical everyday practice, to stop for a moment and take a look at what's happening and then move on and not react... it has changed things... Just try to see it... to stop for a moment and think, where do I need to be? (Wendy)

I'd become accustomed to clenching myself. That required two things. One is physically to let go... it's entirely internally directed... it's actually your decision whether you're going to do it or not... to be absolutely at peace with yourself in doing that. (Sarah)

The ability to take a more 'detached' stance enabled them to put life events into 'perspective':

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. (Fiona)

One of the things about yoga that I particularly enjoy is the fact that you can go in there and just be in the present... if you're open to the experience you can cast off all that other stuff that might be lying around in your head, and that's very liberating for me because I'm a stewer left to my own devices... I can actually put things to one side a bit now, in a way that I didn't used to be able to. (Denise)

Similarly, being able to let go positively contributed to Harriet and Alison's ability to manage aspects of their lives:

The first class I went to... I felt able to cope with all the crap that was going on... and, coming into a class and feeling really agitated and upset and knowing that by the end of it, if not completely eliminated, that I'd got some perspective on it... it's fantastic for that and knowing that there's something you could actually do. (Harriet)

I was worried about things, so I've used the yoga to just think about things by being present and focused... even though the concentration can flutter and fluctuate. I do have that presence when I'm in the class and it does come back and I can move after the class with it so I do feel better. (Alison)

Experiences of 'being' cultivated a different perspective. 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'. 'Being' a witness contributed to the ability to take more of a 'detached' perspective when dealing with different situations. By focusing attention completely on the present moment, these women had a choice about how to respond to situations as they arose:

Yoga... widens your horizons, the more options you get to choose from... Especially, if you find out how you're feeling and then find out well okay I'm out of balance. What do I need to bring myself in balance?... It starts up a little bit by having to deal with being more aware of how you are in any given time. (Wendy)

It's [yoga] become a bit more of a cellular kind of thing so I've got this experience now that I can fall back on... I do have this other state. It's given me a distance. It's given me a way of experiencing detachment or understanding... I don't always happen to do it but know that I can. (Leonie)

Lois noticed that when she practiced detachment rather than trying to control a particular situation, her life seemed to have a way of working out. She said, 'I've really proven to myself that that's exactly what happens when you step back from it and let go of it, the attachment, everything happens'. The ability to detach from situations transformed the way these women experienced many life scenarios.

### 7.5 A ‘tool’ to deal with the stresses of contemporary life

The ability to be ‘an uninvolved witness’ transferred to help the participants deal more effectively with the stresses of work, family and their lives more generally. All of them identified managing stress as a key benefit attained from their yoga practice (c.f. Badell 1998; Dragon 1998; Thomas *et al.* 2000; Thomas & Thomas 2004; Strauss 2005). The effects from practicing yoga were beneficial when coping with daily stress as well as with bigger life events, such as a family death. The benefits were two-fold:

1. Many women attained immediate relief from stress as a direct result of practicing yoga; and
2. They were then able to incorporate the techniques learnt from practice and apply them to stressful situations at other times in their lives.

Most of the serious part-timers described yoga as an important ‘tool’ to relieve physical and mental tension that arose from working in stressful jobs. The effects also, for example, contributed towards improving workplace efficiency, especially those in demanding service occupations (c.f. Strauss 2005). Terrie said, ‘I need those two [yoga] classes to survive the demands of work’. Holly said, ‘It’s a stressful job... an intense environment, but I manage to, largely because of yoga and co-counseling’. As a school teacher, Clare described her work as quite stressful. Yoga helped her to relax and made it easier to get through the rest of the week. She said:

[I’ve] got rid of a whole lot of tension... physical as well as emotional... I’ve got rid of the day’s problems... I will put them right out of my mind... even after you’ve finished [yoga] you still don’t go back and dwell on any problems. (Clare)

All of the participants found that applying the techniques from their yoga practice was beneficial for dealing with stress in daily life more generally. The ability to ‘let go’ and ‘detach’ meant they had ‘tools’ that helped them deal with stress and anxiety. Hannah

found her yoga practice alleviated her tendency towards negative emotions. Alison and Kelly described yoga as a ‘support’ to cope with anxiety:

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. (Alison)

If you feel well because you do your yoga, you’ve got a chance to survive that stuff or rise above it, or you’ve just got the energy to deal with it. (Kelly)

For Wendy and Alison, the effects from practicing yoga returned a sense of balance and perspective that helped them cope with stressful events:

It became really, really clear to me how important it [yoga] was to me. I used it through that time I think as a real tool to bring myself back to sort of balance again... [yoga] was just habit by that time... I knew then what a tool it was just to get through something a little bit hard and I had some options to sort of draw from. (Wendy)

I guess it helps me... to be present, to participate, to acknowledge, that... I have the strength, and some sort of inner reserve to do the best I can... It’s very giving what I do... I have to be consistent. I have to be able to renew that sort of energy... I’ve got to be mindful that I’ve got to look after myself to be that person to be supportive to others. (Alison)

The ability to cope with stressful situations was closely aligned with maintaining a regular yoga practice. Leonie and Holly considered their practice a place where they could deal with the stress:

If I’m very stressed... it’s very clear to me that if I didn’t have my yoga practice that it would have been much harder to maintain all of that. (Leonie)

On a more mental level of being... if I feel somehow a bit worried about the way the world is... the yoga process is this place I can be optimistic and, it’s a place where personally I can return to goodness. (Holly)



From this perspective, not only was practicing yoga a way of coping with the stresses of the various projects in the participants' Western lifestyles, it also was a means of 'trying to bring them into dynamic balance' (Strauss 2005, 59). Attaining balance in life is shown to be a specific issue affecting women, many of whom are trying to 'balance' careers, health, and family life, especially when one's ability to balance the various aspects of life is closely identified with being a 'successful' individual (Fullagar & Brown 2003, 195; Warner-Smith & Cartwright 2003; see also Brown & Warner-Smith 2005). Henderson & Allen's (1991) study reports that women participate in certain leisure activities as a way to balance the various aspects of their lives, while Giddens (1991), writing in the same period, describes 'the authentic self' as someone who is balanced and healthy.

For many women in the study, the ability to cope with stress by practicing yoga was connected with creating opportunities to live a more 'balanced' life:<sup>2</sup>

I think yoga does help balance. (Vicky)

I think on a long term, it [yoga] tends to balance, so if you're doing a balanced practice you become a more balanced person. (Gillian)

In yoga I can tell where to keep the balance. (Kelly)

I just recognise it [yoga]... evens out the highs and makes it [life] more tranquil. (Grace)

Lois' understanding of how yoga helped her was not always clear until she compared her life to when she was not practicing:

When you're doing [yoga] you don't necessarily realise the benefits... When I'm there [at yoga]... I can cope with things and then when I stop [practicing yoga for a while], I

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<sup>2</sup> These findings compare with Henderson & Allen's (1991) study, which reports that women participate in certain leisure activities as a way to balance the various aspects of their lives.

still don't sort of get the connection until I go back and I think oh hang on, yeah, life's a lot easier when I do it [yoga]. (Lois)

According to Quarrick (1989), practices like yoga work because through the attainment of an absorbed state of mind, the mental and emotional states central to increasing a person's anxiety and tension are weakened. Paranjpe (1998, 370) suggests that experiences of 'being' and stillness within can 'mitigate any feelings of existential despair', thus yoga can be an antidote to the anxiety of modern living. It is the embodied nature of yoga's practice that enables this positive self-transformation.

Heelas (1996, 148) proposes that a popular reason for the uptake of practices like yoga relates to values associated with modern living, such as improved personal relationships, and the ability to cope with life's stresses. In the West, practices like yoga are congruent with modern values, because emphasis is given to one's ability to make change and improve one's efficiency in all aspects of life. For the participants in this study, yoga was a 'coping mechanism' and a 'tool' to deal with stress and anxiety. It helped them to deal with negative emotions and stress, and therefore to improve their overall quality of life (c.f. Badell 1998; Dragon 1998; Thomas *et al.* 2000; Thomas & Thomas 2004).

It is somewhat paradoxical that what transpired from the techniques acquired from yoga ('being'), improved the ability to manage particular events and stresses in their lives ('becoming'). The more these women were able to detach and let go, the more control they experienced. Heelas (1996, 31) suggests that the very nature of self-transformation in the West has evolved so that 'the best of both worlds comes about when participants learn to detach themselves from – whilst living in – the capitalist mainstream'. The participants' experiences of 'being' demonstrate their ability to detach and let go, and simultaneously function more effectively in their lives. In other words, they continued to 'become'. Experiences of 'being' and 'becoming' are intertwined in a way that continued to improve, and give balance to, the women's quality of life.

## 7.6 Experiences of mental and emotional control

Many of the women linked the effects arising from their yoga practice to improved levels of self-control (c.f. Thomas & Thomas 2004), which positively influenced other aspects in their lives (c.f. Dragon 1998; Thomas *et al.* 2000; Hasselle-Newcombe 2005). For example, the fully-engaged and serious part-timers alike reported that by practicing certain *asanas*, they attained specific mental and emotional states:

You could energise yourself by doing the back bending... and calm yourself by doing the forward bending. (Lisa)

Energised, peaceful, if it's been a back bend class... after a *pranayama* class you feel deeply peaceful and quiet, very quiet. (Gillian)

I can do standing postures, they're going to make you feel fairly good. Forward bends, they're going to slow me down a bit. Backbends, that's going to make me really feel speeded up. (Kelly)

The ability to practice different *asanas* gave some of the women a degree of control over their mental and emotional states that was then integrated into daily life. Grace practiced some specific postures daily. She said, 'Just to lie on the block (shaped like a brick) makes such an enormous difference'. If her mind was racing, the effect of the pose relaxed her physically and mentally. Evelyn, who had many years experience of yoga, adapted what *asanas* she practiced depending on her emotional state on a particular day:

I think what to do depending on your emotional state, if something has been too traumatic... it's wonderful how you can adapt it. (Evelyn)

Most women associated their yoga practice with improved levels of concentration and focus (c.f. Walsh 1999). This concurs with B.K.S. Iyengar's (1991 (1966), 40) description of the nature of self-transformation ensuing from practice, where the real importance of *asana* practice is to train and discipline the mind (see also Paranpje 1998). Several women noticed how their ability to remain focused in the *asanas* improved.

Fully-engaged practitioners Gillian, Wendy and Evelyn described how their ability to focus developed:

When I first started yoga my mind was probably all over the place and I found it very hard to actually be in the pose. I would be just going through the superficial things and now... the search is to be in it, at the time. (Gillian)

I became interested, in the concept of change... on this mental level of outlook, of focus, of just being... I found my staying power and just standing with a problem and just waiting and trying to work it through increased a lot. (Wendy)

It allows you to centre all your thoughts on one thing... yoga is just a centering on one thing. (Evelyn)

A number of women highlighted the fact that their work effectiveness had improved because of an enhanced ability to focus:

My focus is better. I can concentrate better... At work... it feels like it's all part of the same continuum of having more self-control in various ways. (Linda)

Just centring myself through the breath, through my focus, leaving the head stuff... It really does help me... It centres me and so it gives me focus and I can be there to work my way through things and not lose sight of where I'm going. (Alison)

Being able to detach and let go of 'extraneous stuff' improved these women's ability to focus, make decisions and respond more effectively to challenging circumstances:

If there's a decision... I just stop and you can turn off from other sorts of things... make the decision... in important decisions I tend to be the one that has the final say... that's because of the yoga. (Evelyn)

What yoga does for me is... I've got to focus on this... you can come up with a challenge and you can snap into focus... by eliminating all the extraneous stuff. (Leonie)

I think that requires you to turn off all the extremes of external things that impinge on you in the course of that practice... I'm not conscious that there's anything else in my life that's like that... [it's] self-contained. (Sarah)

Conversely, for some of the women, a lack of clarity was noted when a regular yoga practice was not maintained. According to Holly, 'If I don't do yoga on a day, I might actually have quite a dull head for half the day'. Denise referred to a sense of 'withdrawal' when she did not go to her class. Phoebe said, 'I really notice the difference in my state of mind'. Jackie said, 'I haven't been doing good classes lately: I think I haven't been focusing as much'. Jackie noticed the difference mentally and emotionally when she did not give her complete attention to her yoga practice. Wendy also noted the difference in her emotional and mental states when she did not practice:

I will suddenly just feel that there's a lack, I just feel a bit fuzzy and sort of unreal. It's almost like it [yoga] gives me reality... yoga gives me more clarity. (Wendy)

'To be' is to focus one's attention in the present moment. The ability to focus one's attention contributed to these women's effectiveness to 'become'. The process of 'becoming' a 'better' person was attributed to their yoga practice, because they could deal more effectively with life generally. Not surprisingly, the fully-engaged and more experienced serious part-timers described more substantial changes arising from the effects of their yoga practice. Nevertheless, the majority of women viewed their experiences positively because their yoga practice gave them a greater sense of control in their lives. In keeping with Giddens' project, greater self-control further affirmed their identity in their external environment, however, it was by controlling the mind via 'being' (letting go) that cultivated their ability to do so. In short, these women effectively transferred the techniques from yoga ('being'), to better engage in their personal projects ('becoming').

## 7.7 Affirming ‘the self’

The experiences described by the participants were often articulated using language derived from Western discourses. For example, ‘time for self’ is central to discourses associated with the women’s movement as well as the New Age movement (see Heelas 1996; De Michelis 2004). The time and space created from their practice was important personal time for ‘the self’ (see Section 7.3). What self do the women identify with? Is it ‘the self’, ‘the ego’ (Giddens) and/or ‘the Self’ (yoga), an experience beyond the ego and mental thoughts? (see also Heelas 1996; Garrett 2001; De Michelis 2004)

Another important dimension to the women’s practice was related to aspirations of improving ‘the self’ and their relationship to ‘the self’. Such experiences appeared to be indicative of ‘becoming’ as opposed to ‘being’. Practicing yoga was part of Mary’s strategy for staying well and ‘pushing’ herself to be as good as she could be. Yoga continued to physically improve her quality of life and mentally improve her perceptions of who she was and what she could do. Mary said, ‘I’ve become open-minded about your well-being being in your own control’. Yoga was a strategy to living a ‘better’ life. Rogers (1961 in Paranjpe 1998, 182) describes ‘the good life’ as a direction. Rather than a state of ‘being’, it requires a degree of ‘intention’ to progress towards some future goal. As with Giddens’ (1991) reflexive self, it requires looking forward to ‘become’ and improve one’s potential. This is reflected in a number of the women’s stories.

Approximately one third of the women interviewed attributed a significant transformation in the way they valued themselves to their yoga practice. Often coming from a place of undervaluing ‘the self’, they described feeling empowered and experienced greater certainty about their place in the world (c.f. Iwasaki & Mannell 2000; Pohl, Borrie *et al.* 2000). This, in itself, is an important transition, when research demonstrates that many mid-life women need to look after themselves (Parry & Shaw 1999). For example,

I think the thing with yoga is it gave you time to yourself, it allows you to be stronger in your own sort of beliefs. (Evelyn)

It's given me a greater awareness of the importance of just dedicating some time to myself and being perhaps more inward looking, and that's become a lot more important over the last few years. (Elaine)

Having confidence with myself and who I am. I had none of that before, feeling more empowered as to who I am... now I feel as though I've got to a place on this earth. (Simone)

Grace felt she had acquired personal 'strength' from her yoga practice. She had changed from someone who would sacrifice her 'yoga time' to give to others, to having the strength to look after herself. Her belief in herself had been strengthened, to the extent where she felt she was deserving of the benefits from practicing yoga. She had also come to the realisation that if she did not take the time to look after herself, no one would. Lois and Harriet, too, associated their yoga experiences with a transformed self-belief in their importance as individuals:

I like what happens to me when I take that time for myself. I think the bottom line is about the relationship that I have with myself... To believe that you're important enough... there's a place for you here in this life. (Lois)

It's personal space... it's setting aside a couple of hours for me and just where I don't have to think about anything else and I can forget about any other rubbish that's going on... feeling that I have done something for myself. (Harriet)

These findings are significant in that leisure research, for example, suggests that 'time for self' is either rarely possible or irrelevant for many women (Henderson & Bialeschki 1991; Freysinger & Flannery 1992; Fullagar & Brown 2003; Warner-Smith & Cartwright 2003). Moreover, experiences from these women's practice fostered a stronger sense of self; yoga was a self-affirming practice. 'Time for self' was important, especially amongst those women who were working mothers, with children still living at home.

They felt that taking the time to look after themselves positively impacted on their relationships with others, and in particular with family:

Having looked after myself, I could give attention to other people. I'm a big believer in that, if you spend the time looking after yourself, you'll be able to give to other people. (Alice)

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. (Grace)

This transition is a positive one when, as Stone (1990, 207) argues, women who devote their lives to nurturing others often place their own needs as secondary. Perhaps, then, the awareness cultivated by these women transformed their self-perception in positive ways, and particularly via experiencing a greater awareness of 'the self'. For example:

It's much easier for me to be true to myself now... it [yoga] does make a difference in the way I live my life, but I can't tell you why or how. All I know is that I like what's happening and so the more I go to yoga and the more disciplined I become, the more it affects me in other areas of my life. (Lois)

Yoga means to me just coming into myself and loving myself and treating myself respectfully... to be caring about myself. (Sally)

I feel positive... I feel very good. I feel everything's opened up. I feel like a bit of weight is taken off; just freedom. (Kelly)

Just general good energy... It's almost like a self-esteem thing as well having done it. I feel good... I will just bounce into the day. (Holly)

Other terms used to describe the positive nature of their experiences included, 'strength', 'confidence', 'courage' and 'feeling empowered'. Kelly connected her experiences from



her yoga practice with improving her sense of self-confidence. She said, 'It gives me a bit of confidence to thinking, this is the way I do things'. Vicky and Alison said:

I've got much more confidence... I can say what I feel like and I can do what I like and, you go through life sort of trying to please somebody or not and you think no I don't have to do that any more. I want to be myself. (Vicky)

It [yoga] gives me some strength to... challenge the self-doubt, those fears and those yucky negative things and the confidence... I'm very grateful that I have that and I can use it and I know I can work it to my benefit. (Alison)

Vicky recognised that it was difficult to determine what aspects of her life had influenced her the most, even though her experiences from yoga had contributed to her improved self-confidence. Freysinger (1995) argues that self-orientated activities can develop aspects of the self not realised in other spheres of life, and thus affect positive change for the individual. Most of the experiences from the women's yoga practice were self-affirming, supporting the findings in existing studies of women's leisure (c.f. Henderson, Bialeschi, Shaw & Freysinger 1989; Freysinger & Flannery 1992; Wearing 1998) and yoga practitioners (c.f. Badell 1998; Dragon 1998; Cornell 2000; Thomas *et al.* 2000; Daubenmeir 2002; Thomas & Thomas 2004).

Heelas (1996, 143) suggests that the uncertain nature of modern society is responsible for directing individual attention 'from without to within', in an effort to experience a positive sense of self in an uncertain world. Accordingly, the experiences discussed demonstrate that the majority of women were 'interested in themselves, their nature and what they could become' (Heelas 1996, 144). For the study's participants, positive benefits contributed to their ongoing commitment to practice yoga regularly. Their experiences affirmed their sense of identity and their aspirations to improve their potential ('becoming'), in a way that is in keeping with Giddens' (1991) reflexive project.

### *7.7.1 Is yoga practice different to Giddens' reflexive project?*

As already alluded to, the majority of women described their yoga practice as important 'time for self'. However, what is also of interest is that only a few women identified yoga as a leisure activity, when some research suggests that leisure is an important 'time for self' (see Henderson & Bialeschki 1991; Freysinger & Flannery 1992; Freysinger 1995; Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw & Freysinger 1996; Wearing 1998). Morag and Annie described yoga as leisure because it was an activity they both enjoyed and did for 'the self'. However, for the majority of the study's participants leisure was generally associated with activities such as going to the movies, watching TV, reading and gardening. They considered their yoga practice to be more than leisure. If yoga is considered as an activity for health, then these findings may support Deem and Gilroy's (1998, 93) conclusions that women do not necessarily view health and leisure activities as synonymous. Indeed, research also shows that women's leisure is often associated with a 'project of the self' (see Scraton 1994; Wearing 1998; Warner-Smith & Cartwright 2003).

Grace associated her yoga practice with leisure, but also felt that yoga was more than leisure because of the way her practice calmed and centred her. Vicky said: 'I don't see yoga as leisure... it's something that you're doing back into yourself. I'm doing it for me. I'm not doing it for anybody else'. In Jackie's opinion, the term 'leisure' was 'derogatory' and 'demeaning' in terms of what her yoga teacher was trying to convey in class. For Alice, yoga was a focused activity that she did for 'care and attention'. Evelyn described her yoga practice as more 'private and personal' than other leisure pursuits. Similarly, others felt leisure did not depict the totality of their experiences with yoga:

Just more aware of the personal journey involved, [the] internal aspects of yoga, even though one's at peace in the bush, one's at peace when one's gardening, but there was not the self-awareness, reflection that happens in yoga. (Isabel)

It means more to me than leisure now. It's sort of part of me and it helps me with life... There's that component, the mental and the spiritual; I'm trying to embrace that with the practice. (Alison)

Yoga's significance for these women is often differentiated from 'conventional' leisure activities in that it offers more; the practice of yoga cultivated self-awareness and enhanced the women's capacity for self-reflection. This was an important dimension of their yoga practice. The women's descriptions of leisure compare with traditional and indeed some contemporary interpretations of leisure that describe leisure as a time for contemplation, self-reflection and for understanding the inner self, even though these definitions did not comply with the participants' own understandings of leisure (Goodale & Witt 1985; Goodale & Godbey 1988; Coleman & Iso-Ahola 1993; Smith, Amutio, Anderson & Aria 1996; Godbey 1997; Heintzman 1999; Heintzman 2000; Juniu 2000; Kleiber 2000; Roberts 2000).<sup>3</sup> Both the serious part-timers and the fully-engaged practitioners alike, identified a greater capacity for self-reflection arising from their yoga practice:

I've always been interested in the world in here [Holly points to her head]... yoga consciously gives me more ways of being aware of that and digesting it and enjoying it... I think yoga fosters and reinforces... a natural tendency to be reflective. (Holly)

I suspect the meditative side of it... that's important because there's a sense of when you are very calm and still that you can actually think about your inner feelings... you can be strengthened... by knowing that there's a tune coming within you. (Mary)

Sarah described her yoga practice as a 'process of learning about myself'. Alison felt yoga was an important process in understanding 'who she was' and 'what she did'. In many of the conversations, the participants identified yoga as a specific practice to explore 'who they were'. Their experiences of 'the self' were redefined as levels of

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<sup>3</sup> Further research is needed to understand why interpretations of leisure vary amongst certain populations, when as the participants' views indicate, their own perceptions of what leisure is differs from current academic thought. It is possible that the role of awareness arising from their yoga practice differentiates this group's perceptions.

awareness permeated internally and externally. The yoga was an ongoing process that continued to reveal aspects of ‘the self’ via the internalisation of awareness. Their stories also revealed a greater level of contentment with who ‘the self’ was:

I’m more gentle, and I’m more patient. (Sally)

I’m gentler on myself. I’m not expecting big things... if I can maintain a sense of contentment and calm, to me that’s a huge achievement. (Grace)

You just feel more comfortable in yourself, that you love yourself more as you get older. I think that’s an important thing that has happened to me too because I think before I didn’t really love myself deep down. (Annie)

The participants’ experiences of yoga provided a place to explore ‘the self’ (c.f. Strauss 2005, 85). The embodied nature of yoga’s practice and the associated experiences of stillness reflect an elusive aspect of Giddens’ ‘reflexive project’. Although Giddens’ project incorporates a number of reflective practices borrowed from Western therapy, his descriptions lack the mind-body techniques needed to control the mind as opposed to the body. His focus on the biographical narratives of the mind differs from the internally directed focus and mind-body connection of traditional disciplines like meditation and yoga. As a result, Giddens’ intended goal of self-actualisation remains external. As previously mentioned, the reflexive project is a perpetual trajectory towards an anticipated future self (‘the self’, the ego), where the individual is in a constant process of constructing and revising images of ‘the self’, informed by personal narratives (mental thoughts) from the past and the future (see also Shilling 2003).

The yogic process differs because ‘the true Self’ or ‘the Self’ leads to ‘an inner source of undiminishing joy’, where the individual experiences ‘being’. This is an embodied experience of contentment in the present moment, as opposed to aspiring towards ‘becoming’ happy in the future (see Paranjpe 1998, 236) (see also Chapter Two). Perhaps, then, ‘the self’ the women connect with while practicing yoga is also a ‘constant’, unchanging, ‘true Self’ (Paranjpe 1998). However, the women’s stories are

complex and, as noted, experiences arising from their practice of yoga also describe a ‘true self’ (the ego) that concurs with Giddens’ project, so that their experiences are reflective of both processes of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’.

Paranjpe (1998, 213, 214) describes the difference in the two processes by considering the different types of knowledge associated with them (also see Chapter Two). Empirical knowledge is associated with ‘becoming’. It involves the rational mind, where a sense of identity is developed with the body and the mind. Here the women’s reflexive nature and their *habitus* combine in a complex interplay that determines who these women understand themselves ‘to be’ and who they strive ‘to become’. Alternatively, ‘being’ requires discriminative knowledge, a higher level of knowledge, a higher level of consciousness, ‘the Self’. The latter is an embodied knowledge that goes beyond the rational thought processes of the mind. The study’s participants also referred to experiences of this nature.

## 7.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, the complex relationships between experiences of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ were examined. The participants attributed their self-transformation to expanding levels of self-awareness and an increasing ability ‘to be’ in the present moment. While all of the women interviewed were positive about their experiences, the extent to which ‘being’ was incorporated into the ‘becoming’ of their lives was influenced by the length of time they had engaged in, and the frequency and intensity of, their yoga practice. Not surprisingly, the fully-engaged practitioners were able to integrate the techniques from their yoga practice in a more substantial manner than the serious part-timers.

The women did not recall anticipating experiences of ‘being’ prior to commencing their practice of yoga. Therefore, it is significant that these experiences made such an impact on them. ‘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.

As a mind-body practice, the women's yoga's practice differs from Giddens' reflexive project, where the mind is privileged over the body. Yoga's practice contributes to a self-transformation that is embodied. Most of the women made references to experiences of a constant sense of self: a state of 'being' that arose when the mind became still. For some, this experience was described as transcending, perhaps indicative of an altered state of consciousness. Giddens' project does not support, or engage with, such embodied experiences. Therefore, 'the self' described in Giddens' reflexive project differs from some of the experiences attained from the practice of Iyengar yoga because his project does not necessarily cultivate the more subtle levels of awareness depicted in the participants' experiences of yoga.

That said, yoga comprises both 'being' and 'becoming', both at the level of practice (see Chapter Six) and in the way the effects of yoga transfer and further impact on the lifestyles of the practitioners (c.f. Paranjpe 1998; Iyengar 1999a). To varying degrees the effects of the processes that cultivate 'being' make a positive contribution to 'becoming'. For all of the participants, the effects of practicing yoga were beneficial in a number of different ways: 'constructing the self', making time for 'the self', coping with stress, acquiring a degree of self-control, and living a more 'balanced' life. As noted in Chapters Two and Three, these are central values in contemporary life, and are in keeping with Giddens' (1991) project of self-actualisation. Certain conditions of modernity provide opportunities to plan for the future and 'to make one-self' (see Giddens 1991). Yoga is also a 'tool' and a 'coping mechanism' to deal with the stressful nature of modern life. This, too, supports Giddens' (1991) reflexive project as a response to the 'anxiety' of contemporary living.

Paradoxically, although the participants are attracted to yoga as an alternative way to 'make themselves', their experiences are also contrary to the very project that initiates their practice. Experiences of 'being' are positively integrated into these women's

lifestyles. In addition, they continue 'becoming', arguably with greater efficiency than before. Paranjpe (1998, 184) suggests that 'being' and 'becoming' are defined by each other, and derive their meaning from the other. Both Giddens' progress towards self-actualisation and yoga's 'process' of self-realisation are experienced. 'Progress' is internal as well as external as awareness permeates the mind-body. In brief, these women experience 'being', draw from the effects of 'being', improve and affect change, and thus continue 'becoming'.

Chapter Eight continues the women's 'journey' with Iyengar yoga, and further explores to what extent their practice is representative of 'being' and 'becoming' when compared to the aims of Giddens' self-actualisation and classical yoga's self-realisation.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### SELF-ACTUALISATION AND SELF-REALISATION

You're in the process of change... that kind of an experience we could all have in yoga... We're not static beings and we bring something different to all of our experiences and to every moment of our lives. We don't expect things to be the same. (Leonie)

#### 8.1 Introduction

Chapter Seven examined how the processes of an ongoing Iyengar yoga practice transformed the participants. According to the women, the expanding levels of awareness, the ability to hold their attention in the present moment and thereby still the mind, were central to their transformed experiences. Such experiences described states of 'being'. Paradoxically, experiences of 'being' were also attributed to affirmative experiences of 'becoming', so that to varying degrees, their yoga practice cultivated an interplay between processes of 'being' and 'becoming'.

The purpose of this chapter is to further examine the ways in which a regular Iyengar yoga practice impacts on the women's lives. According to the participants, their yoga practice is central to living a more contented and meaningful life. However, their experiences are complex because they represent an amalgamation of many influences - their yoga experiences, life experiences and *habitus* - all of which impact on their experiences of 'being' and 'becoming'.

#### 8.2 The 'journey' of yoga in daily life

In Chapter Two, the importance of maintaining a disciplined practice was discussed from the perspectives of Giddens' and classical yoga. Several women described their practice of yoga as a discipline. Their *asana* practice was 'hard work', 'really hard', 'challenging', 'torturous', and 'hard yakka'. For example:



It's too much a discipline. There's too much pain involved... it's hard work. I see it as work. (Naomi)

It's work too. And sometimes it's damn hard yakka. It's not pleasure at all. (Sally)

It's a discipline and a treat. (Annie)

There was an appreciation that a certain application of physical and mental effort was required to progress. These and other women's experiences could perhaps offer another explanation as to why their yoga practice was not perceived as leisure, when leisure was predominantly understood to be more pleasurable activities (see Chapter 7.7.1). Discipline was depicted both in terms of the physical and mental effort required to physically remain in the *asana* and, on a more subtle level, to focus one's attention and stay with the body sensations in *asana* practice (also see Chapter Seven).

Discipline is an essential prerequisite for practice in order to engage in a long-term project of 'the self'. Yet some of the participants related their ideas about discipline to their knowledge of yoga as an Eastern practice that presented a different point of view from their understanding of what Western 'practices' offered:

I think that's the interesting thing that in the West we buy everything and we think it's immediate, so yoga you can't buy, you have just got to do it, and it's not immediate. (Fiona)

Yoga really underlines that we're all responsible for ourselves and it takes a lot of energy and work... yoga really fits into that picture that you can't do it over night and you can't get some one else to fix you (Naomi)

Gillian said, 'It's the journey, and it's what you're doing in your own practice, being you... and you realise... it's a long path'. Their viewpoints encapsulate the group's *habitus*, demonstrated in their ability to have an interest in, and maintain, a long-term project of 'the self' via a regular yoga practice. However, this relationship was not always

a positive one. Kelly and Holly spoke of an addictive side to their relationship with yoga. Both believed they had not yet found the correct balance in their practice. Kelly described her relationship with yoga as ‘an obsession’. Holly was ‘too scared’ not to practice. She said:

I’m a bit frightened that I’d not come back to it [yoga], because there’s an element of needing to be very disciplined and needing to be not afraid of applying yourself where it’s actually not comfortable... I suspect that I’m somewhere down the end of the spectrum that’s too disciplined... So I’m not very happy that I haven’t been able to stop practicing and feel okay about it. (Holly)

Kelly and Holly’s responses implied a strong desire for self-control, and an idea of how they wished to present themselves to the external world; also related to their *habitus*. The primary intention was ‘to become’ a better functioning individual, and thereby improve their potential, even though Kelly and Holly felt they were ‘too disciplined’ and had not yet found the correct balance in their practice. For Vera, her experiences provided some insight into the intention of a disciplined yoga practice was to take responsibility for ‘the self’:

Your practice is your own and the journey is your own really... they [the teachers] don’t want you to be too dependent... I get that feeling from things that they do, like they’ll never come up to you and say ‘Oh that’s good’, even if I can see that I’m improving ... I found it difficult to reconcile for a little while, but then I did understand that it was about me taking on the responsibility myself. (Vera)

Vera’s quote also provides some insight into the nature of yoga’s process. Although to some extent it draws parallels with Giddens’ reflexive project, requiring a committed effort, physical training and exertion of willpower (see also Whicher 1998b), it also implies the intention behind the discipline is of a more subtle nature.

The fully-engaged practitioners, as well as the more committed serious part-timers, also spoke of feeling ‘guilty’ when they did not find the time to practice yoga. Leonie said, ‘I

often don't give it priority so I'm at the end of the day thinking 'Oh God', I haven't done any yoga today'. Similarly Gillian said:

I actually think about yoga... It's with you all the time and you're always thinking... I haven't done a practice this morning... I'm thinking about coming home and when I will do it... That feeling... that Geeta [Iyengar] talks about. The anxiety of your practice that you have to have. (Gillian)

According to Geeta Iyengar (2001), 'anxiety' refers to an internal desire that ensures the practitioner has the 'passion' to maintain a regular practice. The *Yoga Sutras* refer to a practitioner's internal desire as *tapas* (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993, 20). It describes self-discipline as a devotional or spiritual practice that is intended to purify the body, not as a means to perfect the outer, external body, but to prepare the inner body for 'the Self' (i.e., the Divine, the spirit, the soul, *Atman*) (Iyengar B.K.S. 1993). It might be that Gillian refers to discipline of a more subtle nature than Giddens' reflexive project. Woodman (1990, 104) suggests that discipline of a more philosophical nature means to be receptive to 'see ourselves through the eyes of another. When we are mirrored in the eyes of someone who loves us and accepts us in our essence, our soul is released'. A disciplined practice intends to control the body, mind and senses so that a certain level of awareness is maintained in daily life. As previously mentioned, a disciplined practice of Iyengar yoga was necessary to maintain a certain level of awareness in daily life.

The discipline of returning to a daily practice was identified as a constant in the lives of the participants. There was an element of stability that these women could return to in their practice. Garrett (2001, 334-5) describes her experiences of the yoga process as a 'ritual' and suggests that yoga practitioners are attracted to the practice because of a belief that the 'regular performance of the ritual will somehow change them'. Grace, who was experiencing difficulties in life, said, 'Yoga has been wonderful to have as that constant... and helped me... enormously because it's been a constant'. Her experiences imply a more subtle level of awareness that embrace the 'ritualistic' nature of practice, a place where she could experience a more embodied and constant sense of self.

Many of the serious part-timers found attending their yoga class and having their teacher tell them what to do was necessary to attain a certain level of awareness and focus in their practice. Lisa said:

I need the discipline of being in a class... I like the passivity of having [the teacher] say do this, do that. My mind could go into a complete sort of other state and I really could turn inwards and just focus on what she is telling me to do. (Lisa)

Expanded levels of awareness were reported as central to the self-transformation experienced in other areas of the practitioners' lives (c.f. Travis & Pearson 2000). The nature of the 'discipline' referred to by a number of the women drew from both internal (yoga process) and external (body project) influences.

For the serious part-timers and the fully-engaged practitioners alike, experiences from yoga were closely intertwined with other aspects of life. Grace said, 'I feel I'm utilising it in everyday living almost constantly'. Mary described yoga as 'an intertwined part' of her daily life. Phoebe said, 'I regard yoga as part of the fabric of my life', and for Terrie, 'The level of commitment has changed... now it's become part of my life'. Attitudes towards their yoga practice were similar, regardless of whether they practiced once a week or every day. Two of the fully-engaged practitioners said:

It's like eating. I'm thinking about it all the time. It's my way of life... It's just how I live and breathe... it's part of the cells of my body. (Sally)

It's an essential thing in my life... I find in some ways it's surprising because I grew up and my interests I suppose were intellectual... somehow or another at this stage of my life I find myself ending up as a yoga devotee and it's something that's central to my life. (Gillian)

The evolving nature of the yoga 'process' was often depicted as a 'journey':

I'm much more interested in the inner journey which yoga takes you on. (Linda)

[Yoga's] constantly opening to me... It's changing so I'm kind of on this journey with yoga'. (Leonie)

Linda and Leonie's journeys' were directly related to their experiences of their physical practice. The effects of their practice permeated every aspect of their 'being'. As well as having the discipline to aspire towards certain external goals ('becoming'), discipline was also 'fired' by a desire to maintain a certain level of awareness ('being'). One is not used to the exclusion of the other; there is an interplay of the two. As mentioned, maintaining a disciplined practice was also made more likely because of the *habitus* of this particular group of women. They exhibited a strong sense of agency, which perhaps is also indicative of the values from which their feelings of 'guilt' arose when they did not practice (see above). From a yogic perspective, expanding awareness ('being') further maintained their discipline, driven by 'becoming' of a more internal nature.

In general, the longer the women practiced yoga, the more important yoga became in their lives. Yoga practice permeated many aspects of their lives to the extent that many of the women were unable to imagine not having yoga in their lives:

I would never like to be without it [yoga]. (Hannah)

I sort of can't live without it [yoga]. (Annie)

To me yoga's... a part of my being, part of my life that I wouldn't like to see me not being able to do it. (Simone)

If there was a reason why I couldn't do it [yoga] I'd be really devastated... it's incredibly important. It's part of me... It makes me be the way I am... it's just a given in my life... It's just part of the way I live my life. (Harriet)

Although the practice of Iyengar yoga had a profound impact on the majority of the participants, Vera and Clare's relationship with yoga was less significant. Vera was concerned that the yoga school she attended was moving to a different location, which would make it harder for her to attend classes. She expressed her desire to attend two classes a week as indicative of the importance she placed on her practice. Clare described yoga as 'fairly important' to her, but she did not like to miss her yoga class. Vera and Clare were also the least experienced yoga practitioners amongst the group (both attended one yoga class a week and had been practicing yoga for between 2-4 years).

The majority of the participants reported they were more content in the present because of their yoga practice (c.f. Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 311). Many of the women described experiences of contentment that were detached from external successes, failures and future aspirations. With practice, they were able to access feelings of contentment from within. Several women linked yoga's process with a happiness that was not linked to materialism (c.f. Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 318). Happiness was an experience of 'being':

I struggle with my bourgeois inner self basically... I know that the happiness and joy... becomes part of your life from doing yoga practice, that doesn't come from something else. (Fiona)

And it's from that place that I try and be with the wider world. It's like what's happening in my inner world is reflected out there. And it's the only way I've ever discovered to feel happy. (Sally)

Yoga gives you contentment... I don't mean to sound pompous, but in thinking about it, it becomes so important... I don't want to be a corporate executive... If you have a strong practice... those sorts of things of the world aren't what you want. (Gillian)

It's about being in the moment and not forcing the moment or the body...working within your own individual idiosyncrasies... in that process. I suppose finding a kind of fulfillment. (Denise)

B.K.S. Iyengar (2005a, 26) suggests that happiness arising from a practice of yoga brings ‘a state of self-reliant contentment. Happiness is good in itself and a basis for progress’. These women had moments when they experienced happiness that was independent of external aspirations towards ‘becoming’. Paranjpe (1998, 236) argues that ‘one who is anchored in “being” here and now need no longer be infatuated with “becoming” happy in the future’. However, these women did not practice yoga with the intention of renouncing their modern lifestyle. This has been shown throughout the empirical chapters in their aspirations for good health, a better quality of life, to be successful at work, and in wanting to make a positive difference in the world. Indeed, the majority of the participants reported that yoga positively contributed to the level of meaning and purpose in their lives (c.f. Hasselle-Newcombe 2005).

Simply put, in keeping with other findings of this study, happiness in the present (‘being’) is experienced together with aspirations to be happy in the future (‘becoming’). Hannah said, ‘To me that’s the real thing, the path of happiness... More positively, happiness is recognised as an important life goal’. A path seeking future happiness (‘becoming’) as Giddens’ project describes, is intertwined with their regular practice of yoga that simultaneously provides experiences of ‘happiness’ by ‘being’ in the present moment.

### **8.3 The yoga process: ‘sameness’ versus ‘change’**

As discussed in Chapter Two, Giddens and classical yoga’s philosophy interpret ‘the true self’ differently. Giddens (1991) describes ‘the true self’ as a ‘constructed self’, a self that ‘becomes’ more authentic via constructing one’s ego; experiences identified by many of the study’s participants (see Chapters Six and Seven). However, a number of women also described ‘a true Self’ that was more representative of an internal and constant sense of identity, a sense of self that is unchanging (c.f. Cornell 2000). As Pamela noted, ‘Yoga gives me a stillness of the mind, which allows me to turn within and be in touch with my true self’.

From a yogic perspective, Paranjpe (1998, 370) suggests that ‘the Self’ is an experience where ‘one always was, is and will remain’. The cultivation of awareness from the mind-body practice of yoga provided the majority of these women with opportunities to experience a sense of self that was a constant and a sense of self they could return to during their practice. Such experiences developed their ability to be an observer of ‘the self’:

It’s very meaningful and something to come back to and that gets integrated in *asana* practice... It’s kind of a primary place that I can observe myself... it gives me a technique for observing myself... or it’s like you can observe yourself from the abstract because you’re observing yourself on the mat, which is detached from the rest of your life, but it gives you techniques that you can use in other places. (Leonie)

It’s actually coming back more into yourself; you become more of an observer. (Grace)

According to Paranjpe (1998, 366), the discovery of ‘the Self’ that is ‘an observer’ is responsible for transforming the individual. Such experiences are not ad hoc; experiences of ‘sameness’ were accessible through a regular practice of Iyengar yoga. For some women, experiences of connecting with ‘the true Self’ were significant in defining who they were (c.f. Cornell 2000). Holly and Wendy said of their relationship between practice and the opportunity for self-exploration:

It’s like a regular revisiting... a chance to look at where I sort of am... to use the medium of the body, and its range of movements, as a vehicle for looking and as a vehicle for learning... my tool for learning and exploring and maintaining or noticing. (Holly)

This is something that I still reflect on quite a lot, of watching myself and watching other people... it’s more that you come face to face with yourself... your attitudes and the way you’re looking at things... it was a very clear mirror, very ruthless in that way sometimes, just showing you who you are and how you approach things. (Wendy)



Experiences of ‘sameness’ and constancy are contrary to experiences of ‘change’ and of ‘becoming’ associated with most other aspects of daily life, and yet, experiences of change of a more subtle nature were also attributed to the participants’ regular practice of yoga. Paranjpe (1998, 75) describes the interrelationship between change and sameness as a paradoxical one. Indeed, a number of the women identified the paradoxical relationship that arose from their yoga practice:

It makes me feel now not alone... it’s a sort of paradox because yoga is aloneness in some ways. It’s only you... you’re in contact with your self and that’s something that you can always rely on and trust. (Wendy)

The process of practicing *asana* provided experiences that were different with each practice even though several women reported returning to an experience of ‘the self’ that was constant. Changing experiences from their practice implied being aware, so that even when the external form of the postures were the same, experiences in executing the *asanas* were always different (see also Chapter 6.5):

The sense that one can do even a simple pose... do it time and time again, and yet find different things in the pose... It’s learning about life... how things are never complete. (Phoebe)

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 (Leonie)

Everyone has their own journey to do... The *asanas* being vehicles for exploration and a tool to use... that’s not just a concept for me, it’s real! It’s a reality I think and for me every day is an exploration. (Wendy)

Wendy describes her *asana* practice as a ‘tool’ that assisted her in situations both on and off the yoga mat. The more subtle level of changes that were experienced during their

regular *asana* practice became a tool for self-exploration. Holly and Gillian described the role of awareness in this process:

It's [yoga] a bit of a something that's always there on one's journey... suddenly you're doing that [yoga] again and then there's that tiny little bit that you got this morning... correspondence between here and here [points to mind and body]... that will be with me all day... a millimetre of learning everyday... usually throughout the practice there will be something that comes and it's definitely not a decision of mine or a plan; some little bit of insight... Another little step in that journey. (Holly)

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 and we only just touch on that sometimes. (Gillian)

According to Shusterman (2000), practices like yoga work because the body is at the centre of the experience, and experiences of the body are always in the present moment. For the fully-engaged practitioners in particular, but not limited to them, being more aware influenced all aspects of their lives:

Daily life is so demanding, and it's so easy to be dragged back into the future, to the past. And so the best thing you can do is go and do a practice and be in your practice, and then the benefits you feel you can take out into the world. (Gillian)

It's like in a lot of things... moments that you get where they're quite transformative, where you see things clearly and then they're just sort of little day-to-day things... then there're also... quite big moments of clarity or something that transforms the way I look at things... It's more the practice... makes some of those things available to me and it puts me in the right frame of mind to notice certain things more. (Wendy)

I want to be an eighty year old that still stands on my head and all the rest of it too... how else do you get to be upside down, if you don't do yoga... Metaphorically, how else do

you get another perspective on life... I love that it's got... that metaphorical dimension to it... you get a much bigger frame in life. (Leonie)

I'm always astonished by how [my teacher] can find new ways (of teaching postures)... It's coming from your own awareness... that's a nice learning for life really, how things can change while apparently staying the same. (Phoebe)

These women and others reported how yoga transformed their experiences of many aspects of life.<sup>1</sup> Changes to 'the self' were often identified after a period of time. For example, Lois discovered she became aware of changes to her 'being' some time after they had occurred. She said, 'I will only be able to reflect back on it later... I was there but now I'm here. But I see that more and more. I see that as just being'. The fully-engaged practitioners in particular identified the importance of practicing regularly and remaining 'in tune' with 'the self' and maintained a certain level of awareness. In the *Yoga Sutras*, it is stated that a sustained commitment to practice is required in order to modify and change one's perspectives and responses to life situations (see Iyengar, B.K.S 1993; Paranjpe 1998). According to Wendy, one of the most experienced yoga practitioners interviewed:

All the classical texts will say just practice... it all gets down to practice because it's through practice that the practice changes your outlook, it changes your body so that certain things no longer work for you or they have a strong effect on you. You notice those effects through your practice, just having to get up and practice every day you notice your resistance and you notice when you're more tired, and so you notice how the day before affects how you are today... classically, it's very simple, you just need to practice. (Wendy)

Wendy indicated that her practice had not changed much in terms of the *asanas* practiced over the years. She said, 'The practice would not be posture wise so different but I pay more attention'. Even after many years of practicing yoga, the *asana* practice was central

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<sup>1</sup> Henderson and Bialeschki (1987, 25) also found that women's experiences of outdoor courses became a metaphor for life. As they gained strength and confidence from participation in outdoor activities they were able to transfer their experiences into other areas of their lives.

to all of the participants' experiences of yoga. Practice was the process where these participants had experiences of a self that continued to change and a self that remained constant.

#### **8.4 Is yoga a spiritual or philosophical practice?**

In classical yoga, a disciplined practice is said to transform the individual physically, mentally, morally, and 'spiritually' (Iyengar B.K.S. 1991 (1966); 1993; 2005a).<sup>2</sup> The experiences of almost half of the participants reported that their yoga practice had a spiritual dimension. These findings support those of Hasselle-Newcombe (2005, 312), who reports that almost half of her study's yoga practitioners identified a spiritual dimension to their practice. For several women (in particular the fully-engaged practitioners), the spiritual aspect of their practice reflected the evolving nature of their practice over time (c.f. Thomas, Tori, Thomas & Mehta 2000):

One of my two classic reasons for starting yoga was to become more flexible and to become de-stressed... the changes for me when I look back are absolutely dramatic even in the last five years... the philosophical side, the *pranayama* (breathing) are becoming more important to me now... In the same way that Mr. B.K.S. Iyengar himself has presented things over the years... I think it's just the normal evolution. (Isabel)

Whether it's the mat or my experience or now my understanding that yoga has given me... it's much more of a spiritual insight. It's very secure and that's been incredibly helpful. It makes me feel very safe. (Leonie)

It's become the core of my life really... [Yoga] provides a structure not just for practice, but for spiritual and emotional well-being... the tools to do more. (Fiona)

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<sup>2</sup> Leisure offers opportunities to explore more philosophical perspectives including 'spirituality' (Godbey 1997; Heintzman 1999; Kleiber 2000; Smith 1996). A substantial amount of literature reports that spiritual experiences arise, for example, in wilderness and natural leisure settings (see Heintzman 2000; McDonald 1991; Zuefle 1999).

Yoga... goes a lot deeper actually into the sort of fabric of your daily life... a mental state of well-being and acceptance and hopefully being able to incorporate that into a lot of aspects of daily life... it's sort of spiritual nourishment (Denise)

It was common for spiritual experiences to be associated with moments of 'being'. Gillian and Hannah said of their experiences:

It's seeking, a path, finding the oneness that you just sometimes can glimpse in *pranayama*... that absolute peace and stillness when it's all you and it's not you. (Gillian)

[Yoga] has that sort of spiritual component... we do not necessarily experience it all the time...when you experience that transcending... you experience that clear mind which is another experience that I couldn't explain. (Hannah)

Spiritual experiences were moments when these women observed a 'transcending', and a 'oneness'. As Hannah and Gillian noted, they were salient 'moments' in their overall experiences of yoga. Paranjpe (1998, 161) argues that such experiences represent a '[t]ranscognitive state, and as such cannot be adequately accounted for in terms of concepts and words' (Paranjpe 1998, 161). For example, Lois and Wendy said:

Dealing with the things that I deal with is much easier... there's a knowing, a trust... which I think gets back to spirit... rather than the human form, which is the more materialistic. It's always just faith or belief. (Lois)

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. (Wendy)

These women's experiences concur with earlier findings (see Chapter Seven) that such experiences are contrary to Giddens' existential interpretation of the world. Instead, such experiences acknowledged a 'higher power', or a 'transcending', indicative of a level of

consciousness that was different to ‘normal’ everyday experiences. For some, these experiences were described as spiritual.

Prior to practicing yoga, Naomi’s understanding of spirituality was secular and closely linked to nature. Naomi’s yoga experiences reinforced her existing beliefs, and the cultivation of awareness enhanced her appreciation what was spiritual for her:

[Yoga] just makes me more aware of what I’m doing and do it more carefully... awareness that’s all... I’ve just got a reverence for whatever life is... God is in everything but I don’t have a separate God. For me moving through the world needs to be thought about so I don’t change or disturb that specialness... I’m just a little part and I don’t want to have a bad effect on it. (Naomi)

Naomi’s quote is also representative of those participants for whom spirituality was important prior to their beginning a regular yoga practice. Their yoga practice supported an existing spiritual belief. Those women with prior spiritual beliefs were more likely to define experiences from practicing yoga as spiritual (c.f. Heelas 1996; Hasselle-Newcombe 2005).

Gillian’s quote on page 195 captures qualities of ‘becoming’, when she describes yoga as a ‘path’, and a ‘seeking’. Being on a spiritual path implies an *intention* to embrace ideas and values of ‘becoming’ more spiritual. For Sally and Alison, yoga also supported an existing belief system:

I always had that desire. I just didn’t know how to find it... it’s the great Indian teaching that you’re already enlightened, it’s just that you’ve forgotten... My first yoga class... really sold me to the whole package... it has just grown from that... my spiritual understanding is much greater than it used to be. But it was a yearning that was always there. (Sally)

I do have a conscience and I do have a sense of what’s right and wrong and so I’m developing and again learning that path... [yoga’s] assisting me to find where I’m going

spiritually... I've always been interested... it's [yoga's] for me to find my... higher power. (Alison)

The intention here is not to specifically examine how the participants define spirituality, but rather to determine in what way spirituality is experienced in their yoga practice (see also Hasselle-Newcombe 2005). In general terms, those women who assigned a spiritual dimension to their practice, broadly interpreted their understanding of spirituality as a universal being, of a God within and a connectedness with nature and/or the cosmos (c.f. Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 313). Spirituality was experiential, linked to their practice rather than to a broader doctrine or belief system normally associated with organised religions (c.f. Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 315).

In Irigaray's (2002) opinion, Eastern practices like yoga have the potential to overcome the patriarchy and dogma associated with many Western religious traditions. Heelas (1996) and Irigaray (2002) suggest that women in particular are drawn towards spiritual practices like yoga because of its 'detraditionalised nature', thereby overcoming possible problems of dogma and domination, while enabling the development of an individualistic type of spirituality. This could perhaps explain why a number of women felt the individual nature of spirituality depicted in Eastern traditions better suited their needs than the Christian religions associated with their upbringing:

I've always been interested in Buddhism... I am aligned with that much more closely than I am with Western religions... I never liked the Christian philosophies, except I suppose the generosity and sharing... the thing about being selfless I can relate to. (Linda)

I was brought up in Christian tradition really, but not as a big church goer... I quite like that... there's a foundation around a set of principles around interpersonal relationships... I like that I have a [yoga] practice that has that dimension in it. (Leonie)

It's sort of my religion... I'm not religious... I believe in worshipping nature and the life force and yoga sort of brings me closer to anything that could be called religion... being

interconnected with everything... you're getting into that higher level of consciousness, you feel as though there's something else besides your body in this life. (Pamela)

I guess some people have their religion or have other means of spirituality, but I'd say yoga has been mine so it has been very important to me. (Grace)

De Michelis (2004, 207) argues that the modern practice of yoga has 'progressively adapted to suit the spirit of modernity and secularisation'. Heelas (1996, 173-4) describes modern experiences of spirituality as 'a celebration of what it is to be and to become'. 'To be' depicts experiences of oneness, of a higher level of consciousness and of connectedness. 'To become' supports many of these women's broader philosophical aspirations to make a positive difference in the world (see Section 8.6).

Although half of the practitioners strongly felt their yoga practice incorporated a spiritual dimension, the other half had no spiritual aspirations (c.f. Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 316). Lesley had a spiritual dimension in her life, but her experiences of yoga were not spiritual:

I've my own philosophies on life and spirituality and I'm not negating the yoga one... I certainly don't look for a spiritual connection there... what I feel is my spirituality and it's a connection to the land... I think my spirituality is walking lightly on this earth and protecting it... So that's perhaps a little more tangible than what I might expect out of yoga spirituality. (Lesley)

Vicky did not identify her experiences of yoga as spiritual. She said, 'I don't think so, no more than was probably there. I suppose because I don't go into it deep enough'. For some participants, their preconceptions about spirituality were contrary to their experiences of yoga. Alice had no 'spiritual' connection with her yoga practice. She said, if her teacher 'was into that kind of thing' she would 'be off' and added 'it just was not for her'. Vera said, 'I don't think I really know what people mean when they talk about spirituality'. Jackie's response was similar; 'I really don't know what that [spirituality]



means; that's not... the way I define my life or look at life really'. She added, 'I don't go and seek a spiritual experience and I don't seek spiritual enlightenment'.

For these women, 'spirituality' was associated with more conventional religious interpretations, which, as Irigaray (2002) notes, are often associated with dogma, tradition, and the written word, rather than with direct experience. Lois' understanding of what was spiritual for her continued to reveal itself to her during the interview. She said, 'If you had said to me the benefit of yoga to my spiritual life... I would've probably said... that's not what I get from Iyengar but maybe it's more subtle'. She continued:

I've just become aware in the things that I've said... It isn't something... you get up in the morning and you say I'm going to be more spiritual. It's like evolution. It just happens... what it probably means to me is really what I do on a day-to-day basis and how best I serve humanity... if I go out to be truly present for others without giving up of myself then I have become more spiritual, haven't I? (Lois)

Fields (2001), Feuerstein (2003a) and Irigaray (2002) all argue that the rational thinking of the educated Western mind leaves little room to comprehend spirituality. Perhaps this could explain why Evelyn, Harriet and Evelyn were uncomfortable with the concept, and considered the term spirituality beyond the realm of their comprehension. Harriet said spirituality was 'too complicated' and not something she wished to get involved with. Holly did not associate her experiences of Iyengar yoga as spiritual. She said:

I don't have a strong sense of spirituality... I'm not a religious person in that traditional sense. I mean words like intuition or just general developing one's sensibilities would be about as close as I would get to it. (Holly)

Even some of those participants who linked their yoga practice with their spirituality had difficulty defining and understanding what it meant to them. As Leonie and Grace put it:

Sometimes the *asana* practice would sit much more in that kind of exercise realm than it would as a spiritual discipline, and sometimes I'm really clear; I understand that I experience it as spiritual. (Leonie)

The line between emotions and spirit is something... I wouldn't be able to articulate... you can be calm but you recognise that there's even more going on. I don't know how to express that. The belief system can be so multi-factual in its impact on your life. (Grace)

Kelly was not convinced her long-term practice of yoga had contributed towards a life for her that was more spiritual. In her opinion, to be influenced spiritually, she would need to practice yoga more frequently, read more philosophy, and be on definite path of spirituality:

I don't really understand so much about it [spirituality]... I'm sort of open to listen to what anyone says, but I am not very directed or convinced myself on spiritual philosophy. (Kelly)

What is of note is that even those women who did identify with the term spirituality, referred to experiences that could be interpreted as spiritual, when spiritual is understood as a practice of awareness:

I think mine's [spirituality] about moving as much as anything. All of those things can stimulate the part of the brain which does that thing of feeling of oneness and well-being. (Jackie)

Sometimes in the shoulder stand you get that wonderful feeling of floating... there's this lightness... it's wonderful; you get this feeling of space and lightness, and calmness. (Evelyn)

It's beyond the dimension of feelings in the emotional language. Definitely a dimension that doesn't really relate to language... The learning process, too, is close to spirituality for me, that idea of... transformation... that sense of overcoming... that learning process of perhaps expanding what we're capable of. (Holly)

These women's experiences depict a level of consciousness, a level of awareness that is different to normal everyday experiences, even though for them this did not translate into a spiritual experience. For Phoebe and Morag, their yoga teachers embodied what spiritual was:

The most sense I have of a spiritual connection is actually the limited contact I have with [my teacher]... she has an aura about her... So that's really where I notice the spiritual.  
(Phoebe)

I can understand why people who do a lot of yoga have this aura about them as being very peaceful and calm people. (Morag)

Even though half of the women in the study reported a spiritual dimension of their yoga practice, none of them actually sought 'spiritual enlightenment' (c.f. Strauss 2005). Heelas (1996, 186) suggests that for 'converts' to activities like yoga spirituality is integrated with other values and components of their lives. This reflects very modern notions of spirituality. In a modern context, yoga is described as a process to get in touch with 'the self' and 'expand' one's potential (c.f. Heelas 1996; Irigaray 2002). The yoga practice of the participants was an adjunct to other aspects of their Western lifestyles. Moreover, the *habitus* of these women included having the time, money and energy to pursue practices like yoga, which creates opportunities to be contemplative and explore their spirituality (c.f. Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 320).

### **8.5 'The self' versus 'self-for-other'**

Heelas (1996, 206) proposes that the 'expressivists' face an ongoing struggle with their ego in modern life, where being aware of the ego and aiming to lessen the pull of the ego is part of the process of becoming more responsible for 'the self'. A number of the women in this study expressed this 'struggle' with their ego, and reported that their yoga practice was a means to acquire some control over it:

It gives me some sense of the importance of certain qualities of challenging [my] ego, of having some humility, compassion. They're very important things to me and I'm learning more about them and I can see there's a connection with the yoga practice and what little I know of the philosophy. (Alison)

I'm on that path and I always have been a bit on that path of wanting to get rid of the ego... and live in the present and also help or be a shining light to others... yoga's again more along that path towards selflessness or egolessness. (Linda)

Evelyn also identified her yoga practice as a means of lessening the hold of her ego. She said, 'You've got to be aware, to let go of ego'. For these women, aspiring to be more selfless existed prior to practicing yoga. The effects from practicing yoga reaffirmed their existing life values and aspirations towards a certain degree of selflessness, and cultivated experiences that enabled them to let go of their ego (c.f. Heelas 1996; Strauss 2005). In Paranipe's (1998) opinion, Eastern disciplines such as yoga 'work' to overcome the ego, and this is seen in the countless testimonies of individuals who have become more 'selfless' or 'egoless' as a result of practicing yoga.

Garrett (2001, 336) suggests that yoga, like other rituals, has 'a dual potential'. Personal practices can be used to construct the ego with the aim of acquiring personal power, or it can be used to lessen the ego and focus one's attention on engaging with others. In her opinion, the cultivation of awareness from practice has the potential to foster experiences of connectedness with human experience more generally, creating opportunities to 'maintain self-in-connection-with-others that is also a self-for-others' (Garrett 2001, 339). However it appears that what actually arose from the women's experiences of practicing Iyengar yoga was a tension between the two perspectives that Garrett proposes. It is not a simple matter of 'either-or', but as the empirical chapters show, this is a group of women who value and make time for self, even though at times there were constraints imposed upon them. They exhibit a significant level of autonomy and independence, albeit to various degrees. Simultaneously, and somewhat paradoxically, their aspirations also place importance on becoming selfless so they can be there for others. The reasons Hannah and Gillian practiced yoga incorporated both a personal quest

‘to transform their *own* lives’, as well as a shared desire to be able to give to *others* (see also Heelas 1996, 203-4):

I feel as if unless I can contribute to that in some way my life would be meaningless... at the end of the day even though I’m doing these things in life to make myself happy and get what I need... I’m not actually running out there and being a mad activist. At least I can say that I try to live an ethical life and influence the people that live around me and it really helps when you do that... if you can influence... a small amount of people around you, and that’s enough. (Hannah)

I think detachment is what you need to learn, detachment at a personal level and at a larger level... It’s detachment from liking or disliking someone. It’s just doing the best for yourself that you can or for someone else. (Gillian)

It is impossible to know to what extent experiences of yoga contributed to their perceived levels of self-transformation, primarily because of the participants’ ageing process generally, and their *habitus* more specifically. Lois felt as if she was coming to a time in her life where she was becoming less attached to some of the things she used to consider important to her. Through her yoga practice, the ability to be more aware had made it easier for her to ‘observe’ what was important:

The values, everything shifted, but I like the shift... [to] have a simple life because maybe that’s more important to me, to just simplify everything I do. And as I said, I still do make it hard for myself sometimes; but I’m endeavouring to try to keep it simple. (Lois)

As noted, such aspirations are easier for those who have the time, and energy to pursue higher values, namely the middle-classes (see also Heelas 1996; Hasselle-Newcombe 2005). For several of the long-term practitioners, their yoga experiences had contributed to a self-transformation towards a ‘self-for-other’:

I think kind of in the obscure way it [yoga] has made me more sort of an ethical person... I've always been pretty ethical... it's kind of clearer that it's [yoga's] an ethical system, it's about a kind of personal ethics about assistance or scrutiny that has ethics within it. (Leonie)

It does become a lot of who you are... The philosophy of yoga... helps me articulate the way I see some things and the way I go about it... I've seen that through practice too. I've seen it to be true in a lot of ways... I'm all for experiencing but just be aware that everything is going to have an effect. (Wendy)

Leonie and Holly also linked their yoga practice as a process to address broader social concerns:

It has become much clearer for me... the relationship between yoga and right action in the world... I'm starting now to see... the relationship between yoga as a sort of a practice that will bring about, not just a personal practice but it's actually a social development practice. (Leonie)

Just knowing that it's [yoga] there as an activity in many people's lives... as a growing community... a way of sort of living and looking at the world. It gives me great optimism that maybe yes... here's some aspect of our society where people are seriously wanting to address big issues. (Holly)

For some of the participants there was a desire for a community where people could be more socially conscious. For three of the participants, this was expressed in their desire to teach yoga to others. Val taught yoga as a way of helping others because she had received so much benefit from her own practice. Lois similarly, had reached a point where she too wanted to share her experiences of yoga with other women. She said:

If I'm this age in mid-life with the health problems and the experiences that I have, that I can see yoga as a way to change my life, then I would like other people to have that same opportunity... for me it means going out there and being in a position to give back to the community. (Lois)

As a group of women with a shared *habitus*, a number of the participants in general terms were concerned with lessening the role of the ego. They expressed an interest in cultivating a ‘self-for-other’, although, as noted, they simultaneously were interested in their agency and self-identity. It is impossible to determine to what extent their values in this matter were a manifestation of their *habitus* (existing ideals) and which were linked to a transformation of self arising from their yoga practice (see Garrett 2001). Nonetheless, according to the more experienced yoga practitioners, ‘being’ transformed ‘the self’ in such a way that the transformation towards a ‘self-for-other’ was acknowledged to be an interweaving of both influences.

### **8.6 A practice of connectedness**

The participants to varying degrees attributed experiences from their yoga practice with cultivating a sense of greater connection with self and a sense of greater interconnectedness with others.<sup>3</sup> For many of the study’s participants, feelings of ‘connectedness’ and ‘inter-relationship’ were directly linked to their yoga practice (c.f. Adashko Raskin 2003). For example, Simone and Evelyn said:

It’s a calmness now that I have... I’ve a better understanding of human nature. And I also would be far more aware now of acceptance and forgiveness... I don’t know if all of that’s attributed to yoga. (Simone)

You can empathise more with people too. If you’re talking to someone you can concentrate more on them and their problems and things. (Evelyn)

Elaine, Pamela, Hannah and Harriet also linked heightened levels of awareness with a greater sense of connectedness with others:

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<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Noad and James (2003, 149) report that practicing Aikido provides participants with a framework to positively connect with their communities.

I think just spending that time on myself allows me that feeling of more awareness of others as well. More awareness itself; somehow or other it follows on that awareness of other people's wishes. (Elaine)

Giving... it's sort of encouraged me to be kind or kinder to people. What you give out you get back... I think it makes you more aware of the way you are and how it reacts on other people. (Pamela)

It sort of changes who you are... instead of taking from life you try to have an orientation of giving for life, giving to other people... that's the major change. You're always aware of what your intentions are behind everything that comes out of your mouth, your reactions and whatever. (Hannah)

The awareness of body shapes really affects the way I can now look at people and be much less judgmental... I'm more appreciative too of difference... a better understanding I think of difference... more tolerant of difference and less judgmental to people. (Harriet)

In keeping with earlier findings, heightened awareness cultivated from practicing Iyengar yoga was attributed to transformations of perspectives that resulted in a greater connection with self and with others for many of the participants. Gillian said:

I think the path of yoga... it's the path that most faiths follow, that it's trying to reach some truth which is beyond a personal experience... to be beyond judgement... to be compassionate, to be detached, that's something that you want to carry over into your daily life and yoga helps you find that. I mean that's a big thing I think to be detached... to be able to love but in a general way. (Gillian)

Gillian's experience reflects yoga's internal process of self-transformation, 'being'; a state 'beyond a personal experience'. This supports the arguments made in Chapter Two, which propose that the external focus of Giddens' project is less likely to result in the cultivation of a person able to pursue a path that is for the betterment of society generally, via love and compassion.



David Bakan (1966 in Paranjpe 1998, 85) proposes that there are ‘two mutually opposing tendencies that simultaneously exist within each individual’ (see also Garrett 2001). On the one hand, there is ‘agency’, representative of Giddens’ (1991) construction of the ego. On the other hand, there is ‘communion’, representative of seeking a connection with others.<sup>4</sup> Paranjpe (1998, 85) suggests that the ‘self-non-self boundaries’ continually contract and expand depending on whether the characteristics of ‘agency’ or ‘communion’ are predominant. The fully-engaged practitioners in particular, but not limited to them, were increasingly drawn to a personal transformation that considered a selfless attitude towards life generally. For them, experiences from practice (‘being’) contributed to further experiences of connection with others (‘becoming’).

The current findings support the work of Carol Gilligan (1982) in that women make ethical decisions in the context of ‘relationship’ or ‘connection’. Perhaps the importance of connection could also explain in part why so many yoga practitioners are female and why the women in this study were attracted to the practice of yoga. This may also explain why more middle-class women are drawn to alternative health practices and seek a more holistic lifestyle (see Gayford 1999). As shown, key characteristics of these women’s *habitus* were distinctly holistic and feminine, and perhaps reflect the ‘feminine *habitus*’ that McNay (1999) suggests is representative of the movements of women into traditionally non-feminine spheres of action. However, more comparative research is needed in this area to determine whether the findings would differ amongst male mid-aged Iyengar yoga practitioners.

For some practitioners, feeling more connected with their social environment was closely related to experiences of a greater connectedness with the natural environment. For Linda, the effects from her yoga practice improved her ability to experience a certain level of awareness and stillness when she was ‘in the bush’. Similarly, Pamela felt more

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<sup>4</sup> From a leisure perspective, Freysinger (1995, 80) also suggests that leisure can be perceived in terms of both community and sharing (affiliation) and integrity and self-determination (agency).

at one with nature, and a greater interconnectedness with other things. Elaine and Sally said:

Yoga has reinforced the importance of unity of self with the natural order of things, which is for me the equal importance of all creatures, not hierarchies, but a place and meaning and balance; appreciation, value, respect for the natural world and my small place within it. Without feeling connected within myself, it is harder for me to connect, to feel at peace and at one with the environment. Yoga helps with that connectedness. (Elaine)

It's consciousness. I always loved going into the bush. I always liked looking at trees. I always liked looking at the sky. But now I have like consciousness... I have a language to describe it not just that it's pretty or beautiful or natural. But I have a spiritual language to discuss it with myself, and to appreciate it with myself and with other people. It's... accessible. It's *Aum!* (Sally)

*Aum* is a Sanskrit word meaning 'universal consciousness'. Sally's use of *Aum* encapsulates the connectedness she experiences with herself and with the environment. Alison and Naomi said:

I've always had an appreciation of the natural beauty and wonder and phenomena of our nature... I don't know if it's awareness, [yoga] increases my awareness, or increases my perception, my clarity... I enjoy the nature and it just seems to be that the philosophy, the science, of yoga embraces that as well. (Alison)

The way I feel about the natural environment makes me attracted to yoga, so it's psychological, but my place in there's an interesting mix of pride and humility in yoga that's very similar to how I feel about nature. There's humility that you're only a speck in this vast universe, but also you can effect change, however small. (Naomi)

For these women, their experiences from yoga reaffirmed existing life and world views, and through the cultivation of awareness they experienced a more subtle connection with the environment. Four women in the study, Val, Harriet, Holly and Clare, did not

experience a specific connection between yoga and the environment. Clare and Holly said:

I think there is such an awareness generally around us that I don't know that I could say that it was the yoga. I think it's just general awareness. (Clare)

I wouldn't say so at all. No, I might just observe animals a bit more closely. (Holly)

As noted in Chapter Five, many of the participants already had an established relationship with the environment, together with a belief that there was a degree of connectedness between human beings and nature. Through the cultivation of awareness, their experiences of the environment were transformed. Their experiences built on an existing affiliation with the environment that resulted in feelings of oneness and connectedness with self and nature. For Garrett (2001, 335) such experiences of connection imply 'spirit', when spirit describes that which binds the cosmos together.

Paranjpe (1998, 187-188) argues that in the yoga process, experiences of 'being' are the catalyst for 'deconstructing' one's ego, as opposed to constructing it. Yoga techniques provide 'tools' for cultivating awareness, 'being' in the present moment, letting go, and detachment (all of which are related). This process, to varying degrees, is acknowledged by the women in the study. In keeping with earlier findings discussed in this thesis, the experiences of many of the women demonstrate the interplay between processes of 'being' (communion) and progress of 'becoming' (agency).

## **8.7 Conclusion**

In keeping with the findings in the previous empirical chapters, a direct relationship between the intensity of yoga practice and the degree to which the effects of practice influenced the lives of the study's participants was noted. The findings of this chapter build on Chapters Six and Seven in discussing the influence that yoga has on the lives of the participants. The findings in this chapter support the findings presented throughout

the empirical chapters. In particular, experiences of ‘becoming’ were intertwined with experiences of ‘being’ and vice versa.

‘Being’ is central to the women’s perceived self-transformations. Most of the participants referred to experiences of awareness, ‘being’ in the present moment, ‘the self’ as an observer, and experiences of stillness, oneness or connection when describing how the yoga process had transformed them. Maintaining a disciplined practice of yoga was essential to their maintaining a certain level of awareness and connection with a sense of self that was more constant. The nature of their yoga practice was a process from which these women developed ‘skills’ to experience ‘the self’ from a more embodied perspective. The nature of their experiences differed from Giddens’ (1991) ‘biographical narrative’ – a process of ‘becoming’, where attention is given to the thought processes of the mind.

Experiences of ‘being’ were also applied to the participants’ projects of ‘becoming’. Important aspirations included responsibility for ‘the self’, being true to oneself, living an ethical life, deconstructing the ego, and connecting with the social and natural environment. In a contemporary lifestyle, Heelas (1996, 169) describes such values as central to notions of ‘perfectability’ indicative of a belief in the potential to make positive change (‘becoming’).

Progress in ‘becoming’ also depicted an internal process, where, in particular, the ‘fully-engaged’ practitioners acquired great proficiency in ‘being’, and thus ‘becoming’ became a more internal process via their experiences of ‘being’ in their yoga practice. At the level of practice, experiences from practicing yoga appeared paradoxical. From one perspective, as Leonie’s opening quote alluded to, practice was always changing. Being aware of more subtle movements and sensations, the women noted that the same pose was experienced differently each time it was practiced. Yet, in their practice, they also returned to an experience of self that was constant. Experiences arising from their practice connected them with ‘the self’ as well as with others and the world. Their experiences appear to support the work of Carol Gilligan (1982), suggesting that women

exhibit relational qualities and experiences of connectedness with others. However, aspects of the group's *habitus* also revealed principles more typically associated with 'masculine' traits. This was reflected in their self-determination, autonomy and agency.

On many levels, the practice of Iyengar yoga cultivates seemingly paradoxical experiences that reflect the interplay between 'being' and 'becoming'. 'Becoming' evolved on two levels: first, internal experiences of 'becoming' via expanded levels of awareness 'being'; and second, external experiences of 'becoming' that are more aligned with Giddens' reflexive project.

## CHAPTER NINE

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The bridge to be crossed is after all *within* us; on the one side is the Being that affords the experience of the unmistakable sameness of the ‘I’, while on the other side is the “Me” that does not cease to clothe itself in ever-new garb (‘becoming’) (Paranjpe 1998, 371).

#### 9.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the main findings of the thesis, explains the limitations of the study, and describes several avenues for future research.

The aim of this thesis was to critically examine mid-aged women’s experiences of Iyengar yoga. The study focused on a select group of women with a regular Iyengar yoga practice, with the ultimate goal to determine whether a process of self-transformation arises from their yoga practice. The objectives of the thesis were:

1. To document similarities and differences between the teachings and practice of yoga in the West and the East;
2. To investigate whether the practice of yoga by female Western practitioners is significantly influencing the practice of yoga in the West;
3. To create a profile of the mid-aged women interviewed for the study;
4. To explain why these women at mid-life are practicing Iyengar yoga;
5. To investigate whether expanding levels of awareness impact on the women’s experiences arising from their regular Iyengar yoga practice;
6. To analyse how and why women’s experiences of Iyengar yoga impact on their conceptions of ‘the self’ and the extent to which their experiences reflect processes of ‘becoming’ (Anthony Giddens’ interpretation of ‘the self’) and states of ‘being’ (yoga’s interpretation of ‘the Self’); and
7. To understand how Western constructions of ‘the self’ fit or differ from Eastern constructions of ‘the Self’ and the ways in which they influence each other.

A paradox arose concerning the nature of ‘the Self’ that is depicted in yoga philosophy, and ‘the self’ that is portrayed in modern societies where Western yoga practitioners reside. In order to explore this paradox, the study examined to what extent experiences and perceptions of ‘the self’ were explained by Giddens’ (Western) reflexive project of self-transformation (self-actualisation) and classical yoga’s (Eastern) conceptions of ‘the Self’ (self-realisation). Thus, the thesis considered the changing nature of ‘the self’ as it was understood through the women’s experiences of Iyengar yoga. What emerged from their stories was an evolving self-transformation, consisting of a perpetual interplay of experiences that drew from both perspectives.

## 9.2 Summary of findings

### 9.2.1 *Seeking alternatives to mainstream life*

A non-random sample of 35 women with a regular Iyengar yoga practice agreed to participate in the study. All of the participants were Caucasian and this is comparable with other research on Western Iyengar yoga practitioners and users of alternative therapies. Findings revealed a widespread interest in health generally and an interest in alternative health choices specifically. They were a group of middle-class, educated and professional women, many of whom were employed, lived in their own homes, and had partners and families. Their occupations were primarily in the ‘service’, ‘helping’ and ‘creative’ professions, and they shared, to varying degrees, a number of similar beliefs and values (see also Heelas 1996).

The group’s shared *habitus* made it more likely that the study’s participants were able to benefit from a number of opportunities created by the conditions of modern living. These women were drawn to similar lifestyles choices, because they did not totally identify with mainstream lifestyle options, and this led to ‘alternative’ ways of doing things. To varying degrees, shared values embraced by the group included self-determination, self-responsibility, happiness, peace, dealing with the ego, living an ethical life, and having a concern for the natural and social environments. These values promote individual notions

of ‘perfectability’, within which yoga can be viewed as an alternative lifestyle to attaining ‘the perfect life’ (see also Heelas 1996; Strauss 2005). Their commitment to similar values also provided the meaning and direction necessary to sustain the effort required to maintain a long-term practice of yoga.

### *9.2.2 The ‘becoming’ of Iyengar yoga*

An intention to improve physical well-being was the primary reason why most of the women commenced their Iyengar yoga practice. Overall, the findings indicated yoga contributed positively to the participants’ physical well-being. The main physical benefits attained were flexibility and strength, and healing and improvements to specific physical conditions and injuries. Ongoing physical ‘progress’ reinforced this group’s sustained commitment to their yoga practice. As a result, their practice became a significant strategy of their overall self-care, which included a desire to age well. They gained confidence and became more positive about their age and the aging process as they made the transition through mid-life. Such aspirations are in keeping with Giddens’ ‘project of the self’, with a focus on planning for the future, to further ‘make one-self’ and ‘become’.

As the participants’ practice progressed, increasing importance was given to the mental and emotional benefits acquired from practice. Such benefits were wide ranging and included the ability to relax and reduced levels of stress. 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 cope with stress. The techniques acquired from yoga were often described as a ‘tool’ or a ‘coping mechanism’ to deal with stress. Thus, practicing yoga fulfilled a very modern function encompassed in Giddens’ (1991) reflexive project; for most of the women, yoga was a practice to cope with the anxiety of modern living. These experiences improved their self-esteem, confidence and self-control, and some were empowered because they perceived these benefits positively impacted on their ability to manage various aspects of their lives.



The participants were a group of women who on the whole believed in the importance of making time for ‘the self’. Most of the women in the group were interested in pursuing a practice that promoted a more internal and stable sense of self-identity. The group’s *habitus* also made it more likely that they had the time and energy available to make time for ‘the self’ and to contemplate broader philosophical and spiritual perspectives. Many of these women placed importance on a spiritual or philosophical component to their lives, even if this spirituality was individually and secularly defined. As Giddens’ reflexive project anticipates, the women in broad terms believed they had the potential to make positive changes in their own lives as well as those of others (‘becoming’).

Thus, many of the women’s stories epitomised Giddens’ (1991) reflexive project that corresponded with the West’s preoccupation with ‘becoming’. The positive outcomes from their practice were substantial and indeed life affirming on many levels. However, notions of ‘becoming’ represented only part of the self-transformation that resulted from their sustained Iyengar yoga practice. It was evident in the stories told that another process of self-transformation took place.

### 9.2.3 *The ‘being’ of Iyengar yoga*

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 practicing yoga. Experiences of ‘being’ described moments when attention was completely focused in the present. Such experiences were described as awareness, stillness, calmness, peacefulness, feeling at one with the universe, contentment, and of transcending everyday states of consciousness. Experiences of ‘being’ arising from the participants’ yoga practice were distinguished from other daily conscious states. They reported that ‘being’ in the present moment slowed down the ‘constant chatter’ of the mind, and allowed some mental space for experiences of stillness. When much of contemporary living is linked to experiences of feeling rushed and being stressed, particularly amongst women (see Robertson & Godbey

1998; Deem & Gilroy 1998), 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'. Ongoing experiences of 'being' were cultivated because the women were committed to a regular practice of yoga over a significant period of time. Heelas' (1996) description of New Age practitioners was useful in categorising the women in relation to the intensity of their yoga practice. The fully-engaged depicted nine of the women with a more committed practice, primarily yoga teachers or trainee teachers, and the serious part-timers were those with a regular practice of yoga, ranging from once a week to daily, with most working in conventional careers.

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. For all of the participants, an ongoing practice was considered essential to experiences of 'being' and for some, to return to a constant sense of self. *Asana*, *savasana* and *pranayama* were the 'tools' to develop self-awareness and the opportunity 'to be' in the present moment. Many women attested to how their practice trained the mind to be still. Experiences of stillness developed the capacity 'to be' more present in their lives and were connected with a greater access to feelings of happiness and contentment in the present time. Almost half of the participants described these experiences as 'spiritual'. According to Eastern traditions of yoga, awareness and experiences of connectedness and union are depicted as spiritual (see Chapter Two). This is not surprising when reminded of yoga's traditional definition – to connect, to bind, to join, union. Even when yoga was not understood to be a spiritual practice, it offered an experiential practice that for many women cultivated experiences of connectedness and 'oneness' with 'the self', with others and the universe at large. 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 (see Paranjpe 1998). For the more accomplished practitioners, 'being' became increasingly significant in all aspects of their lives.

#### 9.2.4 'Being' and 'becoming'

Giddens' project proposes that the narrative of the mind, the mental expertise, provides the means for change and transformation. As the empirical chapters show, many of the reasons this group of women chose to practice yoga concurred with Giddens' reflexive project, and yet they encountered a very different process than the one depicted by Giddens. Several women described the nature of their self-transformation as experiences that were 'beyond' the mind. Giddens' existential stance does not provide for the possibility of an altered state of consciousness, for experiences beyond thought, for experiences of 'being'. A significant transformation that arose from the participants' yoga practice, was an experience that dissolved the boundaries of subject-object, mind-body. This was quite a departure from Giddens' descriptive project of the self that relies solely on mental expertise, in a dualistic relationship between the body and the mind.

From an Eastern perspective, the women's experiences were different to Giddens' 'biographical narrative' designed to cultivate an ongoing process of 'becoming'. Conversely, experiences of 'being' were significant to the majority of women interviewed. Through their yoga practice, the participants were conscious of being 'a witness' or 'an observer' to 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. Behaviour changes occurred because as awareness permeated the mind-body, the women became more aware of 'the self' from an embodied perspective. The nature of this self-transformation differs from both Bourdieu's *habitus* (where embodied habit patterns are pre-existing) and Giddens' reflexive self (where transformation arises through the mind). The practice of yoga provides the techniques to look within. As seen from the perspectives of the women who were interviewed, a transformation of 'the self' provided opportunities 'to be'.

As argued in Chapter Seven, a possible shortcoming of Giddens' (1991) 'body project' is his preference for 'becoming', without providing specific techniques to cultivate a more

embodied state of awareness. Giddens' draws ideas from the New Age movement in his description of the reflexive nature of the individual. His focus for self-transformation is an individual's biographical narrative that continually assesses the ongoing thought processes of the mind. Ultimately, Giddens' focus is external, it is not embodied, and the primary focus is directed to the construction of the ego and 'becoming'. Although Giddens highlights a central role of awareness, without a mind-body practice, such as yoga, awareness may not necessarily develop to the extent that fosters experiences of 'being', especially if it is understood that such experiences are necessary for self-transformation to occur. However, the experiences of the participants reveal another paradoxical dimension.

#### *9.2.5 The paradox of 'being' and 'becoming'*

For the participants, the opportunity to experience 'being' in the present moment created a 'balance' from the pressures often associated with 'becoming'. Yet paradoxically, 'being' impacted on their aspirations of 'becoming'. As levels of awareness permeated the mind-body, the women's experiences led to a greater connection with 'the self'. They experienced the body as a process as opposed to a physical object. This transformation of perspective lessened the emphasis given to their physical appearance and fostered a positive sense of 'being' that contributed to a healthier relationship with their bodies (c.f. Franzoi 1995; Daubenmeir 2002). Their bodies 'worked' and 'functioned'. In an age when the pressures on women, and indeed men, to continually strive, progress and 'become' are known to be overwhelming, yoga cultivated experiences of 'being' that facilitated greater self-acceptance and contentment in the present.

Experiences of 'becoming' did not become irrelevant; rather, experiences of 'being' facilitated the participants' ability to 'become'. For example, all 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. Many women noted 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. 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.

In summary, practicing yoga cultivated experiences of ‘being’. The effects of ‘being’ were positively transferred to effect change and ‘become’ in everyday life. Practicing yoga provided a degree of ‘balance’ between the interplay of seemingly contradictory worlds of materialism and inner contentment. There exists an intricate relationship between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. This thesis documented the interplay between these two processes.

#### *9.2.6 Process, progress and practice*

Paranjpe (1998, 184) proposes that ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ constitute a dialectical pair such that ‘one defines the other and derives its very meaning from that other’. 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. 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*. Thus ‘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.

The experiences of the participants concur with De Michelis' (2004, 251) descriptive account of the evolution of modern yoga in the West as a means to 'harmonise and connect tradition and modernity, revelation and rationality, the sacred and the profane'. According to Paranjpe (1998, 371), the East has a tradition of self-realisation, possibly to the neglect of self-actualisation; in the West, the opposite is true. Nevertheless, he is of the opinion that East and West are representative of the individual at all times. He connects the two opposing philosophies using the analogy of a 'bridge':

East and West are the two sides of everyone at all times. Being on that bridge is simply to realise that East and West are as inevitable a pair as Being and Becoming (Paranjpe 1998, 371).

The current study showed that the women's experiences from practicing Iyengar yoga were an intricate interplay of 'being' and 'becoming'. For the majority of them, experiences of 'being' and 'becoming' continued to transform, at the level of practice and at the level of experience in other aspects of daily life. The cultivation of 'being' and 'becoming' from the practice of Iyengar yoga ensured that the study's participants experienced healthier, more balanced, connected and contented lives.

### **9.3 Returning to the question of 'why women?'**

Broadly, the findings suggest that what attracted these participants to maintain their yoga practice was an impulse similar to that traditionally assigned to yoga's practice; to become free from suffering. As Strauss (2005, 138) so aptly states, a Western modern yoga practice is '*new* theory with *old* practice'. The modern practice of Iyengar yoga upholds the tradition of expanding one's awareness through a disciplined practice and cultivates experiences of 'being', but, as explained, the effects of practice translate into very different goals for the modern yoga practitioner.

Traditionally, acquiring self-realisation in yoga required giving up worldly life. However, the participants had no interest in renouncing their middle class lives as a result of their

yoga practice. They integrated seemingly contradictory influences into their lives. Interestingly, as mentioned in Chapter Three, B.K.S. Iyengar is a ‘householder yogi’ and Iyengar yoga is a lay practice, where one can participate while remaining immersed in modern life. Perhaps, particularly for these women, the way that the practice of yoga has evolved has made its practice both desirable and manageable. These women juggle many demands, such as work and family, and find time for their practice. The nature of practice means that they can continue to participate in their chosen lifestyles in modern society.

The women’s stories contribute towards an understanding of how yoga is experienced by mid-aged contemporary women. The participants’ pre-existing dispositions, their *habitus*, which included their age, class, education, social meanings, values and life view, probably made yoga particularly attractive to this particular group. They assigned the nature of their transformational experiences to the effects arising from a committed practice of Iyengar yoga, which supported existing values and qualities associated with their shared *habitus*. The fact that yoga is process orientated enabled these women to make their practice their own via their experiences. It is also possible because of the shared *habitus* of the group, that the language and nature of these women’s experiences describes a very specific kind of self. Could the findings of this study reflect the *habitus* of all or most mid-aged, serious Iyengar yoga practitioners? Perhaps a group from a different background would produce a very different range of experiences. Indeed, would another *habitus* provide the incentive, motivation and discipline to maintain a long-term yoga practice?

Perhaps the question of ‘why women?’ can also be understood as part of a broader trend that has seen educated, middle-class women express an interest in alternative therapies in a shift towards concepts of health that are more feminine and holistic. The trend corresponds with the evolution of, and indeed an affiliation between, the uptake of Eastern practices like yoga by the middle classes. As noted in Chapter Three, Troeltsh (1931 in De Michelis 2004, 71) describes practices like yoga in the West as the ‘secret religion of the middle classes’. De Michelis (2004, 125) argues that yoga’s popularity in the West has arisen because it developed within a framework of ‘alternative healing’

discourses. More women than men have embraced alternative ways of healing, and this includes the practice of yoga in the West. It indicates an ongoing trend, when, in Chapter Two, it was noted that even in the early twentieth century, the majority of Vivekananda's disciples were female. However, more research is needed to ascertain why women more than men are attracted to a modern practice of yoga and, as noted above, to examine whether this trend is indeed linked to a more feminine *habitus*.

These women, as a group with a shared *habitus*, found that their experiences of yoga supported values integral to their chosen lifestyle. In addition, the embodied process of their yoga practice transformed aspects of their self-identity and their femininity. The women's stories revealed that yoga redefined certain experiences of femininity in a way that overcame some negative female values. Their experiences arose both from their regular yoga practice, and for some, from the practice of specific female sequences (i.e., pregnancy, menstruation and menopause). Moreover, the process of practicing yoga cultivated experiences that represented 'positive' qualities of both 'traditional' masculine and feminine principles (c.f. Noad & James 2003, 149). In short, the practice of Iyengar yoga was a self-affirming practice.

The experiences of connectedness reported by the participants also supported the work of Gilligan (1982). She suggests that the 'ethic of care' is gender related. Concepts of relationality were central to many of the participants' experiences and these, too, could help explain why women more so than men are attracted to a practice of yoga. Many of the women identified an important aspect of their practice was connectedness to 'the self' as well as a connectedness to others. Perhaps, then, larger numbers of women practice yoga than men because such experiences are particularly healing and empowering, and especially so for women who share a particular *habitus*. Further comparative study is needed between male and female yoga practitioners to explore how women's experiences differ from men's. In addition, it appeared that some of the participants attributed their practice to a self-transformation, which facilitated their ability to find a better balance between caring for 'the self' and caring for others.



#### **9.4 Significance of the study, limitations and recommendations for future research**

This thesis has contributed to existing knowledge regarding the practice of Iyengar yoga in the West and the processes involved in the transformation of ‘the self’. The findings shed some light on mid-aged women who pursue a regular practice of Iyengar yoga. Previous studies on yoga practitioners have focused primarily on the benefits of practicing yoga that draw from Western notions of ‘becoming’. Western yoga studies have largely focused on outcomes (‘becoming’) rather than on the embodied nature (‘being’) of yoga’s practice. Within the practice of Iyengar yoga, the interplay between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ has not been comprehensively researched. This study found Eastern ideals of ‘being’, alongside ‘becoming’, were integral to overall experiences of yoga.

Only when this subjective nature of yoga’s process is explored, can the more subtle influences of awareness and ‘being’ be better understood for people practicing yoga in the West. As a result of this study, the potential exists to investigate more thoroughly some of the differences experienced between those practitioners with a more intense practice, for example yoga teachers, and those who practice yoga once or twice a week. Moreover, owing to the long-term commitment of a number of yoga practitioners, including the practitioners in this study, there exists a range of possibilities for both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies.

Due to the subjective nature of the study, the experiences examined are intentionally broad. Findings are representative of a wide range of experiences, revealed by the women’s stories during their interviews. For the participants, the practice of Iyengar yoga positively made a difference physically, physiologically, mentally and emotionally. Future quantitative research could test a number of the claims made in the current study. Larger studies could verify the potential of Iyengar yoga as an alternative method to improve a wide range of existing physical and physiological conditions. Other issues raised in the study which are worthy of further attention include the impact of yoga on

body-awareness, self-image, self-esteem, self-care, menopause, the aging process, as well as a tool to cope with anxiety and stress, including daily stress and life events.

As shown, the benefits of yoga do come to those women who are disciplined to practice regularly. The current body of work draws from a group for which 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 yoga practitioners. The small sample size is acknowledged as a limitation of the study, as well as the fact that the women self-selected to be involved with the interview process. While the women and their experiences in this thesis are specific to Iyengar yoga, women practicing other styles of yoga may exhibit similar experiences. When 70-80% of yoga practitioners in Australia are women, there remains a substantial opportunity to explore why women are practicing different types of yoga, and whether comparatively they have similar experiences. There is a need for research to examine (1) why some people who commence a practice of yoga drop out after a period of time, and (2) what reasons prevent others from attempting to establish a practice of yoga.

The current research involves a group of women with relatively homogenous demographic characteristics. More research is needed to ascertain whether long-term serious yoga practitioners collectively share the *habitus* of this study’s participants or whether there are women with a long-term serious yoga practice who share a different *habitus*. Additional research could determine whether women of different age groups practice yoga for similar reasons to those who practice during mid-life, especially when the mid-life years are identified as being more introspective. As this study focuses specifically on women, there is a need to find out why men practice yoga and maybe more importantly, what inhibits men from taking up the practice of yoga. Could discourses of connection suggesting a possible female *habitus* be a disincentive for men?

The role of other family members is of note in the current study and is worthy of further attention, including the impact on family life and lifestyle. For example, a number of the women had mothers who did yoga, and others had partners and children who also

participated. There is scope to investigate a range of issues regarding the nature, characteristics and experiences of Iyengar yoga practitioners in Australia, but also in other countries. Specifically, within the group of women interviewed for the current thesis these issues include: the slow uptake of embracing a *pranayama* practice as part of the holism of a yoga practice; the reasons for, and constraints to, commencing a home practice of yoga; and the support and education of the menstrual sequence and its integration into yoga classes.

As a fully-engaged Iyengar yoga practitioner and teacher, my own subjectivity is obviously interwoven into the findings of this study. To the best of my ability, and with the assistance of certain guidelines, I have endeavoured to justly represent the experiences of all the women interviewed. The study of yoga has many avenues for future scholarly work. Hopefully, the findings of this thesis are considered to have strengthened the groundwork for further studies of those who practice yoga in the West.

## APPENDIX A

### AN IYENGAR YOGA CLASS

The essence of yoga's teaching is directed at experience through practice. This experiential focus is reflected in an Iyengar yoga class, where the student is given an opportunity to experience for themselves the effects of yoga's techniques. A typical Iyengar yoga class in Australia lasts an hour and a half. Classes for intermediate to advanced students are often two hours to allow for a more comprehensive practice. One-hour classes are not uncommon. The class often begins with the students lying in a passive, restorative pose, as a means to quieten the body and mind before the class begins. Dragon (1998, 49) divides the class content of an Iyengar yoga class into three distinct characteristics:

1. the physical aspects of the class;
2. the verbal class content; and
3. the role of the teacher (Dragon 1998, 49).

#### The physical aspects of the class

These categories are not distinct but are interdependent and the Iyengar yoga class may comprise of infinite combinations of the three (Dragon 1998). The *asanas* (see page 229) begin the process of cultivating awareness at the level of the physical body. *Asanas* teach the practitioner to get in touch with the body, senses, mind and breath. Of *asanas*, Iyengar has said:

*Asanas* have evolved over the centuries so as to exercise every muscle nerve and gland in the body. They secure a fine physique, which is strong and elastic without being muscle bound and they keep the body free from disease. They reduce fatigue and soothe the nerves. But their real importance lies in the way they train and discipline the mind (Iyengar B.K.S. 1991 (1966), 40).

The nature of the class varies depending on the type of *asana* taught. In general, classes are divided into a monthly cycle with a particular type of pose practiced as a sequence of

poses in a given week. These are traditionally divided up into standing poses, forward bends and twists (often practiced together), backbends and *pranayama*. A ‘miscellaneous’ week can be incorporated to include poses that do not strictly ‘fit’ into the other four categories. Examples of miscellaneous poses could be twists and balancing poses. Some classes can be more physically demanding, others can be more passive and restorative. Different poses affect the body differently on several levels: physical, physiological, mental and emotional (Iyengar P.S. 1999b).

Every class ends with the practice of *savasana*. B.K.S. Iyengar describes *savasana* as the yogic art of relaxation (Iyengar B.K.S. 1997). *Savasana* requires the practitioner to relax in a supine position. The aim is to still the physical body and the mind, while remaining fully conscious, and thereby quieten the senses and withdraw focus from external objects (Iyengar B.K.S. 1997). In this state, the body and mind learn to relax. The purpose of *savasana* is to attain a state where ‘the body, the breath, the mind and the brain move towards the real Self (*Atma*)’ (Iyengar B.K.S. 1992 (1981), 232-3) (see Chapter Two).

*Savasana* is a preparatory pose that leads to the more subtle practice of *pranayama*. *Pranayama* is the practice of cultivating awareness of and control of the breath. In the yoga tradition the breath is described as ‘*prana*’ or life force’. The practice of *pranayama* is a more subjective and subtle practice than *asana*, requiring a finer development of skills; focus, stillness, and reflection, established with the practice of *asana*. Regular practice is said to induce a state of mental calm and tranquility of the nervous system. The *Yoga Sutras* emphasise competence in the practice of *asana* as a necessary prerequisite before commencing a practice of *pranayama*. The Iyengar tradition adopts this classical approach (Iyengar B.K.S. 1992 (1981); Iyengar B.K.S. 1993).

#### The role of the teacher and verbal class content

Iyengar teachers are expected to demonstrate the *asanas*, providing students with a visual of the pose. In this way, Lloyd (1997a, 24) suggests that, ‘their very body becomes an incarnate embodiment of how-to-do-yoga’. Initially a teacher will demonstrate the *pose*

and do the pose with the students (Iyengar & Iyengar 2002, 11). An Iyengar teacher is expected to closely observe the students in class with the intention of adjusting students when necessary to assist them experience the ‘correct pose’. The teacher can either adjust their teaching requirements to meet the needs of a particular class via the verbal instruction of a pose, or make either physical or verbal corrective adjustments to assist students experience the pose (Dragon 1998; Iyengar & Iyengar 2002).

The Iyengar yoga class is an unusual environment where students are expected to remain quiet throughout the class. The intention is to enable the students to draw their attention inward and mentally quieten. This allows the student to explore their own body in the poses, in order to cultivate an awareness of what is happening in their bodies, mind and breath by getting in touch with the senses. B.K.S. Iyengar (1991 (1966), 239) suggests that ‘it is the duty of the teacher to bring about unity in the body and mind of each individual pupil’. The process of teaching a yoga class is a structured activity to facilitate the development of concentration and ‘unity’ (see also Iyengar & Iyengar 2002).

The teacher provides the verbal class content through a steady flow of specific instructions. These instructions direct the student in the *asana* or more subtle instructions for the practice of *pranayama* or *savasana*. The instructions can comprise fine anatomical points and the breath, and are often repeated several times, which is particular to the Iyengar style of teaching (Dragon 1998). At times, instruction incorporates imagery and metaphors to highlight the intention behind a pose, sometimes integrating the philosophical dimensions of the practice (Dragon 1998; see also Iyengar & Iyengar 2002).

Examples of some *asanas*:



Source: (Iyengar G.S. 2000, 36, 71, 85, 99, 112, 117).



**APPENDIX B**  
**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

**Yoga and Women's Health**  
**Interview Guide**

1. How long have you been practicing yoga?
2. What were your main reasons for commencing yoga?  
(P1) Is there a story of how you first 'found' yoga?
3. Could you tell me about your yoga practice?  
(P1) Do you attend yoga classes? if yes, how many/week?  
(P2) Do you have a personal yoga practice? If yes, how long, how often and what does it involve e.g. postures, relaxation, meditation, controlled breathing exercises, spiritual and philosophical studies.  
(P3) Has/Is your yoga practice adjusted to fit in with your physical/mental needs eg. menopausal, pre-menstrual tension, stress, injury. If yes, explain  
(P4) Are your reasons for continuing yoga different to the reasons for first starting yoga?  
(P5) Does anything prevent you from practicing yoga as often as you would like?  
(P6) Do you consider yoga to be a leisure activity?  
(P7) How does yoga differ from your other leisure activities?
4. We've been using the term yoga throughout our conversation. What does yoga mean to you?
5. What are the outcomes of your yoga practice?  
(P1) Does yoga affect your physical health? If yes, how?  
(P2) Does yoga affect your perceptions of your physical appearance/body image? If yes, how?  
(P3) Does yoga affect your mental health? If yes, how?  
(P4) Does yoga contribute to you seeking spiritual meaning in your life? If yes, how?
6. How important is your yoga practice to you and your life?  
(P1) Have you noticed any shifts in your life that result from yoga?  
(P2) Does it change the way you live your life? e.g., lifestyle - vegetarian diet, less alcohol, meditation.  
(P3) What role does your yoga practice have as a self-care strategy, as part of your overall health management eg., stress management, coping, lifestyle modifications, nutrition, exercise, cognitive behavioural skills.  
(P4) Has it affected your priorities or goals in life?  
(P5) As a woman, do you feel like your yoga experiences have affected you?
7. Does your yoga practice influence your behaviour to yourself or others?  
(P1) Do your experiences affect the way you act after yoga practice?  
(P2) Are these lasting effects when you return to your daily life after yoga practice?  
(P3) Does your yoga practice affect how you view your social environment? If yes, how?  
(P4) Does your yoga practice affect how you view your natural environment? If yes, how?
8. Throughout the conversation I have been trying to understand how yoga affects your life. Given what we've covered, is there anything else you'd like to add to help me understand the importance of yoga to who you are?  
(P1) Is there something else I should have asked you? Could you respond to that question?





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## Looking for female participants for research project on Yoga and Women's Health

Julie Hodges is currently undertaking a PhD at The University of Newcastle to examine the benefits of regular yoga practice on mid-aged (45-60 years) women's health and wellbeing. Julie is a qualified Iyengar yoga teacher with an Introductory certificate, and currently teaches yoga classes in Newcastle. The research has the support of the B.K.S. Iyengar Yoga Association of Australia.

The main aims of her study are:

1. To determine the nature and frequency of participants' yoga practice;
2. To examine the experiences participants' derive from regular yoga practice;
3. To investigate what aspects of participants' yoga practice influence their everyday lives;
4. To determine how these influences relate specifically to women (e.g. in menopause); and
5. To examine participants' perceptions of the contributions of yoga to their physical, mental and spiritual well-being.

Julie is seeking people who are willing to be interviewed about their yoga practice, its influence on their everyday lives, and its contributions to their physical, mental and spiritual well-being. The interviews for the research will take place between April and November 2002.

If you are 45 to 60 years of age, have been practicing yoga for about two years, and practice approximately once a week, your assistance in this project would be much appreciated. Participants may be Iyengar yoga students or Iyengar yoga teachers.

If you fit the above criteria, and are interested in either participating in the study, or would like to find out more information, please contact Julie Hodges (02 49 637 804) (email: [Julie.Hodges@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Julie.Hodges@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au)), or her supervisor at the University of Newcastle, Dr. Penny Warner-Smith (02 49 215 804).



**B.K.S. Iyengar Yoga Association of Australia Inc.**

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Carole Hart, President

4/81 Blair Street Bondi NSW 2026 Australia

Tel: 61 2 91303286 Fax: 61 2 9387 6773 Email: [yogvaani@telpacific.com.au](mailto:yogvaani@telpacific.com.au)

This letter serves to introduce Julie Hodges, a certificated teacher with the BKS Iyengar Yoga Association of Australia. She is currently undertaking a PHD at the University of Newcastle to examine the benefits of a regular yoga practice on women's health and wellbeing.

The Association supports Julie's research in this study and wishes her well. The results of the study will be forwarded to the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune where continual research is being conducted on all aspects of the benefits of yoga.

With regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carole Hart', with a horizontal line drawn underneath it.

Carole Hart  
**President**

**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
**FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND ARTS**

University Drive,  
CALLAGHAN NSW 2308

Telephone 61 + 2 + 4921 5730  
Fax 61 + 2 + 4921 7402

10 April, 2002

Dear

My name is Julie Hodges. I am currently undertaking a PhD at the University of Newcastle to examine the benefits of regular yoga practice on women's health and wellbeing. My project title is "*Women, Yoga and Everyday Life: Connecting the therapeutic value of yoga as a leisure activity to women's wellness in everyday life*". I am an Iyengar yoga teacher with a current Introductory certificate. I currently teach yoga classes in Newcastle.

The research has the support of the B.K.S. Iyengar Yoga Association of Australia (see attached letter). The results of the study will be forwarded to the Ramamani Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune, and made available to the Australian Iyengar yoga community.

The main aim of my research is to study the therapeutic value of Iyengar yoga for women who are in their mid-life (45-60), and who have a regular yoga practice. Utilizing in-depth interviews as the main method for collecting information, it is hoped that the research will provide valuable insights into the benefits of Iyengar yoga on women's health and well-being. Should you require any further details, please do not hesitate to contact me.

I intend to recruit women for this study from Iyengar yoga schools in Sydney and surrounds, Central Coast and Newcastle. I have enclosed an information flyer to display at your convenience at your school. I have enclosed additional copies of the flier to distribute to interested participants. Interested participants can contact me by telephone (02 4963 7804) or email (Julie.Hodges@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au) for further information. I intend to conduct the interviews between April and November 2002.

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely

Julie Hodges



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14 November 2002

Dear ,

**INFORMATION STATEMENT**

***Women, Yoga and Everyday Life: Connecting the therapeutic value of yoga as a leisure activity to women's wellness in everyday life***

As discussed during our conversation on 14 November 2002, I am currently undertaking research to examine the role of yoga, as a leisure activity in your everyday life. This research forms part of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy program in which I am currently enrolled.

The aims of this study are two-fold. First, to examine the experiences women derive from regular yoga practice, to learn what yoga experiences transfer into other aspects of their daily lives, and determine how these benefits relate specifically to women. Second, to examine women's perceptions of the therapeutic value of yoga on their health and well-being. The study will be greatly enhanced by acquiring first hand knowledge of the issues by way of in-depth interviews with women presently involved in an ongoing yoga practice. Accordingly, I would appreciate your participation in the study.

The interview will involve the discussion of a range of issues including:

- the nature and frequency of your yoga practice;
- what experiences are derived from your regular yoga practice;.
- what aspects of your yoga practice influence your everyday life; and
- your perceptions of the contributions of yoga to your physical, mental and spiritual health and well-being.

The interview will last approximately an hour.

If you agree to take part in the study, I will ask your permission to audio-tape the interview so that I can transcribe it for analytical purposes. During the interview, you may decline to answer any question, you may request that the tape recorder be turned off, you may withdraw from the study without consequence, and you have the right to listen to, edit and erase your component of the tape. I may need to telephone you again after the interview if I need to clarify any information. Information that you provide will be confidential and access will be restricted to the researcher and her supervisors.



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The University requires that all participants are informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which the research project is conducted it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the University's Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Branch, The Chancellery, University of Newcastle, Callaghan NSW 2308. Telephone (02) 4921 6333.

I will be in touch to confirm the tentative arrangements we have made to meet at Street, on Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2002 at 11am. Please feel free to contact me, or my supervisor Dr. Penny Warner-Smith if you have any questions relating to the study before we meet.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Hodges

**CONSENT FORM**

"I agree to participate in the project *"Women, Yoga and Everyday Life: Connecting the therapeutic value of yoga as a leisure activity to women's wellness in everyday life"*. I understand that the study will be carried out as described in the Information Statement, a copy of which I have retained. I realize that I can withdraw from the study at any time and do not have to give my reasons for withdrawing. I have had all my questions relating to the study answered satisfactorily.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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November 2002

Dear

**TRANSCRIPT EDIT**

***Women, Yoga and Everyday Life: Connecting the therapeutic value of yoga as a leisure activity to women's wellness in everyday life***

Thank you for participating in an interview with me at  
on Saturday 29th June 2002 at 12pm. Your interview has been transcribed and, as we agreed, I have sent it to you for editing. I have also enclosed a second copy for you to keep.

Please add any comments you feel may clarify any conversation or delete any information you would like to remove from the transcript. In addition you may like to highlight any themes you regard as being of particular importance. Information that you provide will be kept strictly confidential and access to transcripts identifying respondents will be restricted to me (the researcher) and my supervisors. I have enclosed a stamped addressed envelope for you to return the transcript to me when you have completed this process.

After I receive the edited transcript, I will incorporate your changes, so that the updated transcript will be used for analysis. Later, I will send you a document indicating where your conversation has been incorporated into the analysis of the thesis. This will give you the opportunity to evaluate whether you have been accurately represented. At this stage of the project your feedback is also welcomed.

If you choose to edit the transcript it would be of great help if you could return the transcript to me as soon as possible. Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Penny Warner-Smith, if you have any questions relating to your transcript or to my research generally.

The University requires that all participants are informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which the research project is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the University's Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Branch, The Chancellery, University of Newcastle, Callaghan NSW 2308. Telephone (02) 4921 6333.

Thanks again for your time and your help.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Hodges

# APPENDIX I

## PROFILE OF THE WOMEN IN 2002

| Name    | Age | Employment                   | Educational(1) | Status  | Children | Children at home | Alter-native Health (2) | Other Physical Activity (3) | Concern With (4) Self-care | Social Con-science(5) | Affiliation with (6) Environment |
|---------|-----|------------------------------|----------------|---------|----------|------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Alice   | 56  | Film producer                | PG             | Partner | 1        | Yes              | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Alison  | 47  | Support worker               | UG             | Single  | -        | -                | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Annie   | 48  | Teacher/tutor                | PG             | Partner | 3        | Yes              | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Clare   | 53  | Teacher                      | UG             | Married | 2        | No               | Not specifically        | Yes                         | Yes                        | Not specifically      | Not specifically                 |
| Denise  | 45  | 'house manager'              | S              | Married | 2        | Yes              | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Not specifically      | Not specifically                 |
| Elaine  | 58  | Probation officer            | PG             | Married | 3        | No               | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Evelyn  | 56  | Yoga teacher                 | PG             | Married | 3        | Yes              | Not specifically        | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Fiona   | 52  | Publishing consultant        | PG             | Single  | -        | -                | Yes                     | No                          | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Gillian | 48  | Yoga teacher                 | PG             | Married | 2        | Yes              | Yes                     | No                          | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Grace   | 45  | Physiotherapist              | PG             | Single  | 2        | Yes              | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Hannah  | 45  | University student           | V              | Single  | -        | -                | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Harriet | 47  | Community services           | PG             | Partner | 1        | Yes              | No                      | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Holly   | 51  | Correction adult Ed. officer | PG             | Single  | -        | -                | Yes                     | No                          | Yes                        | Yes                   | Not specifically                 |
| Isabel  | 60  | Yoga teacher                 | UG             | Married | 3        | No               | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Jackie  | 52  | Teacher                      | PG             | Partner | 2        | Yes              | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Kelly   | 55  | Art designer                 | UG             | Single  | 2        | No               | Yes                     | Sometimes                   | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Leonie  | 50  | Community development        | PG             | Partner | 2        | Yes              | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Lesley  | 54  | Bush regeneration            | V              | Single  | -        | -                | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Linda   | 46  | Writer/journalist            | UG             | Partner | 2        | Yes              | Yes                     | Sometimes                   | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Lisa    | 58  | PA                           | S              | Married | 2        | No               | Not specifically        | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Lois    | 54  | Administration               | S              | Single  | 4        | Yes              | Yes                     | No                          | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Mary    | 49  | Mentoring                    | PG             | Single  | -        | -                | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Morag   | 56  | Farm worker                  | V              | Married | 2        | No               | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Not specifically      | Yes                              |
| Naomi   | 47  | Organic business             | UG             | Partner | 1        | Yes              | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |
| Pamela  | 51  | Interior art design          | V              | Married | 2        | No               | Yes                     | Yes                         | Yes                        | Yes                   | Yes                              |



|        |    |                              |    |         |   |     |                  |           |                  |                  |
|--------|----|------------------------------|----|---------|---|-----|------------------|-----------|------------------|------------------|
| Phoebe | 49 | University student           | PG | Partner | - | -   | Not specifically | Yes       | Not specifically | Yes              |
| Sally  | 47 | Yoga teacher                 | UG | Partner | - | -   | Yes              | Yes       | Yes              | Yes              |
| Sarah  | 65 | Retired/academic             | PG | Single  | 1 | No  | Yes              | Yes       | Yes              | Yes              |
| Simone | 51 | Administration               | S  | Single  | 2 | No  | Yes              | Yes       | Yes              | Yes              |
| Tamara | 54 | Administration               | UG | Married | 2 | Yes | Yes              | Yes       | Not specifically | Not specifically |
| Terrie | 57 | Librarian                    | PG | Married | 3 | No  | Not specifically | Yes       | Yes              | Yes              |
| Val    | 45 | Film editor/<br>yoga teacher | V  | Partner | - | -   | Yes              | Yes       | Yes              | Not specifically |
| Vera   | 49 | Teacher                      | UG | Married | 3 | Yes | Not specifically | Sometimes | Yes              | Not specifically |
| Vicky  | 60 | Retired/jeweller             | UG | Married | - | -   | Yes              | Yes       | Not specifically | Not specifically |
| Wendy  | 51 | Yoga teacher                 | V  | Single  | 2 | Yes | Yes              | Sometimes | Yes              | Yes              |

## Notes

- (1) **Education** - Undergraduate (UG), Post-graduate (PG), Vocational Training (V), School (S)
- (2) **Alternative Health** - women used alternative modalities other than yoga e.g., osteopath, herbalist, chiropractor
- (3) **Other Exercise** - Involvement in other physical activity. Main activities included walking, bush-walking, swimming, dance, tennis
- (4) **Concern with self-care** - general interest in taking responsibility for overall well-being. Activities included yoga, healthy diet, vegetarianism, alternative therapies
- (5) **Social Conscience** - general interest and concern for welfare of others, expressed in conversation, nature of work, future ambitions.
- (6) **Affiliation with Environment** - Expressed special relationship with natural environments.

**APPENDIX J**  
**YOGA INVOLVEMENT IN 2002**

| Name    | Reasons for starting yoga | Years of Yoga | Yoga Student/Teacher | Practices/week | Personal practice | Asana Practice | Savasana Practice | Pranayama Practice | Philosophical Practice | Experienced Female cycle Practice |
|---------|---------------------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Alice   | Physical                  | 10            | Student              | 1              | No                | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | No                     | -                                 |
| Alison  | Physical                  | 5-6           | Student              | 2+             | Yes               | Yes            | Yes               | Class              | No                     | M                                 |
| Annie   | Family                    | 18            | Student              | 2              | No                | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | No                     | M, P                              |
| Clare   | Physical                  | 4             | Student              | 2              | No                | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | No                     | -                                 |
| Denise  | Friend                    | 4-5           | Student              | 1              | No                | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | No                     | M                                 |
| Elaine  | Physical                  | 6-7           | Student              | 2              | No                | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | No                     | -                                 |
| Evelyn  | Physical                  | 29            | Teacher              | 7              | Yes               | Yes            | Yes               | Yes                | Yes                    | M, P, MP                          |
| Fiona   | Physical                  | 7             | Student              | 2+             | Yes               | Yes            | Yes               | Class              | Yes                    | M                                 |
| Gillian | Physical                  | 10            | Student              | 5-6            | Yes               | Yes            | Yes               | Yes                | Yes                    | M, P                              |
| Grace   | Interest                  | 20+ on/off    | Student              | 1              | Yes               | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | No                     | M, P                              |
| Hannah  | Interest                  | 4             | Student              | 3-4            | Yes               | Yes            | Yes               | Class              | No                     | M                                 |
| Harriet | Friend                    | 13            | Student              | 2              | No                | Yes            | Yes               | Class              | No                     | M                                 |
| Holly   | Physical                  | 15            | Student              | 7              | Yes               | Yes            | Yes               | Class              | No                     | M, MP                             |
| Isabel  | Family                    | 25            | Teacher              | 7              | Yes               | Yes            | Yes               | Yes                | Yes                    | M, P                              |
| Jackie  | Family                    | 3             | Student              | 1              | No                | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | No                     | M                                 |
| Kelly   | Friend                    | 25            | Student              | 3-4+           | Sometimes         | Yes            | Yes               | Class              | Yes                    | M, P                              |
| Leonie  | Interest                  | 6             | Student              | 4-5            | Yes               | Yes            | Yes               | Class              | Yes                    | M                                 |
| Lesley  | Physical                  | 7-8           | Student              | 1              | Yes               | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | No                     | -                                 |
| Linda   | Physical                  | 15            | Student              | 3+             | Sometimes         | Yes            | Yes               | Class              | Yes                    | M, P                              |
| Lisa    | Physical                  | 14            | Student              | 1              | Rarely            | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | No                     | -                                 |
| Lois    | Interest                  | 7-8           | Student              | 2              | No                | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | No                     | -                                 |
| Mary    | Physical                  | 3             | Student              | 1+             | Yes               | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | No                     | -                                 |
| Morag   | Physical                  | 5             | Student              | 1+             | Sometimes         | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | No                     | -                                 |
| Naomi   | Physical                  | 3             | Student              | 1+             | Yes               | Yes            | Yes               | No                 | Yes                    | P, M, MP                          |

|               |          |                  |                    |     |           |     |     |       |     |          |
|---------------|----------|------------------|--------------------|-----|-----------|-----|-----|-------|-----|----------|
| <b>Pamela</b> | Physical | 11               | Student            | 7   | Sometimes | Yes | Yes | No    | No  | M        |
| <b>Phoebe</b> | Friend   | 8<br>30+ on/off  | Student            | 2+  | Rarely    | Yes | Yes | Class | No  | M        |
| <b>Sally</b>  | Physical | 15               | Teacher<br>Student | 4-5 | Yes       | Yes | Yes | Yes   | Yes | M,<br>M, |
| <b>Sarah</b>  | Physical | 4                | Student            | 7   | Yes       | Yes | Yes | No    | No  | -        |
| <b>Simone</b> | Interest | 7-8              | Student            | 1   | Sometimes | Yes | Yes | No    | No  | M        |
| <b>Tamara</b> | Physical | 20+              | Student            | 1+  | Random    | Yes | Yes | No    | No  | M        |
| <b>Terrie</b> | Interest | 30+ on/off       | Student            | 2   | No        | Yes | Yes | No    | No  | M        |
| <b>Val</b>    | Physical | 12               | Student<br>Teacher | 4+  | Yes       | Yes | Yes | Class | Yes | M        |
| <b>Vera</b>   | Family   | 2-3              | Student            | 1   | No        | Yes | Yes | No    | No  | M        |
| <b>Vicky</b>  | Physical | 2-3<br>40 on/off | Student            | 7   | Yes       | Yes | Yes | Class | No  | -        |
| <b>Wendy</b>  | Family   | 26               | Teacher            | 6   | Yes       | Yes | Yes | Yes   | Yes | M, P     |

## Notes

### 1. Reasons for starting yoga

- Physical – primarily physical condition or ailment or was uncompetitive form of exercise.
  - Family – either partner, mother or other relative's participation in yoga initiated motivation to practice.
  - Friend – had been asked to attend a yoga class with a friend.
  - Interest – had been attracted to practice yoga during their teenage years or in their twenties
- Years of practice** – Definite number of years difficult to determine due to sporadic nature of practice over the years.
    - First figure indicates continuous years of practicing Iyengar yoga
    - Second figure illustrates approximate number of years since first practiced yoga
  - Yoga student/teacher**
    - 'Student' indicates attending regular yoga classes at time of interview.
    - 'Teacher' indicates those teaching Iyengar yoga.
    - 'Trained' indicated completed Iyengar teacher Training.
    - 'Training' were undertaking Iyengar teacher training at time of interview.
  - Practices/week** – '+' denotes when additional bits of practice were done occasionally during the week.
  - Pranayama practice** – 'Class' denotes pranayama practice only done in yoga class environment.
  - Philosophical practice** – 'Yes' had some exposure to classical texts, either from yoga teacher training or personal development.
  - Experienced female cycle practice** – indicates which of three female cycles (Menstruation (M), Pregnancy (P) and Menopause (MP)) have been experienced in practice.

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Julie Hodges  
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22 February 2006

Dear,

PERSONAL DATA APPROVAL

*The Practice of Iyengar Yoga by Mid-Life Women: An Ancient Tradition in a Modern Life*

In 2002, I interviewed you about your Iyengar yoga practice and its influences in your life. The research is part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program in which I am currently enrolled. Since 2002 I have been working on my PhD part time and recently handed in my final draft. As specified at the time of the interview, personal information acquired and quotes incorporated into the final draft of the thesis have been sent to you for final comment.

Attached for your information are:

1. The thesis abstract – to provide a brief overview of the study;
2. Your profile and demographic information as of 2002 for checking;
3. Details of your yoga involvement as of 2002 for checking; and
4. Personal quotes incorporated into the thesis for approval. (Some quotes have been paraphrased - of importance is their intent).

A pseudonym name has been used throughout the study. Your pseudonym name is.

If you choose to make any changes to your personal data it would be of a great help if you could return any changes to me by the end of March 2006. Please feel free to contact me, or my supervisor, Dr. Christine Everingham, if you have any questions relating to your personal data or to my research generally.

The University requires that all participants are informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which the research project is conducted it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the University's Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Branch, The Chancellery, University of Newcastle, Callaghan NSW 2308. Telephone (02) 4921 6333.

Thank you for your time and for agreeing to participate in the study. Your time and experiences shared were greatly appreciated, and indeed integral to the final outcomes of this thesis. I will send you a summary of the study's key findings once the PhD process has been completed.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Hodges



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