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The Process of Becoming a Hatha-Yoga Practitioner[1]

Abstract This paper undertakes the problem of perceiving and feeling the body in the process of acquiring the identity of a hatha-yoga practitioner. The process of becoming a "yogi" is connected with the practice of the work on the body and defining these practices, specific perception of the body, and feeling the body.

Becoming a hatha-yoga practitioner is a process. I describe phases of this process in the paper: 1) The initial phase—constructing motives and first steps; 2) The phase of a fuller recognition of psychophysical effects and ascribing to them appropriate meanings; 3) The phase of a fuller recognition of spiritual aspects of hatha-yoga (quasi-religion). The relations between the mind and the body get complicated at the moment of meaningful engagement in yoga practice and defining body practice as mental practice, as well as spiritual. The work on the body can change the "Western" perspective of defining the body as a material element of human existence (the Cartesian vision) to a vision of treating the body as a spiritualized substance (the vision of Eastern philosophy). Such a change is not always possible if we hold on to the guidelines of other religions as own (e.g., the Catholic religion). Changes in the body and psyche have to be in such a situation defined differently, and also there have to be certain language descriptions of these changes (often acquiring guidelines of set languages formulas) in order to combine the statements of conventional religion with a new spiritual experience.

Keywords Symbolic Interactionism; Body; Corporeality; Hatha-Yoga; Yoga Practice; Religion; Spirituality; Para-Religion; Process of Becoming; Identity Construction

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In the paper, there is an introduction to a description of the world of social practices of hatha-yoga, rules that govern it, motivations of those who practice it, and their definitions of situations, which they find themselves in the process of becoming a yoga practitioner. The formal reconstruction of the process is a second order construction that is based on the accounts of the process by the practitioners of hatha-yoga. The language of the practitioners is a vehicle of meanings that is ascribed to hatha-yoga practice. However, the author's account of these meanings has a theoretical character.

Yoga is becoming a more and more popular form of exercise. The research of the fitness market in 2010 shows that yoga is, among the biggest fitness clubs in Poland, in the third position in their offer: 1) strengthening classes, aerobics (100%), 2) strength training (98%) and personal training (98%), 3) yoga (88%) (Nelke 2010). Yoga is somewhat inscribed in the context of fitness. In Great Britain, it is so with the support of the government. Yoga was taught in the 1970s in the College of Physical Education, part of the Inner London Education Authority (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005:305). It is estimated that around the world about 1 million people are regularly practicing yoga, and in Poland, around 30 thousand. Women express their will to practice yoga more often (see: Górski 2004).

[1] This article constitutes an offshoot of research dedicated to hatha-yoga practice and is, to some extent, based on data included in a research paper "'Ciało świątynią duszy', czyli o procesie budowania tożsamości praktykującego hatha-jogę. Konstruowanie prywatnej quasi-religii" (article in Polish ["'Body as the Temple of the Soul'—The Process of Building the Identity of Hatha-Yoga Practitioner. Constructing a Private Quasi-Religion"]), which was released in *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* in 2012 (vol. 8, issue 3). This version, however, puts an accent on the process of becoming a hatha-yoga practitioner.

The empirical data were gathered in the research (to describe the process of becoming the hatha-yoga practitioner) by using the unstructured and narrative interviews with hatha-yoga practitioners, although there were also interviews done for comparative purposes with people practicing yoga-ashtanga. These interviews and their transcriptions are the data of the analysis of the process of becoming a yoga practitioner, though participant observation and autoethnography were also used as the additional sources of data. I used the symbolic interactionist theoretical approach and grounded theory procedures to analyze empirical data (Becker 1982; Strauss 1987; Clarke 1991; Prus 1996; Strauss 1997).

Described in this publication, research on doing and practicing yoga started with participant observation done in one of the yoga schools in a major regional city (from 2007 to 2011), where the researcher took part in the class at least once a week. The researcher was also an observer of an outgoing yoga school four times—during a week-long trip to the mountains, where, in seclusion, yoga was practiced for seven hours a day, and additionally there were meditations and mantra singing (in 2008), as well as during three-day training trips, where classes were also intensive, all day long with a 4-hour midday break (plus evening meditations; in 2008-2009). The researcher was then an active participant of the world he researched. He dwelled together with the participants of the research, practiced hatha-yoga according to the teachers' recommendations. His psychological and physical sensing of the practice had an influence on asking questions during the research process.

It can be said that during the group practice, there was co-sensing with others of everything that was happening in the exercise room. Co-sensing was connected with the work on the body while performing hatha-yoga positions, receiving instructions about performed positions, during mutual meditation, or group mantra singing, which also causes both bodily and psychological sensations. During common practice, through the observation of one's feelings and undertaking different roles, there was interpersonal empathy appearing, which allowed the researcher to come to certain meanings ascribed to hatha-yoga by others. The feelings of the researcher were thus helpful in the interpretation of the data obtained from other—basic—sources, that is, interviews, observations, and visual materials (photographs and video recordings of hatha-yoga practices). The sole participation in the world of practicing would not be enough for the researcher to understand bodily and mental sensations appearing during the practice.

During the research, apart from 200 observational photographs, 6 video recordings of yoga practices were made. There were also 60 interviews, including 13 narrative interviews, 38 unstructured, and 9 based on films. Among the interlocutors were pupils, students, working people, and yoga instructors, both males and females. Interviews were conducted in 2008/2009 by the students of sociology (from the University of Lodz). The author has been running a participant observation from 2007 till the current moment. Additionally, in 2012, 172 websites of yoga schools in 38 cities in Poland were analyzed in order to examine the strategy and auto-presentational tactics of given schools.

Photograph 1. Practice and participant observation by the author in Helenów Park—practice with Erasmus students (course Meditation for Managers, academic year 2014/2015).

Source: Photograph by Kamil Głowacki.

Introductory Phase—Motives Construction and First Steps

In this paragraph, I will describe the dynamics of the process of becoming a practitioner. The introductory phase consists of three substages: a) constructing motives; b) first steps—the beginning of the practice; c) noticing the effects.

Constructing Motives

The language of motives initiates the process of identity formation. Sometimes some people believe that the decision of taking up yoga was intuitive, but this conviction is expressed in language. They knew for themselves that they had to do yoga. Hence, for this group of people, there are no motives that one had to become aware of at the very beginning of the practice or just before starting it.

> So, my adventure with yoga started when I was 17 years old and it was an intuitive decision. So I knew nothing about it, I did not read, I just felt that I should attend yoga classes not even knowing what it was, and walking down Politechniki Avenue and I saw an invitational poster to such a class and just like that, in t-shirt and jeans, I went in and stayed 'til today. It has been years since that day. (yoga instructor)

We can add here that, apart from intuition, the poster advertizing yoga classes played a major role in making the decision.

One can decide to start practicing yoga because it is popular or in fashion that one can notice observing friends:

> I have been doing yoga for a year now. To be honest, I took it up because of its popularity; one can even say that it is in fashion now. Well, yes, I had no special health issues and a lot of people take up yoga because, as I know, they want to stretch, et cetera … A lot of my friends started practicing yoga, they kept on talking about it. I also wanted to be able to say something about it, be able to say that I do it, too, that I know how it is. (practitioner for a year)

It needs to be underlined that the motives are often constructed *ad hoc* and *in situ*. Experienced practitioners (e.g., 10 years of practice) do not remember what their motives were at the beginning, when they started practicing yoga.

Sometimes practicing yoga starts in a difficult moment in the life of the individual. The individual had hope that through yoga s/he will solve their problems; in the interview cited below, it is not stated what problems exactly are mentioned, however, from further parts of the interview, we find out that the interlocutor was emotionally unstable[2]:

> And … and … I started practicing in such a moment of life, where I started such a huge work on myself and my character, my life. I raised myself up from such a ditch and it gave me so much, really. I mean, it was not the only reason that helped so much, but … um … um … it really brought a lot into my life, that is why I felt that … that I have to continue, and now it is, it is my natural part of life, right? Although, I still feel that it's not enough because this everyday life disturbs. (practitioner for 5 years)

Most often, the motives are reconstructed during the interviews and passed on to the researchers by the practitioners. The motives for practicing yoga often

[2] It resembles a situation of entering sects by people going through some life troubles. It is often emphasized that this entering is the result of some drama and personal problems of the individual. People, for example, leaving prison can come across sect members that are supposed to help them (see: Wilson 1992:184-185). What is more, many people can go through family problems because the sect offers them a new view on the world and allows them to regain self-trust (Wilson 1992:186). Of course, the sect offers emotional support and friendly relations, shows how unimportant the current social statuses are, and shows the "ultimate truth," et cetera (Wilson 1992:186-187). The sect members learn from one another the motives for participation and/or the ways to express them. The descriptions come from group participation. Remembering the moment of conversion is connected with acquiring the language that helps to talk about the conversion (Wilson 1992:200). It does not mean that I consider yoga practitioners as members of some sect; however, some psychological dynamics and participants' motivations in such societies, institutions, and classes can be, at times, similar.

show when comparing yoga with other physical exercises, they are somehow worked out in the process of "comparing justifications," when we compare, for example, yoga with aerobics, showing the advantages of the first (the language of aesthetics of the exercises in yoga). There is present somewhat an arena that singles out yoga from other physical exercises (there is commonsense theoretization on an individual level).

The motives for yoga practice can be different and coexist with each other at the same time. With exercise there are new motives appearing, allowing them to justify the sense of yoga practice (e.g., that it is a form of mental training). The motives thus show up not only at the very beginning of practicing yoga but also later, in different moments of doing or practicing yoga. The development of motives has then a processual character. The initial motives for practicing yoga usually are:

- body training (stretching the muscles and/or strengthening them; body relaxation; treating yoga as sport; keeping fit; getting slimmer; its slenderness, flexibility, and nimbleness);
- health effects (the aim is to improve the state of health);
- aesthetics, harmony of exercises;
- identity motives (yoga is treated as a niche sport or an alternative source of entertainment; looking for some occupation that singles out the individual from the surrounding—it is a singling-out-from-others way of spending free time).

The latter motives that show up with time together with practicing yoga are:

- visible physical benefits, as well as health effects of yoga (visible improvement of health condition or curing from different ailments);
- the peace of the body and mind (quieting of the mind);
- positive influence on the psyche/mind—mental training (type of meditation, acquiring distance to the world, getting a new perspective of seeing the social surrounding, getting energy, etc.).

The abovementioned **body training (work on the body)** is a category encompassing the whole group of motives that are mentioned most often in unstructured interviews and narrations.

Below, the interlocutor mentions many above-listed types of motives. Reconstructed during the interview, different motives can be thus presented by the same person at the same time:

> **Interviewer:** And what motivated you to start yoga practice?
> **Practitioner:** Yoga always attracted me. First, it attracted me as a form of gymnastics, I think most appropriate for me because I do not like to tire myself too much, I hate running, aerobics, and power training, strictly fitness when you sweat with streams, you cannot catch a breath, and the heart jumps out through the throat. It is not for me. I am not used to such an ordeal, painful bodywork or these, um, activities. And these are such exercises that first are very nice, aesthetic, feminine; and if you know how to do them well, they are very harmonious and calm. They do not set the tempo to start with or the number of repetitions, or it is most often specified time during which given asana should be done, but there are no stiff rules that you have to keep to and that you cannot set yourself free from. The human is in asana as long as the physical capabilities allow him to be and as long as he feels comfortable on the mental and physical levels. At first, yoga interested me as a form of physical exercises, training only for the body, and then I started seeing in it a form of mental training, type of meditation, kind of a calming remedy, acquiring distance to all of what surrounds me. And, well, the physical benefits are also important because through its specific interaction yoga has a lot of health properties. (no data about the years of practice)

Positive influence on the psyche is sometimes the subject of additional explanations. The below quoted yoga practitioner ensures that she was not subjected to anybody's suggestions, nobody suggested earlier the positive influence of yoga on emotions and the psyche (she ensures that yoga specialists would agree such positive influence exists). Nevertheless, it is difficult to believe in such ensuring if earlier in the interview she talked about the books and possessing of some (according to me, *a priori*) knowledge about yoga and its influence on the body and human psyche. Previous knowledge could have an influence on the perception of what happens with her psyche and body as an alleged consequence of doing yoga.

> Apart from that, I have noticed that it has a positive influence on my mood. Because, frankly speaking, I was quite skeptical at the very beginning. Well, I did hear before that yoga has a positive influence on emotions, so I did not want it to influence me … But, I think that in my case, no suggestion worked here and it just came to me, and I really felt at one point such a flow of good, um, positive emotions. This influence on the mental state surely would be acknowledged by some yoga specialists. (practitioner for 5 years)

For some yoga practitioners, it is only gymnastics, and they approach the information about the spiritual aspects of yoga they received earlier very skeptically.

The motives of practicing yoga change in time. In the case of more advanced "yoga practice," it often becomes a value, very important element of everyday life, and thus the motive for yoga practice is the value that states the life of an individual:

> Anyway, I am not going to give up yoga. At this moment, I do not imagine life without it, it has become something very important for me. Thanks to yoga I can disconnect from the problems, it somehow allows me to approach everything calmly. (practitioner for 3 years)

If yoga becomes the value for practitioners, then they use descriptions differentiating their practice from other forms of physical activity, sport or psycho-spiritual practice. This distinction of the action is a necessary procedure in the work on the identity of a yoga practitioner. Features distinguishing yoga from sport or fitness are constructed during the work on the emotional and cognitive part—and consciousness—of the individual. Distinguishing

(here are the identity motives) builds up motivation for further practice of yoga as it makes out of this practice a unique action, rarely met where the individual builds the concept of the *I*:

> Somebody who thinks that yoga is only sitting and some murmuring under the nose then he is very wrong, ashtanga is actually contradicting it because it is a very dynamic yoga, where something is happening all the time, where you move smoothly all the time from one asana into another, you can sweat a lot, the organism gets rid of all the toxins then … It is not just coming, exercising, like fitness just to sweat, but this is a more conscious learning of your own body, yoga starts from this, and then you enter deeper into the emotional sphere, of your own deep consciousness. (practitioner for 2,5 years)

For some, yoga is only a set of physical exercises that they do, not ascribed to any values apart from the possibility to stretch the muscles and relax. These people looked for some kind of "sport" that would meet their needs. They often use the word "training," which suggests association of yoga practice with sport. It is, for them, a form of gymnastics, sometimes treated as a substitute for correctional gymnastics. Some of them also do aerobics and aqua aerobics at the same time. Sometimes it is needed by some people to strengthen the exercises and/or body while practicing other sports, for example, swimming, skiing, basketball, climbing, et cetera.

There can be a situation that a person wanting to assist another sport with yoga in order to boost the body efficiency changes the basic performance from a given sport to yoga practice. Yoga practitioners perceiving various effects of yoga practice give up sport (e.g., rock climbing) and focus only on yoga practice. The motive "yoga as a form of gymnastics" is only an initial motive of taking up yoga, and leads to other interpretations and actions of a given person in the social world of yoga practice:

> But, with the time passing, it turned out that this is not just some exercise that makes … that we become more flexible or that our concentration improves, we can spread the strength more effectively or effectively use what the body can do. It turned out that I feel better, yes. I started getting more than I expected it would bring. And then through some parallel years I climbed, but then I climbed less and spent more time with yoga … And after 3 years, encouraged by Sławek, that I know so much that I should share this knowledge with other people. He said that I should start teaching and coming to him, then I was going to him to learn how to teach. Because this is something completely different when we practice for ourselves and something different when we teach others. And then it intensified even more … my going to Warsaw. It lasted for another year. Finally, I started teaching. (practitioner for 14 years, hatha-yoga instructor)

First Steps—The Beginning of the Practice

The stage "first steps" is connected with the actions that an individual undertakes wanting to start yoga practice or other actions that one experiences at the very beginning of contact with the world of yoga.

Many practitioners point to that before taking up yoga, they heard a lot about it and/or read. The Internet is a very important source of information and language for describing hatha-yoga practice. Some of the practitioners even say that if it was not for the Internet, their yoga practice would have never happened. What is more, stretching exercises were their favorite ones, and that is why they ended up in yoga class, or after the initial introduction to yoga, they started practicing it regularly. Some of them also mention the interest in the Eastern philosophy, for example, Buddhism—so not necessarily do they point to the interest in yoga itself. It is, in general, about the interest in the spirituality of the East and meditation. In case of many people, the need for meditation appears in the future. Some of them sometimes mention Buddhism as this knowledge that they were also interested in. So, in constructing their spiritual interests, the researched show a syncretic attitude. In Great Britain, many of those regularly practicing identify themselves with Buddhism (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005:315).

People get to yoga classes also through PE during studying, when sometimes yoga is one of the types of physical exercises to choose from. With yoga exercises we also meet at fitness class that can inspire a deeper interest in yoga.

Often, certain schools of yoga were chosen because they were suggested by friends, acquaintances, colleagues, partners, brothers, sisters, and even parents, or under the influence of advertisements. For many, attending yoga classes with friends is more motivating than individual attendance without the support from own social circle. Very vital here are the recommendations and suggestions regarding yoga practice from people coming directly from the social circle.

It is very important for the majority of practitioners to acquaint oneself with books about yoga, often these are various materials available in the Internet. The language for describing experiences of yoga is to be found there. Giving the reasons for practicing yoga, some even reconstruct, in narrative interviews, their interest in gymnastics when they were children, when they liked, for example, put their leg above the head. They ascribe their interest in yoga to these exercises and interests.

The first class can be a shock to beginners. Sometimes, it is extremely difficult to do the simplest *asanas* because the body is not stretched. Going through this class can either encourage for further practice or discourage. Pain appears:

> At the beginning, it hurts a lot, it means the body is not fully adjusted to such an effort, well, you know how it is when you stretch and you feel such pain because you cannot do more, you feel such a tension. But, this passes with time, the longer you practice, the more your body changes, becomes more flexible, more stretched. (practitioner for 7 years)

The motivation to practice yoga is already built in the initial phase of practice. It refers to the perception of the corporal effects of yoga practice and naming it. Some call it "crossing the borders" of the body, which are placed before the practitioners by their own bodies (the body resists). It is important to correctly define the pain that appears in this phase (pleasant pain).

> It was great for me at the beginning such crossing of borders of my own body. During the class, I felt such

muscles that I would not even think of, that I have them [*laughter*]. With each class I really felt how everything stretched. Although I have to admit that in the beginning, it was not easy, it really hurt and I twisted my face in all ways [*laughter*]. But, with time, the pain was gone, or maybe I got used to it. Anyway, it was after all such a pleasant pain. (no data about the years of practice)

Often practicing at home, I tried to remember the teacher's instructions from the class at yoga school, which helped me to properly define reactions and feelings of my body: "Feel how nice stretching is. Is this a pain from stretching? If yes, then it is nice, feel the pleasure from stretching … If your back hurts, that means that you are cleansing yourself, all these unnecessarily accumulated burdens are cleansed." (participant observation and autoethnography, August 16, 2012)

The concept of a pleasant pain is often used in the interviews; pain is a sign of cleansing the body and psyche. After cleansing, there is an improvement in the mood:

> And I walked really hurt in general after these classes because it was a lot and intensive. But, this is a pleasant pain and cleansing … During exercises, I simply feel good, well, because I get tired and it hurts me, but this is such a really pleasant pain and tiredness, such that the person later feels so light, delicate, healthy, and alive. (practitioner for 20 years, with breaks)

The concept of "pleasant pain" appears from B.K.S. Iyengar. Feeling the pain and overcoming it has a spiritual character and shapes the spiritual posture in yoga, even if the practitioners do not know that, or even deny it[3]:

> Only when there is a pain will you see the light. Pain is your guru. As we experience the pleasures happily, we must also learn not to lose our happiness when the pain comes. As we see good in pleasure, we should learn to see good in pain. Learn to find comfort even in discomfort. We must not try to run from the pain but to move through and beyond it. This is the cultivation of tenacity and perseverance, which is a spiritual attitude towards yoga. This is also spiritual attitude towards life. (Iyengar 2005a:47)

What Iyengar writes does not have to be known to the practitioners, they reach this knowledge by practice according to the suggestions expressed verbally by yoga instructors. Not many of those practicing hatha-yoga read and/or remember suggestions and language of books by Iyengar.

> So you can feel already after the first class. I felt an immense flow of energy after such a first weekend meeting with Sławek. I did not want to believe what influence it has. These were really difficult classes, endurance, such that I sit, I was exhausted … and I left as if I were walking after class on tilts, floating above the ground: light, so happy, I had a will to just run. In my case, it was almost from the first class, from the first contact with yoga. (practitioner for 14 years, yoga instructor, owner of a hatha-yoga school)

The body integrated with the mind often resists, especially with the beginners. This resistance needs to be overpowered in order to develop further. This is my impression from first classes:

> Today I felt since the morning like in a cocoon. I did not want to open in the morning because of yoga. I wanted to stay focused, almost half asleep, so the outer world would not reach me. I went for a walk. This feeling persisted. It was about 17.00 when yoga exercises allowed me to open myself, stretch my body, and at the same time the perception of the world, and accept it the way it is. I could be with the outer world on equal rights without the protection of my inner world and at the same time together with it. I cracked this cocoon by stretching myself and lasting long in the positions.
> Strange is this feeling of wanting to be in a cocoon. I would not know that I was in it if it were not for yoga. This tendency is something so natural, it is a natural wholeness that is difficult to notice. It is an everyday normality of the body, sometimes stronger, sometimes less strong. Physical exercises break it. They allow the body to reach normality with others being itself at the same time.
> Every day I notice that stretching creates space for me, gives more space in the body and also in the mind. This is my interpretation based on what I heard once from master Szczepanik. He said then during exercises: "People move out outside the city to the countryside. What do they want? They want space. We also want more space." Master gives me more ways to understand what happens to us during exercises. Maybe without these interpretations we would not see what I am writing about now. (after five months of exercises, participant observation and autoethnography, January 30, 2008)

First classes are extremely important for undertaking further efforts in yoga practice. Going into raptures over it, marveling at the exercises can be a very important element of building the motivation for exercising.

Some people start their adventure with yoga at home, they do it on their own using market guides available in the book, although it can be dangerous for their bodies if there is no control of the instructor, according to the practitioners.

Entering yoga practice is not an act of a one-time decision; it lasts in time and is a process. As we can see, it starts with the interest in yoga by acquiring information about it, and it may happen then that this interest is put to sleep, and during some situation, for example, promotional event (this is an intervening condition), the decision about taking up yoga is made.

One of the aims/motives for doing yoga can be the desire to obtain the awareness of the own body (focusing on the reactions of your own body). We can find similar expressions, "understanding in the body," in the books of Iyengar (2005a:30). At the same time, being aware of one's own body, we can focus on here and now and disconnect from thinking, overbearing the psyche:

> I attended classes because I was interested in one aspect of yoga that I had read about somewhere, something that was at the beginning something abstract for me, which is the awareness of your own body. It is difficult to describe. With next postures we discovered our bodies more and more, we learn it, we try to listen to it. It is important to focus on the reactions of the body. For this to truly work, you

[3] See also latter section of this article: *Phase of a Fuller Recognition of Spiritual Aspects of Hatha-Yoga (Para-Religion).*

> know, you need to be really focused, try to think only about what you are doing at a given moment … And it is known that this is not easy at all. All the time the head is filled with different thoughts and it is difficult to disconnect from it and focus. (practitioner for 3 years)

Learning the awareness of your own body is also connected with the reaction of the body in specific life situations. Body observation is connected with its knowing and discovering its reactions, strength and weakness, inhibitions and restrictions, pain (compare Iyengar 2005a: 49 [where he writes that pain helps to localize the affected area of the body]). Often, one can observe emotions accompanying the exercises, for example, fear:

> Practicing standing upside down, I felt a bit scared. I have also noticed that very important is precision when doing the candle or standing upside down. Every gesture and a sequence of movements in performing these positions are extremely important. It needs to be done as it should, which is how the teacher says. I have also noticed a paradox that in the candle, the strength of legs is very important. Having your legs up it is good to have them strong so they would straighten up and pull the body up. It is easier then to keep in balance. (after five months of exercises, participating observation and autoethnography, January 26, 2008)

In the initial stage of the practice, there might be a change of the teacher. The practitioner is looking for a teacher that is adjusted to his character and psyche. After finding the teacher, there starts stabilization in the practice.

Motivation for yoga practice can be stopped if the beginner has higher expectations. If one wants immediate results, then one can have doubts after some time to the sense of the practice, and skepticism appears. The beginners look for effects and defined feelings, and also quick effects. They try to perceive them based on their prior expectations and possessed knowledge and observation of celebrities who do yoga (e.g., Madonna). Madonna ascribes yoga the following properties:

> Yoga is a metaphor for life. You have to take it really slowly. You can't rush. You can't skip to the next position. You find yourself in very humiliating situations, but you can't judge yourself. You just have to breathe, and let go. It is a workout for your mind, your body, and your soul.[4]

Madonna treats yoga really practically—as exercises for the body, mind, and soul. Interestingly, she mentions here the soul, which shows religious connotations of yoga in the system of the values of the celebrity.

Other celebrities doing yoga are: Sting, Jennifer Aniston, Gwyneth Paltrow, Ricky Martin, Meg Ryan, Drew Barrymore, Reese Witherspoon, Nicole Scherzinger, Mathew McConaughey (Górski 2004).

If the beginner is not aware of the fact that yoga is a process and the effects come with time, then s/he can get discouraged practicing it.

> I expected that yoga would allow me this … um … emotional education. Um … Yes, I think this is how it's called, that it would be easier for me to focus, that I would have more patience in general, that I would cope better with the stress and different tensions. Frankly speaking, I think I expected some miracles [*laughter*]. Yes … and you cannot, really. With such beliefs, you can easily discourage yourself, resign quickly because there will be no results … Maybe I've practiced yoga for too short … But definitely, without any doubt, it is so that something is improving, but anyone who does any sport can say that; after all, there are hormones secreted so the mood changes into a positive one, that is what yoga gives me, good mood, but not a special one, but a normal one. Thanks to these classes I ensured myself in the belief that yoga is … I feel my muscles, I feel generally better, and I hope that there will be bigger effects, that I will feel it somehow because I would like to spring with energy a lot and be so calm in difficult situations. That is what I would like the most; yoga calmed me down a bit, but as I have already mentioned earlier, it is more tiredness than such effects that others have. I do not know if I practice yoga, for example, for 10 years and there are no such effects as I would want that I would still do it. It is not so that I link my career with yoga because one can hear about this more recently, but I would want it to considerably change my life. I hope that I will not need 10 years [*laughter*]. (practitioner for a year, age 22)

If the practitioner does not connect with yoga practice, for example, social aims, and only sticks to visible physical and mental effects, then the lack of expected and positive effects can result in moving away from the practice. When the practitioner sees no effects, then what could keep the practice in this situation is a further attention to expectations and keeping them.

Noticing the Effects

To remain in the practice it is very important to perceive the effects of yoga—they build a strong motivation for further practice. This perception of effects is already in the first phase, and especially at the end of it. Recognition of the effects is different in different time moments of yoga practice. For the processability in recognition of the effects of yoga practice points out also an expert in this field, Sławomir Bubicz (the student of B.K.S. Iyengar):

> When do the first effects of exercising appear? I ask Sławomir Bubicz, the director of Hatha-Yoga Academy. Just after a month. Better sleep, better silhouette (you keep up straight, your walk is lighter), better blood supply (hands and feet stop getting cold), bigger peace in stressful situations, calmer breath. After half a year, the relations with people start changing. You are more emotionally stable, you do not get "infected" with negative emotions from others. A feeling that everything is OK starts overcoming you. You stop feeling regret—to God, parents, anybody. (Staszewski 2009 [trans. from Polish—KTK])

One can risk a thesis that without any visible effects in hatha-yoga practitioners move away, and perceiving the effects, they stay. It is also important to see the influence of yoga on everyday life and undertaken decisions (it is about the effects outside the practice itself) and on the behavior. One day, after five months of exercising, I noticed the effects of practicing yoga; today, looking at it from the perspective of the researcher, I ascribed instrumental meaning to yoga exercises.

[4] See: http://magazine.foxnews.com/celebrity/hot-celebrity-bodies-shaped-yoga. Retrieved July 19, 2014.

> After doing a cycle "welcoming of the Moon," I was straightened and charged all day. I straightened myself all the time: in the train, on a walk, entering Warsaw University to participate in a PhD exam. Reading on the return trip in the train, I had a big efficiency. (after six months of exercises, participant observation and autoethnography, February 26, 2008)

When it comes to me, it is obvious that I, myself, had such difficult moments that I was not entirely sure about my decision being right. Because, you know, what you do during the class, you feel later inside, in a normal life; today, for example, I … after doing such a standard set of exercises, I feel the difference since I started doing, and improved my mood. I noticed that I could do something else; yoga was for me like an impulse due to which we decided to do other things. I think a year ago I signed up at a swimming pool, and I go to swim about 3 times a week. Having such a connection I feel how my body is working and above all my mind. (practitioner for 3 years)

Very important is the perception of health effects after some time of doing yoga. The practitioners often talk about acquiring organism resistance and limiting getting sick. This also keeps these people practicing. Yoga instructors pay great attention to the health effects of yoga; the great propagator of hatha-yoga, B.K.S. Iyengar (2005b), himself underlined the curing properties of yoga ascribed to given *asanas'* healing properties, and in a different book, *The Tree of Yoga* (2002a:37), he mentions even that he cured himself from tuberculosis. And in the book *Light on Life* (Iyengar 2005a:267-268), he even gives a set of *asanas* creating emotional stability. In many training films, it is also underlined at the end of describing a given *asana* its specific healing properties. The practitioners have then the language and some sort of preparation to tell others about such effects:

> I don't have … I don't have muscle pains. Suddenly it turns out that I am more physically fit when it comes to, for example, bending down, picking something up from the floor, nothing cracks, not that you bend down and ouch [*pretending to be in pain*], no. Such things I do not say that they are gone forever because … because … because, I don't know, but suddenly it is not only that I stopped this organism regress that started happening, that I started seeing, funny thing, but I started seeing, and some things just moved back. (beginner in yoga practice, age 50)

In case of some people, there is somewhat self-healing thanks to *asanas* practice:

> **Interviewer:** And do you recommend others yoga training? What do you think, what kind of a person could find oneself in it?
> **Practitioner:** Any person, any person. There are tangible assets, fitness. I had problems with the spine, so I helped myself, you can say, I set this spine, really, with yoga. I had a problem, like for three years I had this, but I managed and it is OK. (practitioner for 10 years, age 51)

Health effects are often confirmed in conversations among the practitioners and also in conversations with the instructor. If the instructor confirms the presence of healing effects of yoga, then this is a serious argument to accept such an interpretation of the way yoga works:

> Next, Michał talked a lot about the positive health effects for him coming out from doing yoga. He said that he would be walking with a cane if he did not do yoga. The doctor told him that he would have problems with the knee and it would stay like that. After many months of exercises, there is no sign of the injury. He also had his fingers twisted as if he had rheumatism, yoga practice (downward facing dog) allowed him to straighten his fingers, and today there is no sign after the endurance deformations caused by the rock climbing. Similarly, he had problems with the spine. Today, he would be walking with a cane or be in a wheelchair, the doctors wanted to operate on him. Practicing yoga, after a year and a half, allowed him to get out of this problem. (after ten months of practice, participant observation and autoethnography, July 11, 2008)

The first breakthrough moment and the effect of the work on the body in yoga practice can be better physical feeling of the practitioner. One acquires the identity of the practitioner also by perceiving the physical effects:

> First is, well, this that people feel physically better with their body, taking care of the body is extremely important, and we, here, in this Western culture, do not take care of the body like in the East. It needs to be remembered that the body is the temple of the soul, it needs to be cared for, nursed, cherished, this place then it harmonizes with our mind. That is why you need to take care of it, you need to love your body, which is very important; unfortunately, we, Poles, we do not love our bodies, we constantly have something to criticize it. It is here not so, we are too fat, then there is that, breasts are not so, not that tall, simply, it is awful. Yoga teaches how to love your body and it is a great gift, we got it when we were born and it is a great gift, and we should take care of it, love it the way it is. (yoga instructor)

In the above quote, a statement appears—"the body is the temple of the soul." It is difficult to ascertain whether it is a conscious quote, or the one taken from the book by the hatha-yoga guru, B.K.S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga*, "[b]ecause the body is the dwelling place of man, one should treat it as a temple of the soul" (2002a:18, see also p. 3). Disregarding the current situation, it can be stated that some language statements belong to the repertoire of the knowledge of practitioners and are some symbolic background allowing them to interpret what the sole practice and perception of the effects of practice are.

A very essential element defining the identity of the practitioner is the time of perceiving the effects of yoga practice. Apart from perceiving healing and psychic long-term effects, **the practitioner also sees the effects right after finishing exercising** (e.g., effects of mental relaxation), during last *asana* finishing every practice:

> We end the exercises with a relaxation, this relaxation lasts even 15 minutes, and we lay down in a so-called corpse position, well, then there are marvelous experiences, marvelous experiences. It is great. After this effort, all of this comes back to being normal, and so wonderfully the energy flows through the body, we can even fall asleep, and sleep from all of this. Cool things happen at the end, such inner feelings, and the more the person is engaged, the better the experiences. Such a person is generally

quiet, does not get nervous, has a lower voice, is calmed. Really, there is no hogwash here. Well, the benefits here are immense, I do not get sick. (practitioner, age 49)

A very interesting effect of practicing hatha-yoga is the influence on social relations of the practitioner. **Practicing yoga opens the body which being in such a state enlarges the openness of the subject towards other people.** Work on the body becomes the work on interpersonal relations:

> **Interviewer:** And when it comes to limitations that yoga eliminates, what does yoga give in interpersonal contacts?
> **Practitioner:** Above all, a huge openness. The person is not even aware how the body causes the closing of the body if not such a contracting of the body as it limits us. On one side, it limits us, and on the other side, we close ourselves in our body, not wanting outside. And here, slowly, slowly, the opening of the body causes the opening towards the surrounding. Really! (practitioner for 4 years, age 46)

A very interesting social phenomenon is perception of the effects by others in a given practitioner. When the practitioner sees that others, often close people, perceive the effects (a looking-glass self), it strengthens the motivation to practice and causes feelings of contentment and confirmation of the right choice of the path. A subjective self of the practitioner is made stronger, and by the perceptions of others, the individual pays more attention to new qualities of the psyche that were never there. **This is how the identity of yoga practitioner is shaping to which new content is introduced:**

> I am definitely calmer, it brings such a great balance, mostly mental, but I suspect that it links with that we still develop physically. So harmoniously our body, it also is that, such mental harmony … very … I don't even suspected that people at work also feel it, see, always ask me if this is the influence of yoga [*laughter*]. And I say, I think so [*laughter*]. So, it is a great, great advantage when others apart from me see some important changes in my behavior … Well, yes, this could be really true, yoga can give such a strength, my husband tells everyone that thanks to yoga I became a better partner in everyday life [*laughter*]. (practitioner for 7 years)

The beginner sometimes compares himself to other practitioners: Do I come up to them with my fitness? Generally, in hatha-yoga, there is a rule not to compare oneself to others, and to perform *asanas* according to one's possibilities. However, people who treat yoga as sport or gymnastics feel the need to compare themselves to others.

Phase of a Fuller Recognition of Psychophysical Effects and Ascribing Appropriate Meanings to Them

After perceiving physical effects in the first phase of the process of development of the practice, there is a fuller perception of the effects, both physical and mental. There is a fully conscious connection of the physical development with the effects of psychic peace and calmness. This skill of connecting is a symptom of the beginning of the second phase of the development of the practice of hatha-yoga. Some of the elements of this physical and mental process can occur in the first phase, but its fuller development occurs much later. This process (linking the physical and psychic developments—the concept of integration [see: Iyengar 2005a:4-5]) never ends; what is important are harmonious linkages of the psyche and the body:

> It is such an ideal connection of the body with the spirit. The longer you exercise, the better and … it gets deeper into you, the better you understand it. Although this is a very slow process, I am not an authority in this matter, but, according to me, the soul of yoga, for me, the soul of yoga is this marvelous harmony. The fact that you can do this, that you are able to get such a cooperation between these two parts of you, such different parts, such an integration. (practitioner for 4 years, age 23)

> And all the time I practice like this, develop, go somewhere, gain different skills. I change, right? Because yoga is something … it is a process that causes changes, we change in the body, but we also change emotionally, mentally. As you maybe know, it is impossible to disconnect the body from the mind. When we are unhappy or mentally down, then our body is down, too, right? It is said that people somatize and due to the suffering they start being sick. There is also such a nice saying that in a healthy body, there is a healthy spirit. Working on your body we influence the state of the consciousness, the mind, we feel happy, more balanced. And this is how we reach deeper and deeper, we learn ourselves, our week sides, we strengthen ourselves. (practitioner for 14 years, yoga instructor, owner of hatha-yoga school)

Even practicing yoga as a sport will not stop the influence of the practice on the psyche.

> There is no greater difference that the spiritual aspect is omitted in the beginning. Asanas are psycho-physical exercises, not gymnastics. Sooner or later, a man will experience in them inner harmony, integration, and happiness. He will empirically discover the spiritual layers of his humanity that will lead him to further changes. (Pawłowska 2012 [trans. form Polish—KTK])

Yoga practice turns out to be as an "agency" that influences the psychic changes in the individual against his/her will:

> I, as a passive observer, that is, a person that has never had contact with yoga, I believed it to be a kind of sport, and now I hear that it is something different … Well, I have a friend that recently started going to yoga, and she treats it like that, you can do yoga like that. She values this emaciation that you can relax, focus on the most important things. It also helps her a lot, but she does it mechanically. And, absurdly, it turns out that even though she does not try achieving that, then yoga influences her psyche, as well. Although she might not be aware of this, does not see that, she perceives her world differently. (practitioner for 5 months, age 24)

First, yoga class, as it has been already mentioned, is not always a nice occurrence. Yoga requires a large physical effort and starting the use of those muscles that might have never been used. The beginnings of exercising can be very difficult, even after a few months of doing yoga:

> After class, at 19.30, in the changing room, there were comments about the exercises in lifting up legs to the perpendicular position (exercises for abdominal muscles), that they were hard and Michał

overdoes them. But, these were accepting comments with smiles.

Really, Michał usually gives us a hard time, sometimes it is on the verge of endurance. I barely manage, try to survive to the moment when he says, "Maximum … enough." Exercises in one hour for the initial group are hard, intensive. Although the last exercises were mainly stretching, but also exhausting. (after eight months of practice, participant observation and autoethnography, May 20, 2008)

It is Saturday; today I went to yoga in Źródliska Park. These meetings were organized by the company Yoga Center, from Gdańska Street.[5] The aim is advertisement for two months in the park at 12.00 in the fresh air (they are free classes). It was ashtanga yoga, very difficult exercises.

The pace of doing the exercises was so fast that, really, you cannot think about anything else, full concentration here and now. There was even no time to observe how others exercise, but I liked the exercises. I really felt relaxed. This monotony of the intermission worked wonderfully.

After the exercises, my muscles hurt and I was sore. At the end I asked a question: How long did the instructor lady exercise? She said that the advances should be measured with our own measure, "how much further do I bend in comparison to previous times," or if I do a given exercise better. She stated that you should not look at the instructor and compare with others. (after eight months of practice, participant observation and autoethnography, May 24, 2008)

[5] See: http://www.yoga.net.pl/. Retrieved November 17, 2013.

Such training causes muscle pains and cramps, sometimes you cannot do given exercises, which causes some problems with self-esteem. However, with more hatha-yoga practice, if a proper meaning is given by the practitioners (e.g., that yoga is a challenge, a healthy physical exercise, spiritual practice, etc.), then they stay with practicing it, and **they increase the intensity of the practice.**

The meaning of diagnosing your own body, getting acquainted with it is an effect that the person achieves at some point of practicing hatha-yoga. The experiencing of the body is a constant process in yoga practice, and in it there is getting acquainted with somebody's own body, for example, thanks to lasting in a given position. It is some form of a contact with oneself. Achieving this moment can sometimes last for years:

> This contact with your own body was something that cost me a few years, such searching and … such … how to say it. I really wanted to understand what it is all about in this slogan. Apart from that I understand the words, well, um. (practitioner for 8 years)

Diagnosing the body refers also to its different mental qualities. The body has, for example, memory; it means that the body can have some consciousness of itself. The subject of the action here treats the body subjectively, somehow it has an agency:

> And this is interesting that after a half a year break I only need a week and it is better than it was … to move, you are more stretched, and the body remembers. (practitioner for 10 years, age 51)

Experiencing the body is connected with **experiencing life.** The body reflects our current life situation. It is not a sign vehicle only, it is an active agent. Working in yoga on our body, we work on our life because the body expresses the life of practitioners:

> Because everyone is different, everybody has different conditioning, different life experiences, and different lanes, it goes and it processes differently. And even if it is happening not right, if we have some regress, stay in one place, then this also has some purpose, reason, and in this moment it shows us something about ourselves, and we can work with it. (practitioner for 5 years)

Diagnosing the body is also diagnosing through hatha-yoga practice the role of breathing in our life. One discovers here the connection of the breath, body, and mind. The breath links with the movements of our body, and the right breath with the mind concentration. Realization of this idea in practice is visible especially in classes with an instructor who usually pays attention to calm and correct breathing. It is important to perceive the effects of yoga practice (in this case breathing) on life outside the classes and *asanas* exercises:

> And, um, I did not mention a very important thing, I think the most important thing in yoga, that is breathing. It would seem that breathing is really simple, it seemed so to me until I went to yoga [*laughter*], um, to be honest, correct breathing is the basis of every well-done posture … Only then can the air affect every part of our body, breathing is synchronized with every move. And … and this correct breathing is also connected with this focusing, concentration … Such learning of the correctness of breathing is not easy, but later when we learn it, even outside of class, to breathe properly, that is, by diaphragm, then we realize that we begin to function differently, that somehow we have more energy, we are less sleepy. (practitioner for 3 years)

Breathing has many functions. Very important here is cleansing the body. The breathing is a regulator of our actions, their speed and quality. All of this can be experienced while performing *asanas*, which, of course, can be moved to our everyday life. If the breath orders the rhythm of the exercises, then, through analogy, it also orders the rhythm of our actions in life and the rhythm of life in general:

> Breathing has many functions, one of them is cleansing the body, liquidating the tension. A breath in cleanses the mind and the body, with the breath out all of these contaminations are let out. Secondly, and also important, breathing helps us to deepen the exercises, particular postures, it also sets the rhythm of the exercises. It tells what pace you exercise in, how far you can move doing asanas, I mean, of course endurance and the capabilities of the body. (practitioner for 7 years, age 22)

Sole, specific breathing exercises (*pranayama*) are often done before or after *asanas*. *Pranayama* practice is about correct breathing, controlling, and regulating appropriate rhythm of breathing, sometimes about its withholding (Iyengar 1983). The practice of *pranayama* nourishes healthy features of consciousness (*vritti*).

The meanings ascribed to yoga change while practicing it, for example, from treating it as physical

exercises to exercises calming down the psyche, or methods of fighting back the stress. It is connected with the increase of physical endurance of the practitioners, which allows them to better concentrate on the psychic or spiritual side of the practice.

Mental calmness has its opposition, and it is psychic aggravation. It happens through the aggravation of the body. Here, one also perceives the connection of the body and the psyche. That is why in yoga, according to the practitioners, it is very important to adjust the sequence of the exercises so after stimulating exercises appeared calming exercises. **All of this state the belief that between the body and the psyche there is a meaningful connection.** The state of bodily stimulation influences the state of psychic stimulation.

Intermediate practitioners ascribe yoga mainly the meaning of changes in the body, and later in the psyche, and improvement of the physical and psychic well-being:

> A person discovers such new physical horizons and knows their body better because you feel such parts of the body that you have not even known that they exist, and more importantly, you change psychically. You calm down, relax even. I, for example, learned patience while practicing yoga. I used to be an awfully hot-tempered person! Somebody or something made me upset and I exploded! And now [*laughter*] … really, I sometimes do not recognize myself [*laughter*] … this yoga is a very good thing. I am just a bit when it comes to its influence on life … but [my boyfriend Paweł], oh my Lord! Simply an oasis of peace! But, he is already a maniac. For him, yoga, it could be said, is his whole life [*laughter*] … you know, every day 2-3 hours he does yoga, arguing with him is an art and a miracle! (practitioner for 2 years)

The physical and psychic well-being starts building a new quality of life. After several years of practicing yoga, some practitioners ascribe yoga the meaning of "improving the quality of life." It is a meaning that is connected with all changes, psychic and physical, and connected with improved quality of everyday life (controlling emotions, lower stress, more creativity, and even the feeling of happiness, etc.):

> Well then, what yoga gives me is surely from the moment I practice I am happier, you know what I mean? Well, simply somehow what you practice in yoga transfers to my everyday life, I mean, I am no longer so tense, I do not worry about everything, it is a bit so that if I manage to achieve something in yoga, something that seems to be out of my reach, then I feel so, that it does not have to be only like this in yoga because, well, I know, like I would get some wings [*laughter*]. Because I have more faith in myself and now I look at the world more optimistically with hope for betterment, and I await some new challenges and I do not try, like in the past, to be unseen, hoping that I would not be noticed and I will somehow survive this situation … I also stress less now, constantly there is this calmness assisting, I am more relaxed and it brings me grand benefits not only because of this that it positively influences my organism and the state of my spirit, but also I somehow do better in class, I have more ideas, I am more creative, and I am not afraid to speak up. I also learned to better control my emotions, these negative ones … And, with full honesty, I can recommend yoga to others as a remedy both for the body and the soul [*laughter*]. (practitioner for 3 years, age 22)

Such a complete approach to the interpretation of changes in life thanks to yoga practice is somewhat a confirmation of making the right decision about practicing and justification for undertaking big physical and mental efforts connected with practicing yoga. Ascribing meaning of improvement of quality of life states somehow accepting yoga as a necessary practice in everyday life. It is also an indicator of the appearance of the second phase in yoga practice. The life attitude changes and the behavior in different situations changes, as well. All changes that happen in the life of an individual and its identity state the initial character of yoga.

The quality of life is connected with the psychic changes linked with **the openness** that in yoga is connected with the openness of the body, which is then transferred onto **the openness in the life itself.** Belief about such benefits and about the marvel of yoga is socially strengthened by opinions of other practitioners:

> Whereas if we control our mimics, that we do not do wild faces because it hurts us or we do not grit our teeth, this is something … something new. First, second, third thing new for the body and this influences such openness towards the new in general in life … Simply, something new happened. (practitioner for 8 years)

The change of life attitude and the quality of life is also **a change of diet and the style of feeding.** Diet is a form of addressing the body; thanks to this yoga practice changes the way of treating the body through eating different, healthy food. The need to use stimulants is also smaller:

> In general … I ate whatever … In general, such unhealthy food or such that somewhere … um … I don't know, like chocolate that is … increases the level of serotonin and improves the mood, and so on, cheese, and so on, such things that work so stimulating the organism … And, this is the moment when it works as if being more subtle, your sensitivity to your body, to your surroundings, and you also start, I noticed, you start feeling what you eat … and you better listen to the needs of your organism, for example, you feel better what is good and what is bad for you, um … right, so, I, for example, acquired a taste for simple food, some simple products with no chemistry, that I have a greater pleasure from eating such a things. I do not want to eat fast food and drink fizzy drinks, and that's in general. (practitioner for 5 years)

A long-term hatha-yoga instructor talks about a proper diet (see the quote below), using **specific terms.** "Toxins," "adding toxins," "organism poisoning," "awaking the consciousness," "auto-destruction through nutrition," "organism cleansing," "enlarging the space"—these are terms of a language often used by the instructors, and are delivered to the adepts of yoga so they could understand the reactions of their organisms and their inhibitions connected with the diet. The terminology connected with the diet is provided by famous gurus of hatha-yoga, for example, Sri Pattabhi Jois (2010:24) quotes Upanishads: "When the food we take in is pure, our minds become pure. When our minds become pure, memory becomes steady." Terminology and this knowledge show us

a close connection between nutrition and the state of the mind. These terms are later used by the practitioners. They refer to the complete approach to life and body. The observation of the body and its feelings connected with nutrition gives some basis for reflection. This reflection has even a "para-religious" character. The practitioners start wondering what is good and what is evil. This reflection starts from the thought about what is good for one's body:

> The quality of what we put into the body is very vital, yes, we cannot treat our body like a rubbish bin, we put anything when we are still young, the body manages well and we do not feel it, right. But, with time, the amount of toxins gathered in the body grows, and we, unfortunately, start getting sick anyway, some illnesses appear. And not only on the level of bones and muscles that we become stiffer due to some life experiences that tense us up, yes, body … it is known that stress goes over to the body, we tense up, yes, if it is long … if the stress holds on for a long time, we tense a lot, and this tension stays permanently in our body. But also, bad nutrition causes that different toxins accumulate in different muscles, cells, joints and because of this joints become stiffer, everything is so swollen, and set, and through practice of asanas we can cleanse this, yes. But, it is good when we clean not adding more toxins. Because we can cleanse practicing asanas, but all the time we will still, for example, smoke cigarettes and poison ourselves. And it will be so that we clean ourselves here a bit and here we will poison ourselves a bit. And this will all be somewhat in one place. But, after some time, we will realize that you cannot work like this because this is such a destructive action, yes. We poison ourselves for different reasons. Everybody has their reasons why s/he uses different stimulants and works auto-destructively. But, we are aware of that, our consciousness awakes and some things, earlier not important, become vital, we take care of it, we wonder whether … what would be better to eat to feel better. (practitioner for 14 years, hatha-yoga instructor, owner of a hatha-yoga school)

Thanks to exercises more attention is paid to the nutritional problem also before the exercises. Eating heavy meals before practicing *asanas* and eating directly before exercises is not recommended:

> One of the participants of this feast left later in the evening during the exercises and did not return to the class, he felt weak because of having eaten fried camembert cheese in wild chanterelle sauce, as he stated. (participant observation, November 10, 2008)

The teacher teaches us to feel and **name the feelings of our body.** His words, language forms allow us to feel some difficult exercises and resulting from them states of the body positively:

> When pulling the body back from the wall on the line with the arms supporting against the floor, Michał approached me, and when I simply could not do that exercise, he supported my back with his knee, saying: "Straighten your legs, straight knees, hold with your legs, hands delicately support, you will feel stretching, you see how wonderful that is. Wonderful, right? Wonderful, right? Wonderful, right." I answered barely making a sound, "Wonderful." The exercise seemed to be awfully difficult. After a while I managed to do it. The main problem was with the technique (straight legs) and breaking the fear. I kept my position later on with a much smaller effort. (participant observation and autoethnography, November 11, 2008)

I was at yoga in the park. Michał ran the class. Today yoga was set on searching for the balance. There were many exercises to train balance: tree, trikonasana, et cetera; Michał, while doing the asanas, paid attention to the feeling of the body, especially the ones connected with the balance:
– "Feel how the back parts of your legs stretch, how your calves stretch (while doing the downward facing dog)."
– "Feel the balance between the right and left foot, feel how you achieve the balance, how you balance between the right and left side of your body. Feel how the center of gravity moves between the right and the left side of the body (the mountain position)."

> Michał also said a lot about achieving balance between tension and relaxation. He talked about this while doing trikonasana: "Feel how your thighs work. Let the left leg work, but let abdominal muscles stay relaxed. The work of the body is tension, but also relaxation. Relaxation is also work." When we were breathing lying with our feet together, resting, Michał paid attention to breathing: "Hear and feel the wind. Now pay attention to your breathing. It is your inner wind. It cleanses your lungs." (participant observation and autoethnography, August 16, 2009)

The improvement of quality of everyday life is also an increase in the feeling of self-value, self-esteem, self-confidence, perseverance that changes the life attitude and resolves many problems in everyday life. This all is ascribed to yoga. **The individual has the awareness of acquiring new psychic abilities thanks to yoga, which builds one's identity as a yoga practitioner:**

> For example, I don't know … I walked with a proudly raised head, let's call it … then different things started solving themselves. It turned out that people looked at me differently, that they don't attack me, that I don't have to attack. (practitioner for 8 years)

> From what I have noticed, I am more self-assured in the positive meaning, I know how to sell myself, I know my value, and I have no feeling of inferiority. Simply, when I have to do something, I give all of myself and I believe in myself, believe me or not, but this brings effects, and surely this is the result of yoga because from the moment of starting the exercises, then something really started changing in my life. (practitioner for 3 years)

It is very important to obtain social skills. They are connected with attentiveness and concentration on the here and now. Heightened sensitivity into another person is the basis of being nice towards others. Interviews also show a high self-awareness of the researched and their reflexivity concerning their identity and what happened to it after starting the practice of yoga:

> I became, if I say so, more aware and sensitive towards what happens around me. In the past, I would not notice that. People are very busy now, only haste all the time, work, classes, work, classes, and again, and again. There is not even a second to look outside the window, to see how the world looks. Apart from that, I try to smile more often at people, just because, with no reason, just simply be a nice person. (practitioner for 3 years)

With the progress of the practice, many people **want to deepen this practice.** One of the methods is a trip to a solitudinal training camp, or trips to the roots of yoga—to India and schools operating there:

> Well, you know, what we deal with is only a part of what yoga really is. That is why Paweł [advanced practitioner, interlocutor's boyfriend] saves money to go to India to such workshops. (practitioner for 2 years)

However, some people, at some point, run away from the practice, and their practice can end in just the moment of perceiving the changes in their bodies and psyche:

> There are people who, noticing the changes that happen, have to stop practicing, yes, they have to stop practicing because these changes are difficult to cope with, it turns out that there is too much to change and they are not ready yet. Right … for example, if someone is really addicted to cigarettes and knows that it is not good for him, he is aware of that, sometimes people run away from this. They run away from the practice because they do not want to face what they have already noticed. They have noticed that they hurt themselves, but they are not ready to change it. Of course, if they went on practicing, then it would help them to achieve the goal, become stronger. (practitioner for 14 years, yoga instructor, owner of a hatha-yoga school)

Phase of a Fuller Recognition of Spiritual Aspects of Hatha-Yoga (Para-Religion)

Some sort of problem for the practitioners is the attitude towards the spiritual aspects of yoga. As it is known, yoga is originally linked with certain spiritual and moral values that need to be obeyed. It is the so-called Eightfold Path of Yoga by Patanjali (Iyengar 2002b). First, there should be morality and only then exercises of *asanas*. If we imagine yoga, following B.K.S. Iyengar, as a tree, then the roots would be moral values (*yamas*). Breathing exercises and meditation are also elements of the practice.

Thus, the elements of yoga are at the very beginning bans, so-called *yamas*—withholding from violence (*ahimsa*), withholding from lying (*satya*), withholding from theft and greed (*asteya*), lack of desire and control over sensual desires (*brahmacharya*), lack of greed (*aparigraha*). Next, there are also recommendations (*niyamas*). It is somewhat the trunk of the tree of yoga—cleanliness (*sauca*), contentment (*santosa*), self-discipline and eagerness (*tapas*), self-knowing (*swadhyaya*), giving oneself to God (*Iswara-Pranidhana*). Giving oneself to God points the most to the religious aspect of yoga practice—it is about focusing on the godly aspect, although many Western teachers do not accept it as a religion as not to discourage the willing from practicing yoga, being at the same time confessors of different religions.

The bans support the development of cleansing the body and mind, and recommendations are the signs that should be followed that strengthen the practice.

Yoga practice is described in the remaining elements of the Eightfold Path: the practice of yoga postures (*asanas*, branches of the tree), breathing exercises (*pranayama*, the leaves of the yoga tree), withdrawal (*pratyahara*, bark of the tree), concentration (*dharana*, the sap of the tree), meditation (*dhyana*, the flower of the yoga tree), clean awareness (*Samadhi*, the fruit of the tree of yoga, when in the climax we forget about ego, the soul penetrates every element of the body). *Samadhi* is pure awareness, connection with the object/objects of meditation, and achieving the state of unity with the universe (Iyengar 2002a; also see: Eliade 1997:106-110; Iyengar 2002b; 2005a:3-37).

The spiritual elements point to the goal of yoga, that is, seeing the soul. Performing *asanas* allows finding the unity of the body, mind, and soul. This is so-called active meditation (Iyengar 2002a:149). At the end of the development of practice, posture is done in a perfect way (Iyengar 2002a:149). **Yoga allows withholding the movements of the mind** (*chitta-vritti-nirodha*).

The practice of *asanas* does something to the body of practitioners, and it is the beginning of some phenomena appearing. **These phenomena can be explained by the language of medicine and physiology of the body;** however, the moral-religious side of yoga **can only do as much as to give some food for thoughts.** This thinking is often supported through literature about yoga, together with the linguistic terminology taken from there:

> Nerve centers stimulate breathing, you know, that when you breathe differently as I read here, that some nerve is closed, some space opened then, this simply influences the well-being, the mind. These are not any magical things, this is this, when you go to do fitness, then you leave with serotonin or some other euphoria, I do not know which euphoria. Nobody is shocked, the same is at yoga, this is also movement, the same as in any other movement. I, personally, believe that this is according to yogis, according to people that make their religion out of this, well, this is something created by God. Even if not by God, then surely by wise men, even if, well, let's say, I don't have to believe that this is created by Siva, but that it was worked on through thousands of years, or hundreds let's say, that one, second, third came up with this idea, I mean, one did, the second continued, the third, and so on, and so forth through hundreds of years, even thousands because it is still being developed … If it was done according to the commandments of yoga, then first, for example, one needs to clean the consciousness and act in a moral way. Do some things and don't do other things. And it is written what should be done, what should not be done, more or less the same as in Christianity. Just like in any other religion … Only then you approach the practice. So only this, even if I start exercising, but I come across some brochure that tells me that then it makes me think, for example. (practitioner for 8 years)

Some of them show **a selective approach** to the whole philosophy and yoga practice. Yoga, in this situation, delivers a wide array of rules and practices that are the basis of free choice of an individual, choice connected with some elements from the set of rules. This is somewhat a **private choice;** it is done independently from institutional conditions and compulsions, as it often is in traditional and institutionalized religions.[6] Modern religious topics, apart from self-expression, the ethos of mobility, sexuality, and familism, are also a subject of individual autonomy (Luckmann 2006:147-154). Free choice agreeing with the interests of an individual—in this case, regarding what yoga is—is

[6] Compare: Knoblauch (2006:23, 25-26).

an expression of individual autonomy. It can be some philosophy and/or style of life with religious elements, but yoga can also be treated as physical exercises. Even if we point to a free choice of some elements of yoga practice and discard its religious character, then, in the end, as in the example below, we can point to spiritual elements, where the awareness of oneself gives also "such awareness of the surrounding world, connection with nature, harmony" (practitioner for 5 years). **Yoga becomes a privatized and individually understood para-religion or quasi-religion.**[7] The individual finds grounds for the individual choices in the net of direct contacts, for example, among friends, colleagues, an environment of common interests, family, et cetera. These individuals find themselves in a private sphere—primal public institutions no longer assure legitimization for these autonomic choices[8]:

> Yoga can be done in disconnection from the philosophy it is connected with … It can be treated only as some sort of physical activity. It does not need to be treated as a whole, anybody can choose, take from yoga something that is the most interesting, can focus on its different elements such as breathing exercises, meditation, Buddhist or Hindi philosophy. (practitioner for 5 years)

Yoga seems to be helping in privatizing and individualizing the values of spiritual areas. People have different needs and different practices are good for them, the choice of these appropriate for individual people states the **"privatizing of yoga practice":**

> Because everybody needs different things, right. Maybe this is good for me because it agrees with me, because I have such personality and such a way with yoga, or with the attitude towards life. It is good for me, but maybe somebody else needs something else, and it is not known how this road will go, that maybe one day it will go in such a spiritual direction, or maybe it remains on such a body level and such benefits for here and now, and you do not know it cannot be disapproved of. (practitioner for 5 years)

After some time of practicing yoga, there are some **auto-definitions** connected with yoga appearing. In general, it is difficult for the practitioners to define who they are in yoga practice; for sure, they are not yogis because it requires enormous devotion and strong practice excluding from the everyday life, it first and foremost requires time for practice. Generally, they define themselves as "exercising/practicing yoga." **Yoga is, for them, something more than physical exercises, but also something less than simply spiritual practice:**

> **Interviewer:** So what is more important, body or spiritual development?
> **Practitioner:** Well, rather both, I guess, because you cannot disconnect these two. Only that in case of yoga together with spiritual development there is also physical development this is the simplest way it can be described because not always when you exercise can you also develop mentally, and here, well, I am not saying that I went to yoga just to somehow get into the philosophy or to meditate or fly in general. And I am not a yogi after all, I only practice yoga. (practitioner for 20 years, with breaks)

Auto-definitions that appear in the third phase of the development of the practitioner are connected with **the acceptance of oneself as a person.** Yoga exercises are some form of taking care of oneself. Being good to oneself, after some time, is also connected with being good to others. Here, the element pointing to hatha-yoga as a para-religion is important because one work on the change of one's personality. A bigger awareness of such types of spirituality is shown by yoga teachers and persons practicing longer:

> Well, OK, I work on my body, I make time for myself to practice, to look after myself. And everyone, I think, when they look after themselves more, love themselves, then they start feeling better. Everything surrounds you in life better, I do not know if I said it right, but when we love ourselves, then people who love, maybe they come closer to each other. And they love as much because we love ourselves. And we radiate. We send radiation. There is something like this, but such specifying quieting, such a bigger happiness, such a bigger acceptance of oneself. (practitioner for 12 years, yoga teacher)

What is also important in yoga is **opening not only of the body but also the worldview opening, which again points to para-religious character of the practice, transcending the self.** It is then about the creating of some psychic attitude that enables some spiritual reflection:

> Opening to this whole worldview, meditation … maybe the ability to accept the things that we normally don't accept because … it is so, yoga leads to emaciation, to cleansing, this is, I guess, the most important. So not to approach it as only body exercises, but open more to the philosophy so the mind would also benefit. (practitioner for 20 years, with breaks)

It is difficult to disconnect the spirituality of yoga from the bodylines and feeling of the body. This connection, frankly speaking, is the most important aspect of yoga. **The body awareness has a spiritual character:**

> **Interviewer:** And does yoga give you anything spiritual?
> **Practitioner:** Well, I mean, that if these were more regular exercises, then probably it would give because you enter a deeper contact with all of the muscles. You find out about the existence of muscles that before you would have no idea about because they are not usually activated, only during yoga. And you need to find out, get used to, and learn to breathe.

[7] Para-religious phenomena are connected with the interest in the final and existential aspects in the life of a man, but there are no beliefs in supernatural powers included. Para-religious approach is present in, for example, some psychotherapies or in various corporation cultures, where work on the meaning of life and individual identity are undertaken (Greil and Robbins 1994; also see: Greil and Rudy [1984] who write about so-called "identity transformation organizations"). These organizations, whether they ascribe themselves features of religious organizations or not, show some features of religions and religious practices. Yoga practice in the Western context can be treated as a privatized para-religion, when the individual defines here what is important for him/her from the ultimate concerns that I am working on, for example, identity or understanding the sense of life and its aim.
If hatha-yoga solves existential problems and changes the identity of an individual, then it is a para-religion. All of these statements about privatizing spirituality and religion become religiousness, autonomically described by the individual (Knoblauch 2006; Luckmann 2006). However, it should be remembered that religion is a social creation, not purely psychological (Prus 2009:124-125).

[8] Compare: Luckmann (2006:145-146). Although "religion requires a religious community," we have also secular agencies that help in alternation and/or confirming the plausibility structure of social reality—as psychotherapy or institutions of political indoctrination (see: Berger and Luckmann 1991:178). There are also other institutions—as yoga, meditation, mindfulness courses, Eastern dancing, and karate schools.

> And, honestly, a deeper breathing makes that you enter a different … the mind works differently, you start thinking, focus on what is happening, and when you stretch every muscle, how every muscle hurts [*laughter*], try to close this pain, move away, so it is so, well, on the verge maybe not spiritual, but on the verge of spirituality. (no data about the years of practice, age 23)

The contact with the body is not only recognition of the body itself. The recognition of the sole physical body is a pretext to understanding the reality in the shape of specified mental states, for example, **being here and now or disconnecting from the thinking,** and not referring to oneself and not being in the past and the future tense (memories and projections). The body is thus a very important tool of work on the psyche that turns out to be a layer of spiritual practice because only marginally and partially are the connections with spiritual religiousness pointed out. The relationship of the corporal practice with the spirituality and psyche is pointed out by Iyengar (2005a:103): "Do not think, therefore, that asana pertains only to physical sheath. There is a total involvement between the three elements: sheath of the body (*annamaya kosa*), energy (*pranamaya kosa*), and mind (*manomaya kosa*)."

> And here they tell me to overturn. Contact with the body is about that I am to look for … these movements in the body and the way to do so, to do it, and to feel comfortable because then it is ideal that the position is comfortable … and effortless. And that I can, more importantly, meditate in this posture, then only this. Of course, there is a slogan "meditate in the posture." Well, this is quite a concrete suggestion. Of course, achieving it, I congratulate you. But, only that I think about what I do, that I am here and now, I think that for majority of people, this is such a dare not to think about millions of things such as why he does not want me or why … why somebody likes me or does not like me, what I eat, and if I earn, and so on, and so forth. Or that parents … why they were like this or were not … different things, everybody has … or how to wangle something so … different things. This is very difficult to think for an hour and a half only about this how to be here and now … such a typical slogan of Eastern religions. And this, this is an answer, too; also, I think some question that was or will be that, well, this is something new, characteristic of yoga being present here and now. This is this thing that apart from the clear physicality, such typical, corporal effects. (practitioner for 8 years)

Being here and now and gaining the awareness of the present is an extremely important element of teaching the religion of the East. Among other things, such teaching is important in, for example, Buddhism (see: Zotz 2007; Scherer 2009), but also in hatha-yoga. Meditation allowing to focus on the here and now is a part of hatha-yoga practice. Moreover, "[m]editation is integration—to make the disintegrated parts of man become one again" (Iyengar 2002a:144). What is more, Iyengar states that different names of meditation relate to the same state of meditation. There is one meditation:

> In many religious practices, one will find meditation and different ways of working with the emotions and desires. You may hear of Zen meditation and think that it is something different from meditation in yoga. But, meditation cannot be called Hindu meditation, Zen meditation, or transcendental meditation. Meditation is simply meditation. Remember that the Buddha was born in India and was also a student of yoga. (Iyengar 2002a:15; also see: Zotz 2007; Scherer 2009)

Thanks to this it is possible to build one's own syncretic spiritual attitude. The knowledge of the guru is distributed by books and goes to the practice.

In spiritual aspects of yoga, **some find certain values that influence their mental state. Humility**, as a value, becomes a mental feeling that is achieved by yoga, it is connected with gaining some posture which is the **openness attitude.** It has a mental character but in connection with "humility," it acquires a spiritual virtue. These values can be discovered quite early during *asana* practice; however, they mature together with the advancement in practice:

> However, this opened me. I also remember this feeling, so new and really interesting, so fresh, creative, new; in general, the notion of humility … these were the first classes. One of the first … first months that I started feeling how cool it is to be humble that I need to fight, I pay so I demand, for example. That somebody cannot care or it can be different than I imagined, this is a completely and differently understood humility … completely different. Such daily humility, humility that I start discovering as if it just came, and I named it then. I'm telling you, it is humility. And, it was such a fantastic feeling of such a life-relief that I hung around it for several months that it is so wonderful. I mean, of course, this costs … it is not so that this is so wonderful that I walk as if I were in love. Only that this costs, these are also painful feelings, this is also a fight with oneself, it is … like moving any stiff thing. (practitioner for 8 years)

The mental state achieved by practicing yoga allows perceiving reality differently; what used to be a problem for an individual, is no longer such a problem. Inner harmony gives strength to cope with everyday life and its problems. Although it is difficult to univocally state the influence of yoga upon the life attitudes (on the mind) of practitioners, **mentioning the change of life style**, together with the change of managing, indicates, however, a full change and full influence of hatha-yoga on the life of a practicing individual. Such changes have a **spiritual character**, not only mental or physical, and are connected with the identity transformation (para-religious activities). It is interesting that the spheres of mind and life are mentioned here at all, although the practice is connected mainly with the body and physical exercises:

> With time, it is possible to notice its influence on many other spheres of our lives. I, for example, started paying attention to completely different things … some problems that, in the past, seemed so big and that, for sure, I would not manage with them suddenly became unimportant. Well, in general, yoga gave me what I wanted, that is, this inner peace, such inner harmony, but also strength. Strength because I thought to myself that nothing is impossible. If every time during the class I overcome my boundaries, boundaries of my body, then in my life, I can also cross these boundaries. So I think that yoga can be such a life style, style of thinking, acting … It is

hard to talk about something that is connected to the mind, it is hard to name some states, it needs to be lived, I guess [*laughter*]. (practitioner for 3 years)

Thanks to yoga practice we gain … we attract the inner light that solves the problems. We are often completely unaware how to do that and we are shocked that it happens so fast. And now, it's à propos of what we have to give up when doing yoga. With time, when I follow the path, I discover that some factors that cause my … this that I develop slower. And, in a natural way, if someone wants to have improvements in yoga, tries to eliminate these factors that limit him. That is why many people practicing yoga give up stimulants such as tobacco, alcohol, not to mention drugs, as well as certain styles of life that do not agree with us. We start changing it so our improvement, our perfecting, and satisfaction that followed were deeper. Some people give up, for example, life … how to say it … they stop going to discos or doing some forms of entertainment that are not good for them.

Interviewer: And in your case, what were the factors that you found as limiting you?

Practitioner: From the very beginning when I started practicing yoga, I stopped drinking alcohol. Completely. And if earlier drinking alcohol gave me pleasure, then now it is something really unpleasant. The awareness in yoga grows. I am more aware, my mind becomes clearer, is able to look at everything from a better perspective. However, alcoholic intoxication has a completely opposite effect. (practitioner for 14 years)

The spiritual aspect is also underlined in **commonsense theorizing about the essence of yoga, where Eastern philosophy of thinking is mentioned,** for example, the notion of illusion (*maya*) and liquid reality. One also moves here outside the commonsense thinking into the sphere of mystical experiences ("this is more a sort of feeling"):

> And such a big Eastern weapon for such thinking is that there is this battle with these images that this notion of such an illusion, this maya that surrounds us and that … that people have this awareness, I mean, these people, I am saying, um, let us assume that people have this awareness of illusiveness of everything, that these are only concepts, that these are only images, and that the notion and the image always exist in a constant way and the reality is liquid, that it always exists in this process, and that words and images serve only as a way of transmission or as a, um, something that directs you, right. As such a … this hand that points to something, and that you do not look at this moment at the hand that is pointing, but at what it is pointing. (practitioner for 5 years)

Yoga teachers talk more about the spiritual aspects of yoga. Physical aspects, for example, breathing and movement, breath and body co-ordination have spiritual values for them. There is energy in breathing (*prana*) that, according to the interlocutor, can be identified with God. **A thesis can be done that the more advanced the practitioner, the more attention is paid to the spirituality:**

> And when we breathe, we breathe in fresh prana, fresh energy, let's call it. And this energy is needed by us, we need this energy to cleanse everything. And this energy, it can be said in Hinduism, or yoga, in thinking that God is in this prana. God is … I don't know how to say it in Polish so I will say it in English. In an atom, you have the electron, and you have the proton that goes around. In the electron you have the negative and positives, and everything that holds that little atom together—God is in there. God is also everywhere. He is even bigger than the universe. So you've got God everywhere and God is considered to be this energy, this energy that is prana. So breathing is very important because the whole time you need more energy. You need more energy to keep what you're doing, to keep the positions. So in some level, I started from the level of spirit, where you're breathing in God, you're breathing in the energy. You're breathing in life force. And you need life force to keep living. (practitioner for 12 years, yoga teacher)

Teachers sometimes also talk about a conscious **search of the state of enlightenment and *Samadhi*** (state of pure awareness and/or blissfulness, complete connection with the object of meditation). This state is their aim and the aim of yoga practice.

Para-religious character is especially obvious for people who from the very beginning searched in yoga for spiritual and "religious" threads. Yoga was, for them, a certain point of achieving after searching for this right spiritual path and satisfaction in life. Yoga is, for them, searching contact with the soul, divine element. Interesting here is the fact that this contact for many years is treated as a form of perfecting oneself, which states the "invisibility of religion" also for the subject feeling some transcendentality of their corporality during the practice. The individual often chooses on its own the way to achieve this contact with "own soul." Spirituality is here a question of autonomy of the individual, its private choices shaping the "patchwork" definition of religion. Every individual has its private, individual path reaching the contact with its true I:

> In the beginning, I looked for this satisfaction in philosophy, in religion, in many religions later. And later, I came across books about yoga and courses that were the answer to what I was looking for. Because yoga is … yoga itself is about finding, one can say, the perfect part of each of us. In everyone, there is something really deep, pure, perfect. And in many cultures, different religions, it is called differently. And that is why some people call it soul, some call it infinity in the heart, some call it God … and there are people who experience the contact with this, I will call it from now on, let's say, soul … contact with the soul they experience in a very religious way. Other people experience this contact not describing this as a contact with God, but as a form of perfecting, for example … the aim of yoga is always the same, that is, contact with the soul, contact with our true inner I—something deep and perfect—but there are many methods of achieving it. You can choose one method that you follow, however, if we move from one to another, well, sometimes they might seem to be contradictory, going to different directions. Admittedly, they go towards the same goal but different ways. (practitioner for 14 years)

A thesis can be made that the more advanced and experienced in the practice more often use other elements of yoga than only the practice of performing *asanas*. They sing, for example, mantras and meditate, set their own definition and the routine of practice:

> My method is the heart yoga. It is yoga based on meditation every day in peace and on singing mantras. This is the base of the path of yoga I follow. And … it is about that every day, in the morning, I meditate, at least a few … several minutes, and this gives me great strength, this gives me a lot of positive qualities that stay with me the whole year. These are such qualities like peace, happiness, enthusiasm, calmness, harmony that come to me in the meditations. (practitioner for 14 years)

We come across an opposite sequence in a different statement. Below, the presented interlocutor accents first the spiritual character of yoga, then she distances herself from the religious aspects of this practice. She points to the spiritual elements when describing the breathing.

Breath is, for her, an indicator of meditational character of physical exercises of yoga. **Focusing on breathing creates the state of "not thinking."** Breath, for the advanced practitioners, have a spiritual character:

> **Interviewer:** And what then with breathing? You said that it is the most important.
>
> **Practitioner:** Well, yes, because with … with meditation then the breathing helps so one could turn off the thoughts. The moment one starts focusing on breathing, and as if following its course, then he focuses on this breathing in such a way that he stops, that this breath becomes his thought, and then you as if do not pay attention to this breath and … frankly, there is nothing [*laughter*]. And this is it that there is nothing [*laughter*]. (fitness and yoga instructor)

Next, the respondent **distances** herself from the religious aspects of yoga practice (ritual aspects such as singing the hymns) and from the instructors who introduce spirituality of yoga, and gives a simply pragmatic reason of practicing it (help in sicknesses, possibility of mental quieting, ability to direct the energy to specific places, harmonious development of the body). Distancing from the religious aspects of yoga points also to recognizing the spiritual aspects of yoga. **It seems that there is some need in people already advanced in the practice of *asanas*, but not fully identifying with the spiritual or religious aspects of yoga, to describe (explain oneself) own position in this situation:**

> Because I, for example, practice yoga, I do not consider myself to be a typical yogi that sings hymns and practices yoga to, to learn meditation or, I don't know, change my awareness, no, that isn't so, this is so … well, I can't even say why I practice. There are many reasons. That it is for me some form of relaxation, that I believe that yoga can help in many ailments, in many illnesses, just thanks to such emaciation and ability to direct energy to a given place. So I say so that it is difficult … call it such a clean yoga. It cannot even be called this. Because even being in a course and having to do with such people somehow this does not fully convince me. Because a yogi sings hymns in honor of Patanjali and I am not going to sing hymns in honor of Patanjali, although I am grateful to Patanjali that he created it. (fitness and yoga instructor)

> I do not play in these spiritual experiences and such things, and it pushed me away from one center. I am practicing and believing Catholic, so other philosophies are not needed by me for anything. I have no intention to change neither my denomination nor my faith that I was brought up in. But, really, I like accepting yoga and such teachers I accept that … well, there are such dominating tendencies in yoga schools in Poland that focus on the harmonious development of the body. (no data about the years of practice)

Treating yoga as a religion is inseparably connected with corporality, with the connection of what is sensual with the body. If it happens, then there is also a change in the life of the individual, mental changes are noticeable, there is energy flow, bigger mind concentration, thus yoga can be defined by the interlocutor as a "religion" (in my sense—a para-religion) since these changes are too big to happen in a short period of time without the integration of a transcendental factor.

Other elements of the attitude of distancing oneself from the spiritual aspects is comparing yoga with one's own culture and keeping connection with that culture. Yoga is used here selectively, as physical exercises, to gain mental peace:

> Generally, yoga is some philosophy, but I, well … not this moment yet, for me, or maybe yoga gives me now so much goodness, gives me peace, balance. For now, I guess … I try to find some comparison with our culture because I was brought up here, in a completely different culture, with completely different standards, Catholicism and such, my parents, I mean, my father is very religious. Well, it is difficult to switch just like that, well, maybe not, it is difficult just like that to give up something and jump into something new. I know that some are fascinated by this and do so, but I still try to connect it somehow, find some, I don't know, equivalents? Dang it … [*laughter*] well cope with this somehow so you wouldn't have to jump over, jump into such deep water … philosophy. (practitioner for 7 years)

However, later on, the practitioner mentions that **it is difficult to run away from these spiritual elements;** practicing, you come across them all the time:

> One is sure, for sure, on a certain stage, you cannot run away from the philosophy. Well, at yoga class itself, it is difficult to run away from it because it is known that the teachers mention such things when you go to camps, I have gone there for many years, there is also such an introduction to the meditation, some things … and, well, yoga philosophy needs to be mentioned, as well. (practitioner for 7 years)

Conclusions

Basing on the analysis of data, I have tried to construct the following thesis. The categories dividing the process of becoming a yoga practitioner (stages) are researcher's constructs, although they are based on the analysis of empirical data. The *in-vivo* codes, if they appear, are only inspiration for the analyst to create the categories and their properties, as well as theses.

I state, after the analysis of data, that **the work on the body is done to change the way of functioning of the mind.** This skill of working on the

body is obtained through *asana* practice. It defines the identity of the practitioners. Verbal auto-definitions can be different here, together with the distancing from the spiritual/religious aspects of yoga. Thus, becoming a yogi could be a long-term process, ending in achieving the *Samadhi* state. It is a state available only for a scarce number of practitioners. However, for the most advanced practitioners, it is a very important symbol of yoga.

The level of advancement in yoga practice (the ability in performing *asanas* and the knowledge about yoga and ascribing it spiritual aspects) describes how the individual defines one's identity, as well as the sole hatha-yoga practice. The level of advancement allows distinguishing three groups of practitioners that are appointed by gaining certain levels of growth. Some practitioners stop at the first stage (introductory stage) of becoming the practitioner. They are then yoga practitioners that build their motivation to practice yoga based on the **practical motives** connected with the corporality, that is, perception of the body, health, and calming the mind. Very vital here is the perception of the effects of the practice (see: Diagram 1 [Appendix 1]).

If they appear, the practitioners can move on to the next, second stage of the process of becoming a hatha-yoga practitioner. Then appears the ability of a fuller perception of psychophysical effects of the practice, that is, connecting the breath, feeling the body, and the mind. The ability for correct performing of *asanas* becomes greater. A new quality of everyday life is then perceived, connected with emotion control, smaller stress, bigger creativity, and even feeling happiness. The feeling of one's self-esteem increases. Some practitioners stop at this point. However, after achieving previous values, the individual starts reflecting on the spiritual dimension of yoga, then s/he moves to the third stage of the development of the identity. Yoga then appears to the individual not only as an opening of the body but also as a "philosophical openness." Work on the body becomes a spiritual practice. Some of them feel a higher sense of humility and openness towards the world. These people already know the hatha-yoga terminology and its philosophy. These are usually instructors and yoga teachers; the most advanced in the work on the body (practicing *asanas*), which is the third group of practitioners.

However, becoming the "practitioner of hatha-yoga/*asana*" is a never-ending process as the work on the body and learning how to do the *asanas* continues on, one can never say that s/he has reached the end of these skills. Similarly, it is connected with the perception of the effects of the practice (physical, health, and mental) and discovering the spiritual dimension of yoga. Here, there are always new elements together with the need to distance oneself from other religious and/or spiritual aspects of yoga. This is what can point out to us that the identity of the practitioner (although always in the process) is the ability to perform *asanas* and perceiving the effects of practicing, as well as becoming aware of the spiritual aspects of yoga (with their acceptance or rejection). These three elements end somehow the process of becoming a practitioner, although they just barely start the process of becoming a yogi, which probably will never be started in the case of the majority of the practitioners, researched by me.

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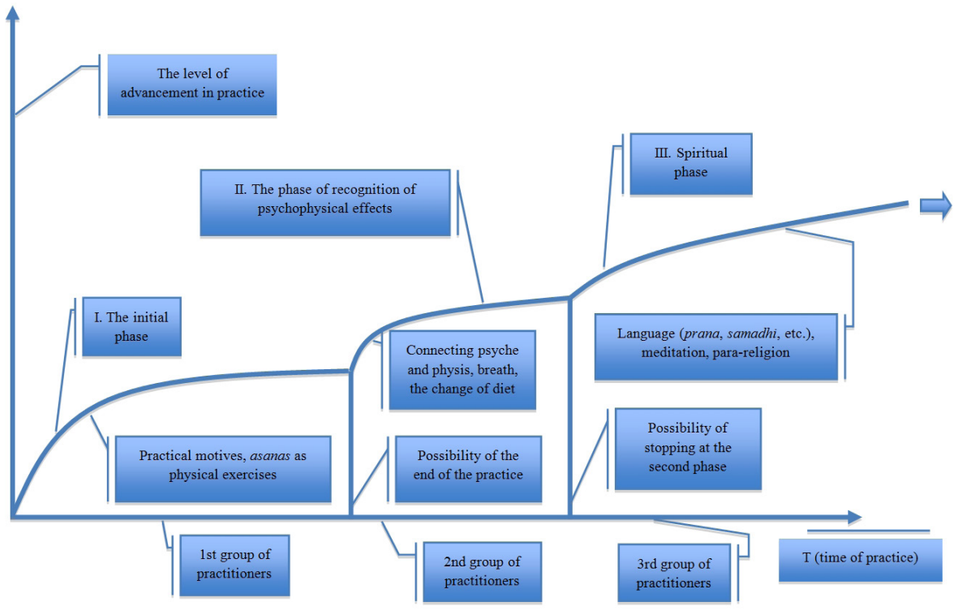
Appendix

Diagram 1. The Process of Becoming a Hatha-Yoga Practitioner.



Source: Self-elaboration.

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