

"Of the 20% of respondents who reported using yoga to treat a specific health concern or medical condition, more people used yoga to treat mental health issues (stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia and panic attacks), than used yoga for musculo-skeletal problems (chronic back pain, disc injuries and arthritis). A sign of the times perhaps".

Sign of the times...

Stress, anxiety and depression - a modern epidemic

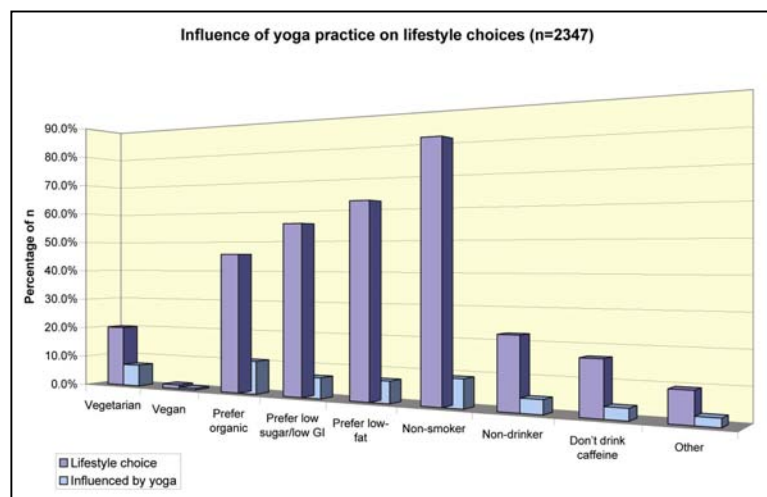
Researchers at RMIT University in Melbourne have conducted the world's largest survey of yoga¹, with nearly 4000 Australians participating. This article highlights some of the early results.

The rise and rise of yoga

Yoga participation in Australia has grown rapidly in recent years to be the 13th most popular physical activity not including walking, according to figures from the Australian Sports Commission². By comparison, yoga (practiced by 2.9% of the population) was ahead of Aussie Rules (2.7%), dancing (2.4%), fishing (2.1%) and martial arts (1.8%). However, yoga participation may be much higher when therapeutic use is considered (7%-12%) according to a recent national study of complementary therapy use, also by RMIT researchers³. In another national survey of Australian GPs, yoga and meditation were seen by doctors to be similar in both safety and effectiveness to massage, acupuncture and hypnosis, with one in ten doctors practising yoga themselves⁴.

Educated, employed and health-conscious

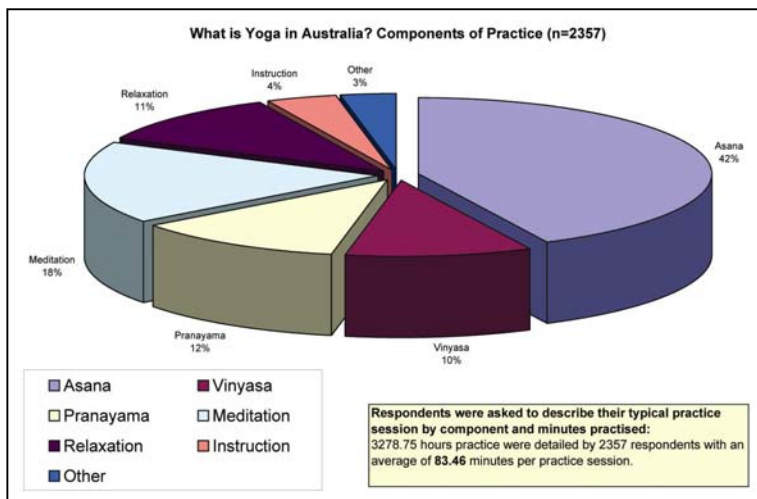
The Australian yoga survey found that the "typical" yoga practitioner ('yogi') was a 41 year old female, practising regularly (1-2 times a week) for about five years, tertiary educated (81%), with a household income of \$70,000+ (78%), a preference for organic foods (46%) and a tendency towards vegetarianism. Interestingly, about one in seven yogis were employed in a healthcare occupation, most commonly nursing, massage and psychology, confirming high levels of acceptance of yoga amongst healthcare professionals.



Younger and sexier

Yoga has traditionally appealed mostly to women and still does (about 85% of yogis are women), but the average age of yogis has fallen dramatically overseas⁴ and seems to be doing the same in Australia, suggesting that yoga now appeals to younger age groups. Iyengar, Satyananda, Ashtanga, Desikachar, and other forms of contemporary classical yoga are very popular styles, while some recent strong or dynamic forms of yoga, like "Bikram" in a heated room, and "Power" yoga are appealing not only to younger people but also more to men.

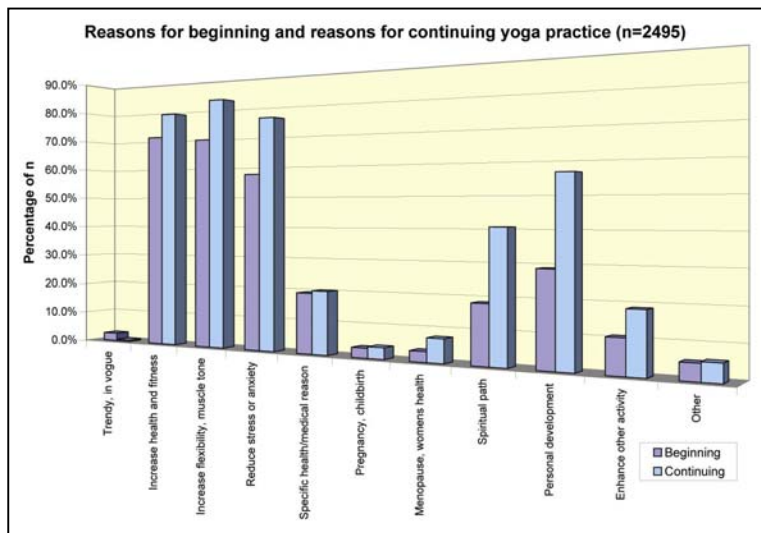
To further investigate the styles and practices of yoga, the survey found that about half of the time spent practising (52%) was devoted to “physical” practices like postures and dynamic posture sequences, while about 40% of the time was devoted to breathing techniques (pranayama), meditation and relaxation, suggesting that yoga in Australia is a healthy mix of the many holistic practices in yoga and not focused solely on postures.



More than meets the eye

The reasons most commonly given for starting yoga were “health/fitness and flexibility/muscle tone” (70%), rising to about 80% as reasons for continuing, confirming that yoga is primarily seen and practised as a physical discipline. However, “to reduce stress or anxiety” was also given by 57% of people as a reason for coming to yoga, increasing to 76% as a reason for continuing, nearly as common as the physical reasons for practice.

Even greater differences were found in the questions about “spiritual path” and “personal development”. While only 18% initially saw yoga as a spiritual practice, this more than doubled to 41% once practising. Similarly, 29% initially saw yoga as a form of personal development, increasing to 56% as a reason for continuing to practice. Yoga teachers will tell you that this is no surprise. *People come to yoga for the physical but stay for the spiritual.*



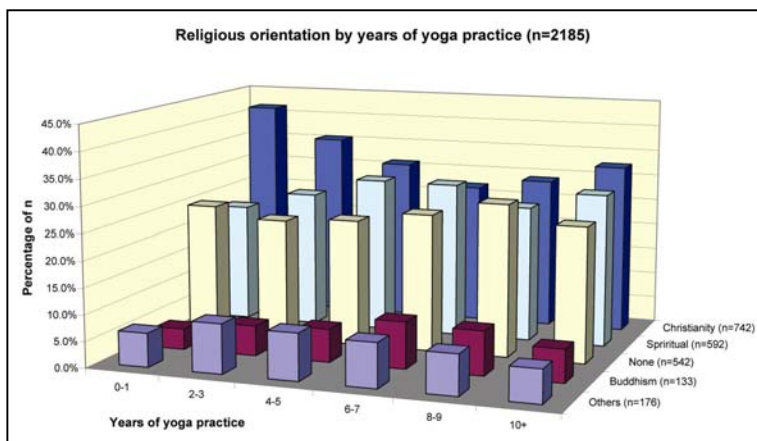
Also worthy of investigation, 19% of people said they had a specific health or medical reason for starting yoga, remaining steady at 20% as a reason for continuing. However, in the absence of any formal system of referral to yoga from the healthcare professions, this suggests that people are *self-prescribing* yoga for their health concerns. More on this later.

Can yoga change your religion?

The religious orientation of yogis in their first year of practice was found to be significantly different from the general population. While 68% of the population identified themselves as Christian in the 2002 Census, only 36% of first-year yogis said they were “Christian”, while another 23% said they held “spiritual but non-religious” beliefs. Likewise, while Buddhism represents about 2% of the Australian population, 6% of first-year yogis said they held “Buddhist beliefs”, suggesting that yoga initially appeals to people who do not identify with the traditional western religions.

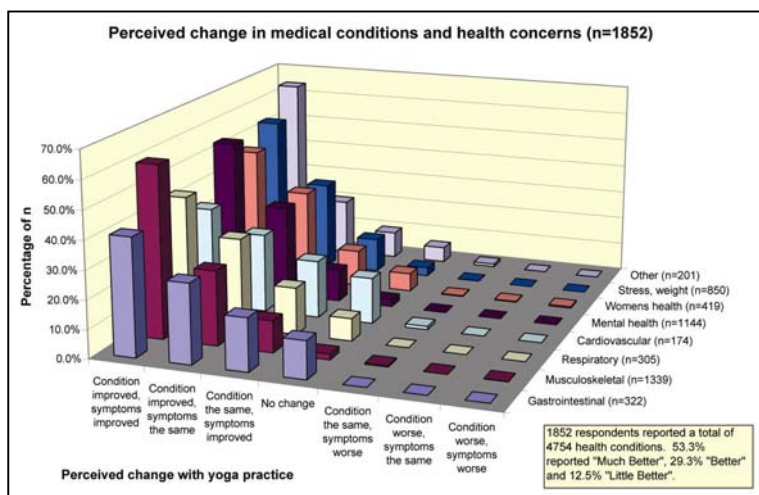
Interestingly, the proportion of “Christian” yogis steadily decreased with years of practice, from 36% to 27% after 7 years of practice. Conversely, the people who initially said they were “spiritual but non-religious”, steadily increased from 23% to 30% after 5 years of practice. Those with “Buddhist beliefs” also increased from 6% to 8.8% after 7 years of practice.

But then an interesting thing happened. After five to seven years of practice, the trend away from religion reversed, suggesting that while the non-religious spirituality available in yoga might initially provide a source of greater meaning in light of the decline of traditional religions, there is a point at which the two integrate. It may be that in the longer term, the spiritual path offered by yoga integrates with or enhances the religious beliefs we were brought up to hold.



Can yoga change your health?

As mentioned earlier, one in five yogis indicated a specific health concern or medical reason for practicing yoga, most commonly stress, anxiety and depression, sleep and anxiety disorders (eg: insomnia and panic attacks), or back, neck and knee problems (eg: chronic lower back pain, disc injuries and arthritis). Of these, more people reported using yoga to address mental health issues (about 90%) than musculo-skeletal problems (72%). A sign of the times, perhaps.



Women's health was the next largest area (9%) with reported improvement in menstrual and menopausal symptoms, and assistance during and after pregnancy, ahead of gastrointestinal (7%), respiratory (6%) and cardiovascular (4%) conditions, with consistent improvement across all these categories.

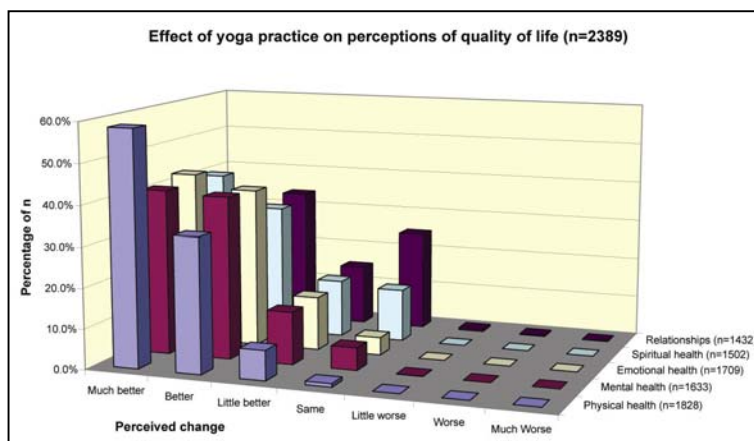
Of all the conditions reported as being addressed by yoga, 53% were rated as "much better" (both conditions and symptoms had improved), 29% "better" (condition improved but symptoms the same) and 12% "little better" (condition the same but symptoms improved).

This appears to be a remarkable phenomenon. It seems that whatever condition people used yoga for, it improved. Overall, 96% of people found their condition improved by yoga, with the remaining 4% reporting their condition much the same.

Can yoga change your outlook on life?

The answer to this question was an even more emphatic yes. Perceptions of quality of life were dramatically improved by yoga practice in all areas; physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health, and also in relationships.

Nearly 60 years ago, the World Health Organisation created a forward-thinking definition of health, as "a state of complete physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being, and not merely an



*absence of disease or infirmity*⁶". In support of this, many yogis took the opportunity provided by the survey to describe the way in which yoga had enhanced their all-round health, from average to good, or from good to excellent. Some reported that they de-stressed, gave up smoking, stopped eating junk and stopped fighting with their partner or children as a result of yoga practice. Some typical comments were:

"Generally I am a much happier, emotionally stable person which is a change from how I was before yoga."

"Yoga and meditation has given me the stillness and grounded-ness I need to manage emotionally stressful times and situations."

"Now that I'm doing a daily practice, I feel like I am at my best all the time. My relationships are better and I can deal with everyday life better because I don't get so stressed about the little things anymore."

"Yoga has helped me take a step back, and see life, with its highs and lows, as just that -life with highs and lows. I can choose to get stressed about it, or just to observe what happens."

"All my relationships are much better off. Being 'present' was the major hurdle so now I can give my full attention to those I am with."

"Yoga has a truly holistic effect. My experience has been that it improves every aspect of my life."

"Practising yoga increases my quality of life ten-fold. I am calmer, more balanced and more in tune with my physical and spiritual self, making me a better friend, lover and mother."

A final word about mental health

Mental illness is a general term to describe a broad range of conditions. At one end of the spectrum there are emotional or mental disturbances, sometimes manifesting as anxiety disorders (eg: chronic anxiety, stress and panic attacks), eating disorders, addictions, sleeping disorders, behavioural disorders (eg: OCD), and at the other end of the spectrum, depression, bi-polar and other major mood and personality disorders.

The Mental Health Foundation of Australia says:

"One in five of us will experience depression at some time in our life. Unfortunately, only about 20% of depressed people are correctly diagnosed because depression can mask itself as physical illness (such as chronic pain, anxiety, sleeplessness or fatigue). Depression can contribute to, and be caused by, many physical illnesses. The World Health Organisation has concluded that by 2020, depression will be the world's major health problem⁷."

Mental illness touches us all. In yoga, mental illness is recognised as the "Adhi" or disturbance that first exists in the manomaya kosa (the mental/emotional personality), eventually filtering through to the annamaya kosa (the physical body) and manifesting as somatic illness⁸. Adhi is characterised by excessive speed, mental restlessness and emotional disruption (stress, anxiety, anger and resentment), in fact modern life seems to be a perfect recipe for creating Adhi.

It's important to understand that we are profoundly emotional beings and inherently spiritual, whether this is developed or not. Once we validate this, we can begin to untangle the effect our emotions (thoughts and feelings) have on our behaviour. Yoga is one of the ways you can develop this awareness, starting with the body and the breath but ultimately developing stillness in the mind, inner peace and lasting happiness.

References

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About the survey

The Yoga in Australia online survey was conducted between June 2005 and January 2006, supported by a comprehensive website providing yoga-related news, articles and research at www.yogainaustralia.com. Recruitment was through yoga teacher networks, mainstream press, word of mouth, and by widespread distribution of nearly 50,000 invitation postcards to yoga schools nationally. A total of 3832 respondents completed the survey including 1265 yoga teachers and 2567 yoga practitioners. The results described in this article do not include the yoga teachers. Despite a huge national response, participation in the survey was voluntary, therefore cannot be assumed to represent all yoga practice in Australia. Schools and styles of yoga that supported the survey effort can be assumed to be over-represented. Likewise, being an online survey, some groups of people without access to the internet can be assumed to be under-represented.

About the author

Stephen Penman is the President of the Yoga Teachers Association of Australia. He also teaches Wellness, Health Enhancement and Lifestyle Management at RMIT and Monash Universities in Melbourne. He is actively involved with the Australasian Integrative Medicine Association and research into yoga, meditation and complementary therapies. For more information about the national yoga survey go to www.yogainaustralia.com. Stephen can be contacted at stephen.penman@rmit.edu.au.

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