Bare Feet, a Ethnographic Journey in Yoga [1]

PREFACE

Stepping into the world of yoga is something I have been putting off longer than I should. My proximity to this world has always been a mere arms length away, not because I practice the intricate asanas or partake in meditation, but because it is a world my older sister inhabits with passion. She is a beacon of serenity, a yoga instructor whose dedication to her craft unfolds within the wall of a Chicago studio, Barefeet, the subject of this ethnography.

A few months ago, I found myself crossing the threshold of Bare Feet Power Yoga for the first time. I was an outsider looking in, and the experience was fleeting and left me wanting to know more. One session was not enough to fully grasp it, but the energy of the space was palpable, a current of calm that seemed at odds with the bustling cityscape just outside. It was this initial visit that sparked a desire to delve deeper into the enigmatic world of yoga and its practitioners. My objective is to immerse myself within the world of Bare Feet more fully, to understand the gravitational pull it exerts on so many diverse individuals. I want to compare the studio with my research on Yoga as a whole. How does it compare to traditional practices? What is it about this space, this practice, that anchors restless souls and fosters a sense of community so robust that it can thrive amidst urban chaos?

I anticipate that through deeper engagement—participating in classes, talking with the practitioners, and observing the daily rituals of the studio—I will uncover the multifaceted nature of yoga as it is lived and breathed in this space. I am eager to learn about the personal journeys that intersect here, the philosophical teachings that permeate the studio's ethos, and the transformative impact that yoga promises and, to many, delivers.

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BACKGROUND INFO

According to Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani, a renowned yoga master and director of the International Centre for Yoga Education and Research, the practice of yoga is deeply rooted in spiritual tradition and has evolved significantly over millennia. She explains, "The word 'Yoga' is often described as 'union'. It implies that the individual is united with the Universe, the personality with the Universality. The root of the word 'Yoga' is the Sanskrit Bija 'Yuj' which means 'to join together'" (Bhavanani). This definition underscores the essence of yoga as not just physical exercise, but a profound journey towards spiritual union and enlightenment.

The adaptation of yoga into the more commonly known physical practice in the West can particularly be traced back to the early 20th century, and even has roots in Chicago. In the modern era, Yoga has transitioned to a more exercise and body focused practice, while losing some of its mysticism. Mark Singleton notes in his book "Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice," that "a significant part of modern yoga practice, including the emphasis on asanas, is a radical break from the ancient Indian traditions, influenced by Western gymnastic movements" (Singleton). He highlights how the adaptation has shaped modern yoga, making it more accessible and appealing to a global audience, but at the same time shifting the focus away from its traditional spiritual objectives.

Today, yoga's global presence as a diverse and adaptable practice reflects its journey from an ancient spiritual discipline to a contemporary cultural phenomenon. From secluded Indian ashrams to bustling studios in cities all over the world, yoga has evolved to meet the varying needs of its practitioners, whether they seek physical health, mental clarity, or spiritual depth.

This dual nature of yoga, as both a physical and spiritual practice, illustrates the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity within cultural practices. It highlights how deeply cultural traditions can permeate global societies, adapting to new contexts and audiences while retaining core elements of their original intent.

The Studio subject to this ethnography, Bare Feet Power Yoga, exemplifies the modern evolution of yoga, blending ancient practices with contemporary needs. According to their website, “Bare Feet is a place you come to connect. Through classes, events, and workshops we teach you to unite your body, your mind, and your spirit to create balance within and all around.” As part of my ongoing research, I am excited about the opportunity to learn more about the studio in the coming weeks. I will be attending a few classes at the studio, which will allow me to directly engage with its community and practices. This firsthand experience will not only enhance my understanding of how Bare Feet Power Yoga integrates traditional yoga principles with modern approaches but also how they foster a sense of connection and transformation among their students. I look forward to discovering how this local studio embodies the spirit of yoga and impacts the lives of its members.

OBSERVATIONAL DATA AND ANALYSIS

18 April 2024 (1000-1100) Mindful Vinyasa

Upon entering Bare Feet Power Yoga, the serene ambiance of the studio immediately cast a spell of calmness, with its subtle natural lighting and walls painted in soothing blues and earthy tones. This setting starkly contrasted the bustling Chicago streets outside and aligned well with my initial impressions from the first visit. The studio's policy of leaving shoes in the lobby

symbolically invited participants to detach from the burdens of the external world, fostering a space conducive to mindfulness and introspection, and fitting the name on the door.

The class, called Mindful Vinyasa, and led by my sister, Katie, began with her warm greeting and the offering of lemon tea, enhancing the welcoming and sensory atmosphere. As the participants arrived, the group dynamic became evident—a small class of 12, predominantly women, reflecting the broader trend of yoga's contemporary demographic. Katie initiated the session with a sage burning ritual, an ancient cleansing practice involving the burning of the herb around each participant's body, seamlessly integrated into our modern session and setting a spiritual tone from the outset.

The session's structure revolved around combining mindfulness meditation with traditional yoga poses. Katie's approach emphasized meditation and controlled breathing over physical rigor, with deliberate pacing designed to encourage present-moment engagement and internal awareness. This approach mirrored the dual nature of yoga as both a physical and spiritual practice, resonating well with the participants and reflecting principles discussed in the works of yoga scholars like Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani.

Throughout the class, Katie provided nurturing yet clear instructions. She guided us through various asanas, meditation and breathing techniques, focusing on mindfulness as a pathway to tranquility and self-discovery. Participants appeared deeply engaged, maintaining poses with a focus on controlled breathing and attentively following the guided meditations.

The tranquil setting of Bare Feet Power Yoga, highlighted by natural light and the calming aromas of tea and sage, complemented by Katie's thoughtful guidance, seemed to underscore the theme of union central to yoga philosophy.

The experience of yoga at Bare Feet was both communal and deeply personal. It was great to share in my sister's life passion, and truly enjoy it too. I remember making that mental note of appreciation while in the midst of the meditation. While each participant pursued their own path of mindfulness and self-discovery, the shared space and collective energy enhanced the sense of serenity. This balance between individual exploration and communal support highlights the studio's appeal, providing an environment conducive to personal growth within a nurturing community.

Reflecting on this session, the modernization of yoga's traditional spiritual goals started to become evident. It underscored the adaptability of yoga to various cultural contexts and its relevance in addressing contemporary societal needs for connection and tranquility, while providing a service that is streamlined and convenient. As I prepare for the next class, which promises a different style and focus—Candlelight Beats—I am eager to see how these observations continue to evolve, offering further insights into the dynamic nature of contemporary yoga practice

30 April 2024 (1800-1900) Candlelight Beats

The 2nd and final session in which I partook for this study, an evening session called "Candlelight Beats," was distinctly different from the morning session with my sister. The lobby this time had dimmed lighting, and that with the now darkened city streets outside gave a different, but still calm and serene ambiance. An offering of tea was again offered as I entered.

The class demographics were very similar, but no familiar faces. Robin, the studio owner, free-spirit and mentor to my sister, would be this session's instructor. The studio floor

itself had no lights on, but had several candles on the floor throughout, aligned to make a circular pattern in the middle, with space for us practitioners to put our mats.

Robin, with her extensive experience and years of instruction, brought a wise, steady and controlled presence to the class. Unlike the morning session led by Katie, which focused on mindfulness and had a little more physicality, her class ventured more into the sensory and emotional dimensions of the practice. She instructed us through slow, deliberate movements synchronized with deep, rhythmic breathing that were accentuated by an ambient music backdrop. This combined with the flickering shadows of the candlelight, deepened the meditative state of the participants, facilitating a journey inward. I ended the session in a deep meditation, feeling refreshed, with a deeper appreciation of the versatility of yoga.

When discussing my sessions with Katie at a further date, she said while these sessions were both very different, they were two of the slower paced versions of yoga offered by the studio, which offers several more types of yoga classes. We discussed how the use of ambient music or candlelight directly appeals to contemporary sensibilities, offering a sensory experience that differs from traditional yoga practices, but can still achieve the original goals. We agreed this modern twist on yoga practice acknowledges the hectic lifestyles of city dwellers and provides an accessible means for mental decompression and spiritual rejuvenation.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on my immersive experiences at Bare Feet Power Yoga, I gained perspective on Bare Feet, and Yoga itself, illustrating both their broad range and deep roots. This ethnography not only allowed me to connect more deeply with my sister's world but also offered

a broader perspective on how yoga functions as a bridge between tradition and modernity in an urban setting.

Through the sessions of Mindful Vinyasa and Candlelight Beats, the studio presented yoga not just as physical exercise but as a holistic practice that integrates the body, mind, and spirit. These experiences showed me the studio's commitment to fostering an environment where individuals can pursue personal growth within a supportive community atmosphere. The diverse approaches by Katie and Robin, each with their unique styles, highlighted the studio's adaptability and responsiveness to the needs of its urban clientele.

The philosophical underpinnings of yoga, as discussed by scholars like Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani and reflected in the practices at Bare Feet, demonstrate a compelling balance between staying true to yoga's spiritual origins and embracing the physical emphasis that is more prevalent in Western interpretations. This duality serves not only to enhance the accessibility of yoga in a fast-paced, modern society but also preserves its profound spiritual essence, offering a sanctuary for those seeking solace from the chaos of daily urban life.

In conclusion, my ethnographic journey into the world of Bare Feet Power Yoga has been enlightening. The balance of heritage and innovation they achieve is part of what makes yoga such a pervasive practice for spiritual and physical wellbeing in today's world. There is more to learn too, as I have only scraped the offerings of this one studio, but I am proud to say I will be participating more in the future, perhaps to eventually follow in my sister’s footsteps to become a “Yogi” myself.

Works Cited

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