

Yoga gives meaning to physical exercise

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Yoga is on the upswing. About 1.5 million French people practice it, according to the National federation of yoga teachers (*Fédération nationale des enseignants de yoga - FNEY*). Revived since the early 2000s in the United States, yoga has benefited from brand ambassadors such as Madonna and Sting, who are in their fifties and defying the passage of time. The actress Jennifer Aniston, ex-star of the sitcom "Friends", has just released a DVD titled "Yogalosophy", with the teacher of the stars, Mandy Ingber.

Revisited to satisfy a new public, yoga is now declined in multiple practices, more or less respectful of the fundamental principles of this millennial discipline of Indian origin.

The *Usine*, a top-of-the-range Parisian sports club, offers no less than eleven different types of yoga in its two centres in Opéra and Beaubourg: from the most traditional such as hatha yoga, with its slow rhythm based on holding postures with breath control, to the most dynamic such as power yoga and ashtanga yoga, where the postures are executed very quickly one after the other.

There are also stiff man yoga classes, which are supposed to adapt to the male morphology; those of bodysculpt yoga, targeting the thighs, buttocks and abdominal strap; or yogalate - a mix of yoga and Pilates -, working on the alignment of the body through a set of physical exercises performed, most often, with the help of mechanical equipment.

"We've gone from a yoga perceived as very passive to a yoga in motion that attracts people from the fitness world," explains Patrick Rizzo, co-founder of the Usine gym. This population is joined by another, a more elitist one, attracted by activities considered nobler and gentler than weight training or cycling.

The plain and simple workout sessions to sweat and build muscle are lone gone. "Yoga intellectualizes a bit the practice of gym. It is a kind of opposition trend," says Rizzo. In short, it strengthens not only your body but your mind as well.

"Whereas our clientele used to be mostly older people, we're seeing more and more young people between 25 and 30," says Eric Beische, product manager at Club Med Gym. As a result, the chain plans to expand its traditional hatha yoga offer to a more modern and dynamic practice.

Will this trend last or will it only retain the core of highly motivated practitioners? "It's likely that yoga will endure while cleaning itself out of a few exotic activities," considers the co-founder of the Usine sports club. These include dog yoga, *doga* in American, which offers postures and massages to masters accompanied by their pets; or bikram yoga, which consists of a series of postures in a room heated to 40°C, which is not without health risks.

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In a stress-driven society where well-being has become a cardinal value, yoga is not only an outlet but also a way of restoring meaning to physical exercise. *"This craze corresponds to a need to refocus, to find a new direction in an increasingly fragmented and frenetic society"*, says Isabelle Morin-Larbey, President of the FNEY. The fact remains that these different alternatives risk betraying the spirit of the discipline. *"At its core, yoga is a philosophical system that takes into account the person in his/her physical, psychic and spiritual aspects. With these new variations, there is a risk of cutting up the practice,"* she says.

More and more doctors are advising their patients in this area. Dr. Lionel Coudron, director of the Institut de Yoga Thérapie, which trains health professionals and yoga teachers, outlines the symptoms that can be treated or improved through yoga: anxiety and stress disorders, sleep disorders, hostile behaviours such as irritability, nervousness, anger, frustration intolerance, lower back pain, intestinal functional disorders, recurring infections, angina, hypertension, asthma, etc..

"Yoga plays on the balance of the neuro-vegetative system (which innervates the viscera) by strengthening the parasympathetic nervous system (which ensures the conservation of the body's energy reserve after a reaction developed by the sympathetic system in the face of stress). From the very first sessions, one feels a sense of well-being. For it to be long-lasting, it is advisable to practise three hours a week at the rate of one one-hour group session of twenty minutes every day, or two group sessions of an hour and a half a week", explains the doctor.

It is still necessary to choose one's teacher carefully and flee the sects, some of which manage to recruit their followers by this means. *"A yoga teacher must know his or her students well and, before starting classes, make a small, non-intrusive assessment to find out who they are dealing with so that the practice can be adapted to each person's possibilities,"* insists Isabelle Morin-Larbey. Avoiding harming, that is to say avoiding pain, and working with ease and firmness are the fundamental principles of the discipline. Three federations in France have seriously trained teachers, a list of which can be consulted on their websites.

La Yoga thérapie. Guide de Lionel Coudron (Odile Jacob, 2010, 304 p., 22,50 €)

L'Esprit du yoga, de Ysé Tardan-Masquelier (Albin Michel, 2005, 288 p., 19 €).

FNEY. Fédération nationale des enseignants de yoga (Lemondedyoga.org).

FFHY. Fédération française de hatha yoga (ff-hatha-yoga.com).

FIDHY. Fédération interenseignement de hatha yoga (Fidhy.fr)