

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

Julie Hodges

B.Sc. (Hons) M.Sc. (University of Strathclyde)

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

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Julie Lynne Hodges

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ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

‘becoming’: a means to perpetually progress and improve oneself. Eastern practices, however, give priority to states of ‘being’, via the cultivation of awareness to attain experiences of constancy and stillness within.

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