

# THE TRUTH ABOUT YOGA

# OM

DID YOU KNOW YOUR 6:30 AM YOGA CLASS AT 24-HOUR FITNESS IS ACTUALLY A RELIGIOUS RITE?

BY DANIELLE HUBBARD

These days, yoga is often grouped in with Pilates as being an often-overpriced, vaguely New Age, celebrity-fueled fad, but yoga is actually rooted deeply in Hindu philosophy – a path of self-knowledge and self-mastery that ultimately leads to pure consciousness through surrender to God. This, according to the Hindu sage Patajali, “is absolute freedom.” Patajali is the St. Peter of yoga -- about 2,000 years ago, he wrote *The Yoga Sutras*, now widely regarded as the bible of yoga.

If you're not feeling enlightened yet, it might be because what we Americans consider “yoga” is actually only a sliver of the real thing.

Only one of the eight branches of yoga has anything to do with postures—the rest, *The Yoga Sutras* tells us, are things like “abstention from violence, from falsehoods, from stealing, from sexual engagements, and from acceptance of gifts,” and realization through “consciousness only of the object of meditation and not of the mind.” The theme throughout all of this is the paradox of mastering the self while simultaneously letting go of the world.

And by the way, “Om” isn't just some random caricature, being to stereotypical yogis what “Argh!” is to pirates. It is, according to Patajali, nothing less than God's voice. “The repetition of Om should be made with an understanding of its meaning,” he says.

This is not to say that American yoga is the bastardization of something that was once pure, holy, and sacred. The nice thing about yoga is that it is beneficial even in its most modernized variation—and in San Diego, yogis and yoginis (that is, male and female yoga practitioners) have a buffet of options, some deliberately in tune with yoga's ancient roots, some much more modernized.

For example, the Shiva Vishnu Temple in Mira Mesa is a Hindu temple who states its mission as



dharma, or “devotion to God and commitment to righteousness.” It offers yoga classes as only part of an array of religious services and activities.

Bikram Yoga involves performing traditional yoga postures in a steaming-hot room. Bikram's Yoga College of India, with campuses in Middletown and La Jolla, uses this so-called hot yoga “to promote cellular metabolism, detoxification, and suppleness of the muscular system,” According to its website.

And Gold's Gym in Midway offers “Power Yoga” sandwiched between classes such as “Bodypump” and “Never 2 Late Stretch & Tone.”

If you're a yoga virgin with a desire for contortionism, but are nervous about looking uncool (not to mention what effect all those twisty postures will have on your control over your bodily functions), worry not. Beginning yoga classes—especially those that cater more to those looking for genuine physical and mental benefits—are by their nature welcoming. After all, from its genesis, yoga was taught as a way of allowing the greatest number of people possible access to God (or pure consciousness or total peace, if you prefer). Plus, there's always someone less flexible than you. And even if there isn't, no one really cares, because nobody looks glamorous doing those poses.

Finally, about those bodily functions, the wise old yogis are way ahead of you: Pavana Mukta Asana is the position created for releasing gastrointestinal gasses. Now that must be religious, right?



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**With such a rich history, how has yoga remained relevant in the new millennium?**

Yoga has changed to fit the needs of modern people. It's ironic that, in this ultra fast-paced world, yoga has even more applications than ever before. Many of my students tell me that yoga helps them cope with stress. Anxiety, tension and depression often dissipate with regular practice of yoga.

**What about the future of yoga in San Diego?**

Yoga really fits the healthy Southern California lifestyle. There are many active people here. Yoga enhances their abilities in other sports and activities to create a positive influence in the quality of our lives. With mind and body balanced, we can become more connected with our surroundings and focused on the present.

**What pose would you share with a beginner?**

A safe posture to practice at home is *balasana* or “child's pose.” Kneeling with your big toes touching and your legs slightly spread, drop your torso until your arms lay at the side of your hips and your head touches the floor. This posture releases any tension in your lower back and brings clarity of mind—it can be a very restorative pose.