

**The Self-Transformation Process in Yoga  
from a Gender Lens**

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ISSR Working paper 10.04.2024 ● ISSN 2297-203X

Pour citer :

**Laetitia Stauffer**, 2024. *The Self-Transformation Process in Yoga from a Gender Lens*. Working Paper n° 19, ISSR, Université de Lausanne

## **Abstract**

This article investigates the self-transformation process in yoga discourse and practice from a gendered perspective. Data was collected over three years in Western Switzerland and with a multi-sited ethnography using a combination of participant observation and a total of 52 interviews. Using Kundalini yoga and its representation of “feminine” and “masculine” as a case study, I explore how practitioners appropriate gendered rituals and identities. In this tradition, the transformation of self is based on concepts of inner strength, sensitivity, and divine femininity, causing dissonance within some practitioners’ identities. Additionally, specific arrangements emerge to negotiate spiritual space, gendered agency, and biography in the context of yoga teaching and teacher-student relationships. Finally, I investigate the interactions between practitioners’ yoga trajectories and their private and professional realms, observing differences in women’s and men’s experiences.

**Keywords:** gender – yoga – identity – spirituality – Kundalini – qualitative

## Introduction

In Western contexts characterized by secularism and the growth of religious diversity, meanings attributed to yoga practices are multiple and contextual (Becci 2018; Office fédéral de la statistique 2020). In a study about yoga teachers in the United States, Bender (2003) highlighted the “unsettled meaning” of yoga; devotional practices transform from religious to secular when they enter the mainstream quest for health. The same phenomenon was observed in Switzerland, where yoga studios and schools, and the number of people practicing yoga, have increased impressively since the beginning of the 2000s (Nizard 2019). In 2020, 12.9% of the Swiss population between the ages of 15 and 85 practiced yoga, pilates, or mindfulness techniques, compared to 7.1% in 2013. The average age of people participating in these activities was 49, and 80% were women (Lamprecht et al. 2020). These practices primarily focus on physical and mental health (Garnoussi 2008, 75), slipping between diverse secular and religious meanings and institutions (Bender 2003).

A paradox runs through modern yoga<sup>1</sup>. Themes of liberation, authenticity, and self-realization are central, yet yoga is also shaped by social norms prescribing ideal bodies and behaviors, including aesthetic norms for postures and ideas about successful aging, self-discipline, and individual responsibility towards health. Furthermore, formal training is accessible disproportionately to the white middle class (Altglas 2005, 2014b; Berila et al. 2016; Lucia 2020). Questioning processes of self-realization and embedded contradictions using a gender lens can expose the power dynamics and authorities that influence modern yoga practices.

The interplay of self-realization and social norms in modern yoga has been addressed from a gender perspective in a few studies. Research has primarily examined holistic spiritual and health practices among urban middle-class women, as they make up a majority of yoga practitioners, in the United States and Europe. Apart from a study by Griera (2020) about working-class men and yoga in Catalan prisons, women have received the most attention from researchers on the topic. According to another study, holistic practices helped to validate traditional representations of femininity specific to body care and interpersonal relations, but they also held the subversive potential to lead women to autonomous selfhood, allowing them to feel supported in their daily obligations (Sointu and Woodhead 2008; Woodhead 2012). Other studies have linked the concept of empowerment to an emancipatory potential in yoga practices (Berila et al. 2016; Nevrin 2008). A focus in the research shows the value holistic practices place on women’s traditional relational care work and body care, where the body, its appearance, and sensations are the center of attention (Sointu and Woodhead 2008). I aim to contribute to gaps in the research by examining gender and power dynamics embedded in processes of self-transformation and self-expression in modern yoga.

This article takes into account gendered considerations of yoga and holistic spirituality in the context of yoga teaching, especially in teacher-student relationships. Based on interviews, participant observation and documents, I analyze representations of the masculine and the feminine and appropriation by practitioners of Kundalini yoga according to Yogi Bhanan. Practitioners negotiate their worldviews and practices in various ways. The importance of the relationship between student and teacher is central to the student’s self-transformation process, which serves as a therapeutic space to work on oneself, inviting power dynamics, tensions, and difficulties as opportunities to this end. Gendered aspects of yoga journeys are seen in the interaction of yoga trajectories with personal and professional social realms.

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<sup>1</sup> Yoga practices discussed in this article are forms of “modern yoga” defined by De Michelis (2008, 19) as “disciplines and schools that are, to a greater or lesser extent, rooted in South Asian cultural contexts and more specifically draw inspiration from certain philosophies, teachings, and practices of Hinduism. These teachings and practice, by virtue of export, syncretic assimilation, and subsequent acculturation processes, have by now become an integral part of (primarily) urban cultures worldwide.” See also Singleton (2010).

## Spirituality, Yoga, and Gender

The concept of spiritual or religious “bricolage” describes a process where individual spiritual/religious beliefs and practices are selected at will rather than as a result of tradition or sociocultural obligations (Altglas 2014; Altglas 2014b; Hervieu-Léger 2001; Mary 2001). According to scholars critical of the concept, and the concomitant idea that an individual is a consumer who freely combines a wide range of decontextualized beliefs (Mary 2001, 28), forms of spiritual or/and religious resources, albeit diverse, retain their cultural meanings.

Heelas and Woodhead (2005) describe a “subjective turn” as “a turn away from life lived in terms of external or ‘objective’ roles, duties, and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, cited in Altglas 2014b, 240). Research about the subjective turn in holistic practices and yoga from a gender lens does not always pointed in the same direction. In the work of Sointu and Woodhead (2008), these practices helped to subvert traditional gender roles and empower women by prioritizing responsibility, self care, and the uniqueness of the individual. By contrast, Altglas (2014b) suggested that yoga reinforces traditional roles and representations of womanhood. “The fulfillment and realization of women is not an individual issue, because they are likely to envisage these goals as entailing harmonious relationships to their partner, children, and relatives. As far as women are concerned, there is no self-care that is not, in part, care for others” (Altglas 2014b, 267).

Some authors applied the notion of “empowerment” to examine the potential of emancipation through yoga practice and belonging to a yogic community (Berila et al. 2016). Becci et al. (2015) warn that this notion is an ambiguous and unstable concept. Woodhead (2012) affirms a connection between religion and gender. “By way of symbolic and material practices religion can reinforce existing gendered distributions of power or try to change them” (Woodhead 2012, 35). The author defines a theoretical framework placing yoga as in the categories of “questing religion” or “subjective-life spirituality” whose main features is to “use sacred power in ways which aim at personal (or occasionally group) transformation and movement towards a position of greater advantage within the existing gender order. The aim is not to change this order so much as to improve one’s position—and wellbeing—within it” (ibid 44).

As a whole, research about yoga, and gender has been mainly confined to women’s studies. Meantime, inquiries focusing on configurations of gender practice, relationships between men and women, and among men and women have increased. In the last two decades, research in the field of men’s and masculinities studies has enabled a growth in the documentation of male relationships to health (see Robertson 2007) and the diversity of men’s experiences and identities within what Connell called the “gender order” (Connell 2000; Robertson 2007). Connell (1995) proposed a conceptualization of four types of masculinities: hegemonic, subordinated, marginalized, and complicit masculinity. Whereas “hegemony is usually established through a correspondence between cultural ideals... and collective institutional power” (Robertson 2007, 33), subordination refers to a subordinated position to the leading hegemonic one and is about cultural marginalization and material practices (ibid).

While self-care and the transformation of the self involves identity-related issues, male practitioners and gendered relationships in the yoga world have not been primary topics of researches to date. One study did analyze these dimensions. In a study on yoga classes in Catalan men's prisons, Grier (2020) highlighted how yoga classes as “emotional zones” contributed to reshaping conceptions of masculinity for working-class inmates. Inmates valued yoga as a physical activity to build physical strength, but also reshaped some of their conceptions about what it means to “be a man.” They viewed a strong man as one with inner strength, rejecting aggressive behavior and violence which they perceived as a sign of weakness and also building their own spiritual narratives.

## Teaching Contexts and Teacher-Student Relationships

The first yoga schools appeared in Switzerland in the 1950s (Merz n.d), and the Swiss Yoga Federation was founded in 1968. The European Union of Yoga, created in 1972, played a key role in developing yoga in Europe and Switzerland and establishing teacher training programs. The implementation and recognition of programs brought about a notable shift in the practitioner's relationship to the master or guru (Desponds Meylan 2007). According to the new teaching pedagogy, authority is based on personal experience, the "inner master," and no longer on the master's authority, as is the case in traditional<sup>2</sup> teachings. Despite the formalization of teaching frameworks that reshaped the master-student relationship as a source of yoga knowledge transmission, learning from a master or guru during trips to India, elsewhere abroad, or in Switzerland has remained important to some students. In a study of Sivananda and Siddha Yoga centres in France and in the United Kingdom, Altglas (2005) found that practitioners' relationships with a master occur in an experience of tension between contemporary subjective self-expression and devotional practices. Some practitioners are reluctant to the "spiritual authority" of the master, for others, the master or guru, their authority, or their attributed aura is a means or a support in the practitioners' "quest" and self-help (ibid, 116).

In this personal growth, not only yoga is dedicated to improve well-being, but for some yogi(ni)s to support recoveries from illness and traumas (Shaw 2021). Types of teaching styles refer to pain and its meaning in different ways in yoga tutorials and health discourses. In a study about yoga teaching styles in Germany, Hauser (2013) highlighted two forms of yoga tutorials. The first approach, popular in the 1970s and still practiced today characterizes yoga as a "gentle and soft practice" where achieving well-being is the result of slowing down. From this view, pain is seen as a warning signal (ibid, 125). The second approach, popularized near the end of the 1990s following a boom in yoga practices in the US and in Europe, emphasizes expanding one's personal limits. In this approach, pain is defined as "normal" and discomfort a "method for increasing the health benefits" (ibid, 118). Although the first approach emphasizes pain avoidance, both approaches to yoga teaching can be harmful. In a study about Ashtanga yoga teachings, Shaw (2021, 331) explains that pain is viewed as a part of the transformative process, stating, "pain is often glossed as progress and instructive." According to Shaw, the organizational dynamic of the Ashtanga system with an embedded teacher-student relationship contributes to perpetuating harm and potential abuses, understood by practitioners as part of the therapeutic process to heal and grow physically, emotionally, and spiritually (ibid).

In addition, self-transformation through yoga practice implies a process of appropriation of rituals, symbols, and embodied performance. I do assume that practitioners and teachers must negotiate their gendered expression of identity in yoga contexts where conceptions of gender are embedded in normative considerations and possibly different than their own. An analysis of gendered dynamics and interactions can help us to shed a new light on these relationships and teaching contexts.

## Methodology and Fieldwork

My analysis is based on interviews with yoga teachers and practitioners and long-term participant observation conducted between 2016 and 2019. Participant observation enabled me to take part in and observe *in situ* yoga practices, interactions between participants and teachers, and the social and material environment. Interviews with participants helped me elucidate meaning-making process and networks of meanings related to yoga, to question observations I made in classes and discuss with fellow participants, and to have a wider understanding of the yoga practitioners' and teachers' backgrounds, noting their biographical trajectories and forms of commitment to practicing yoga. In addition to regular participant observation in yoga classes and

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the word "traditional" is always to be taken cautiously: on the one hand, the reference to tradition is not consensual and there is still discussions among historians to identify what belongs to History and its posterior reconstruction. On the other hand, this argument of tradition is widely used by participants in the yoga world to establish a legitimacy based on "authenticity", in a critical way towards the process of "commodification" of yoga.

intensive workshops during periods of four months and two years, I also adopted a multi-sited approach by following participants—according to the opportunities of the fieldwork—in their networks (Marcus 1995). This led to long-term relationships with participants.

Data is composed of field notes from courses and workshops in Western Switzerland and Sofia, Bulgaria, retreats in Lemnos, Greece, other festivals and events including completing 40 days of Kundalini yoga, attending the Congress of the European Union of Yoga in Zinal, Switzerland, and additional places of practice and activities to which my participants invited me. In addition, I conducted 52 formal interviews in French or English with practitioners and teachers between the ages of 30 and 79, 15 of whom self-identified as men and 37 as women. Data collection also included audio and visual recordings of lectures and collective yoga classes over one year, totalling 70 hours of recordings. Some documents (books, websites) completed this data set.

The offer of yoga classes unfolds across a diversity of emphases ranging from spiritual, philosophical, sports, and/or therapeutic (Nizard 2019), and in various teaching contexts, from fitness studios to yoga studios and ashrams, as well as the domestic universe of personal practice. Depending on the context, references to a religious/spiritual dimension expressed in rituals and teachers' discourses range from absent to open or strong emphasis. The results of this article are based on teaching contexts with a religious/spiritual dimension in the teachers' discourse and the spatial environment. My analysis and conclusions are, therefore, partial with regard to the multiplicity of forms of yoga teaching<sup>3</sup>.

I based my data analysis and production of results on a grounded theory process, iterating between data collection and analysis. In the second stage, I specifically analyzed the sociological biographies of participants by applying analytical and methodological framework outlined by Lahire (2019).

## The Masculine and The Feminine: Sacred Energy, Rituals, and Identities in Kundalini Yoga According to Yogi Bhajan

Although historical transformations have implied that yoga practiced today in Switzerland has little to do with yoga practiced several centuries ago in India, the teachings, teachers, and practitioners share references based on ancient, often translated, sometimes revisited, texts, which are sourced from different yoga traditions. Today, a primary shared understanding across teaching contexts is the characterization of a human composed of both feminine and masculine energy. This understanding is inspired by the Tantric tradition. According to Tantric metaphysical foundations, the feminine and the masculine are the poles of unity between Shakti and Shiva. In particular, in Kundalini yoga<sup>4</sup>, the “shakti-kundalini” represents the cosmic energy, and the mastery of this energy—through the practice of *kriyas*<sup>5</sup>, *asanas* (postures), *pranayama* (breathing), and *mantra* (chants)—allows Shiva-Shakti union (Fields 2001, 144).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This data was collected for a Ph.D. study. For the global study, wider teaching contexts were included and observed.

<sup>4</sup> Kundalini yoga was introduced in Europe by Carl Gustav Jung. Until then, it was transmitted mainly orally in master-student teachings. Yogi Bhajan (1929-2004) popularized Kundalini yoga in the US at the end of the 1960's, which then spread to Europe and, to a certain extent, throughout the world. Kundalini yoga “as taught by Yogi Bhajan” is a type of standardized yoga in terms of training and teaching; publications and techniques are protected by copyright and a teacher who wishes to teach “Kundalini yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan” must have undergone specific training to do so. Other teachers claim a form of traditional authenticity of Kundalini yoga by distinguishing themselves from this movement.

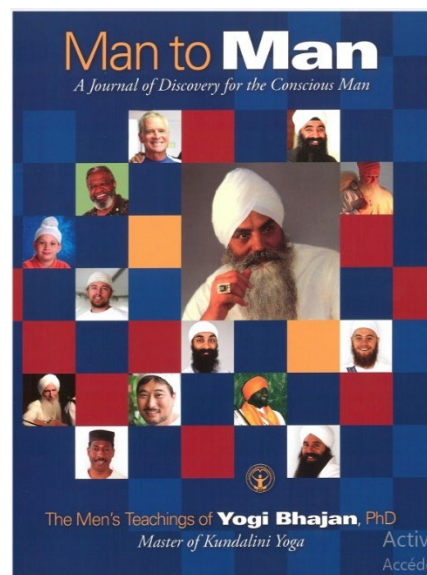
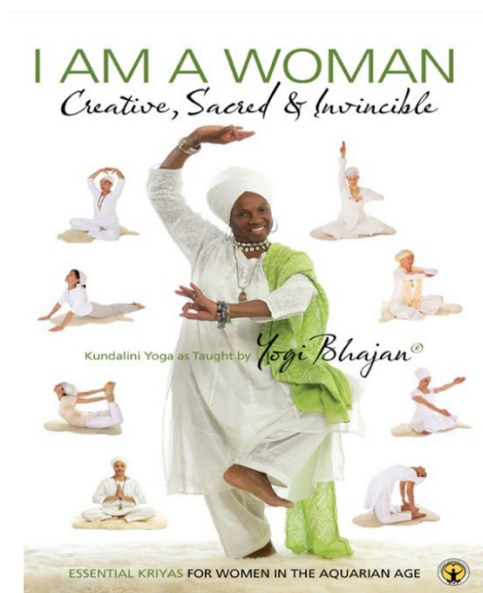
<sup>5</sup> A *kriya* is a sequence of physical actions designed to impact the practitioner physically, mentally, and spiritually.

<sup>6</sup> The difference between the texts of the Tantric tradition and the classical yoga rests on the characterization of the body in a process of “liberation”. Classical yoga advances that the body (and the binomial body-mind constituting the *prakṛti* matter) is a tool in the sense that the yogi(ni) is supposed to transcend this materiality to reach pure

In this tradition, the focus is on harmonizing the masculine and the feminine. Reference to the masculine and feminine also extends to a wider network of meanings that shape a holistic understanding of the human being, including the physiological, the psychological, and the spiritual.

This representation of the masculine and the feminine also finds its translation in representations of men and women. Although oral teachings often emphasize an articulation between masculine and feminine that goes beyond gender, many rituals physically stage this dialogical reference between masculine and feminine, inscribing them in the dynamics of gendered relations. In addition to rituals, through a gendered differentiation (binary and envisaged in its complementarity) moral codes are constructed, guaranteeing supposedly harmonious and ethical relationships.

Kundalini yoga, as systematized by Yogi Bhan, also emphasizes a system of rules of behaviors and formalizes a wide range of practices in a gendered differentiation. The books pictured below, one for each gender, are based on Bhan's teachings and are a compilation of recommendations and guidelines referring to mundane and spiritual topics. Placing explicit emphasis on gender roles and identities, they outline expected behaviors and representations of what it implies to be or become a "good" woman or man.



"I am a Woman"<sup>7</sup> is divided into four parts, offering answers to the question "what is a woman?" Women are portrayed as infinite, divine, and worthy beings. The first chapters elaborate on how to awaken inner vitality, connect to eternal power, and be radiant through beauty and grace. The second part is dedicated to the woman as "healer, leader, and nurturer," explaining how to empower life and cultivate the self. The sacred feminine and divine mother are discussed in the third part, which offers guidelines about sexuality and creativity, relationships and communication, becoming a mother, and becoming healthy, happy, and holy. The final chapters refer to inner beauty through personal discipline and grace.

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Consciousness (*purusa*). In the Tantric, non-dualist tradition, *prakrti* and *purusa* are present in the materiality of the body, where the latter is both conscious and sacred (Fields 2001, 32-33).

<sup>7</sup> Kundalini Research Institute. 2009. I am a Woman. Creative, Sacred, Invincible. KRI.

“Man to Man”<sup>8</sup> depicts a good and “conscious” man. The book shapes a definition of a “real” man who is supposed to be an “inside” man, invoking polarities, and growing as a man through communication. A strong man is a conscious and radiant man. The book outlines the expected qualities required for sex, success and prosperity, invincibility, excellence, and spirituality.

Dedicated to guiding Kundalini yoga students and teacher trainees towards self-realization, these two manuals offer specific images of the “true self:” women as healers and nurturers who embody divinity and men as conscious beings who build inner strength and have strong communication abilities.

## Gendered Rituals and Identities: Cultivating the “True Self” Through Inner Strength, Embodied Sensitivity, and Divine Femininity

In my observations of Kundalini yoga classes during forty-day practices and solstice celebrations<sup>9</sup>, and through interviews with participants, it became apparent that gendered roles—explicitly enacted during certain ritualized practices—are appropriated in contrasting ways.

The rituals show a paradoxical situation. While teachings convey harmonizing the masculine and feminine within each individual, ritual practices reify distinctions between men and women. For example, there are different ways to position hands in the *mudras*<sup>10</sup> depending on whether one is a man or a woman.

Some female practitioners appreciate this distinction as a way to reinforce self-confidence, an enunciation of feminine power to reappropriate one’s femininity. The rituals and, more broadly, belonging to the group, allow some practitioners to perform a form of femininity that valorizes their roles as mothers and wives. Here, “devotion” is a key idea applied to extra-mundane spirituality and worldly activities. While for others, gendered roles considered traditional and part of a reification of the body give rise to tensions, sometimes leading them to leave the group.

Juliette, age 43 and a therapist and yoga teacher, makes spiritual meaning of her yoga practice, which leads her to discover a sacred feminine:

And yoga is the discovery of my own divinity. I was able to trust my body, go through some really hard things in teacher training. All of a sudden, you feel this light, which is not you but you are part of it. That’s the divinity that touched me in yoga, yes, my own divinity.

When I asked her what health means to her, her answer referred to a vibrational balance. To illustrate this, she explained how she feels a flow of vibrations while doing *Venus Kriyas*<sup>11</sup> with her partner:

I did some *Ang Sang Wahe Guru Venus Kriyas* with my boyfriend, where you do the mantra by putting your hand on the heart of the other, looking into each other’s eyes, and you feel the vibration of the mantra in your hands, in the other’s body, in the other’s heart. Han, how beautiful

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<sup>8</sup> Kundalini Research Institute. 2008. *Man to Man. A Journal of Discovery for the Conscious Man*. KRI.

<sup>9</sup> Kundalini yoga gives great importance to the cycle of seasons, and solstices and equinoxes are celebrated with special events.

<sup>10</sup> A *mudra* is a hand gesture intended to channel the flow of vital energy.

<sup>11</sup> The *Venus Kriyas* are techniques practiced in pairs and intended to make the polarity of the masculine and feminine energies circulate between the partners.



it is, to see that, it is where you feel that the vibration is cleansing in fact, that these sacred mantras (silence) ... And health is the free flow of this vibration.

In contrast, Brigitte, age 38 and a social worker, illustrates how the specific gendered tutorials in rituals and teachings can disturb some practitioners. I met Brigitte at a Kundalini yoga night celebrating the winter solstice. The celebration consisted of a collective gathering of 11 people in a yoga studio between 8 p.m. and 7 a.m. During the event, we practiced *kriyas*, *mantra* chants, and relaxation. A couple of teachers guided the celebration, and the participants were all Kundalini yoga teachers and students. The “Heart Lotus *Kriya*” was practiced twice during the gathering. The teacher’s instructions repeated the description in Bhajan’s book, namely that the practice was to be done “normally” between a man and a woman, mentioning the different positions of the hands adopted by the man and the woman, and adding when both partners were of the same gender, that one was to play the man and the other the woman.

When I interviewed Brigitte two weeks after the event, she mentioned that the gendered dimension of *kriyas* had made her uncomfortable:

In my regular class, there were already things that bothered me. But this night of yoga disturbed me much more than the other times ... And so that night it really made me a little bit like that. A little bit of a repulsive effect. Also an exercise, where you put yourself as a man, as a woman ... It's several times, little things like that, that make me wonder, am I really in my place, is it really this practice that I want to develop ... And the hierarchy, the roles of men and women, it doesn't fit ... I consider myself more like a witch. It's energy, life, nature, that's what I am interested in... For me, a witch is a woman who has knowledge about nature, bodies, contraception, well the premises of contraception. She is a strong, independent woman, who was not afraid of her emotions, of going to see inside.

Despite having taken regular courses for over a year, Brigitte hesitated to continue practicing Kundalini yoga after this event. Her reaction can be understood in part by looking at the functioning of certain movements such as the Kundalini yoga presented here, or the Shivananda centers studied by Altglas (2005) and Nizard (2020) who highlight a double discourse the centers mobilize. On one hand, teachings that refer to universally accepted principles were relatively easy for practitioners with different beliefs, values, and objectives to appropriate. On the other hand, Shivananda centers retain a connection to neo-Hinduism which was less easily appropriated by some practitioners and resulted in their distancing from the group. Altglas (2005) and Nizard (2020) observed that in the moments practitioners connected more deeply with the community, their relationship to it transformed: either to a reinforcement of the commitment to the community and its central values, or to a more personalized and psychological appropriation without necessarily showing a strong adhesion to these values, or a distancing or even a separation from the group. In this contexts, gendered rituals and, more broadly, certain expectations regarding marked gender roles have also an influence on practitioners’ positioning.

Yoga is accepted as a space to discover the body and senses, a self-discipline dedicated to build self-confidence in men’s meaning-making narratives. Their experiences incorporate “energy,” embodied sensitivity, non-competition, and conscious actions where consciousness brings inner power.

This extract of my interview with Georges, age 48 and a salesperson, illustrates these points. For him, yoga is related to energy flows. He mentioned how embodied feelings are important and bring him to “feel alive physically and spiritually:”

And I really have this feeling to touch something, it is something ‘magic,’ a feeling of calm, of precision. For me, it is something important in this sense. It is almost an ecstasy, an orgasm, an illumination, and it is also a moment of sharing, there is a very generous, benevolent energy in the group.

Yoga spaces appear as “safe spaces” that support the development of positive understandings and different emotional registers, as Griera (2021) highlighted in the specific context of Catalan prisons for men. The emphasis on embodied sensitivity and emotional experience is a key point in men’s experiences, often in contrast to expectations of dominant hegemonic masculinity. Socialization through collective yoga practice can also help to elaborate spiritual narratives.

Physical performance and strength remain valued by male practitioners. Yet they view inner power as characterized by rejecting competition, the modern world, and the figure of an “unconscious” man:

One of the most blatant change was associated with food and fasting. Because questioning the way you eat—because for me yoga as I said before is learning to do new things, ideally like a child, and also questioning what you think you have acquired. And then eating, nobody questions the food ... And during the fasting, when I saw the people in the cafeteria sitting down, it's mechanical, it's mechanical ... you look at people who eat to fill themselves up and then they go back to work, and you say to yourself ‘bullshit, I don't want that’ ... So you do things mechanically, and I don't want that. I think that yoga is learning not to do things mechanically ... And with yoga you learn to let go ... There is this side of managing life, with lightness. At the time, I was depressed, my feet hurt, I didn't know what to do. And everything is better now. Yoga is really done to heal the body, and it does work.

(Tom, 35 years old, engineer)

These examples reflect specific ideas about the “true self” among Kundalini yoga practitioners. Through yoga, they have been able to increase their inner strength and embodied sensitivity. We see self-transformation and meaning-making that rejects competition predominantly emphasized in the narratives of men.

## Is Self-Expression Soluble in Tradition?

Although yoga teaching in Europe and Switzerland is based on pedagogy that formalizes teaching frameworks discouraging the master-student relationship as a source of transmission (Desponds Meylan, 2007), learning from a specific teacher, often referred to by students as a “guide,” or a guru or master in India or abroad, remains highly valued by practitioners and teachers.

Learning from a teacher respected for their knowledge and skills embeds practitioners in negotiations of where to position themselves. Teachers' views can be uplifting, but also raise questions and tensions sometimes resulting in distancing between the teacher and student, or even rejection. These dynamics can strongly influence the self-transformation process.

In some spiritual contexts that value and potentially reinforce a "dominant gendered order" (Woodhead 2012), practitioners can question their own values, identity, and life stories. For instance, teachings that sacralize the creation of life and motherhood can lead women who have had abortions to be viewed and to view themselves as having performed a reprehensible act towards the sacred. Although teachings like these and practitioners' processes of appropriation leads to various outcomes, these exchanges are often marked by tensions between spiritual space, gendered agency, and biography.

Melanie, age 59 and an elementary school teacher, was a strongly committed feminist activist at the end of the 1970s and has supported abortion rights her entire life, but has been questioning her feminist values since she began yoga. The focus of one particular intensive yoga workshop was about the origin of life. The teacher located the "spark" of life and its beginning at the moment of the encounter between a sperm and an egg. Melanie was strongly upset by this discourse, having previously experienced an abortion and thus calling her decision into question.

Then when Max [the teacher] spoke about this first spark where there was the meeting of a sperm and an egg, but oh it made me a shock, a shock, even now, that is, pfiou. It's hard what I did. You see, in fact it's also that, all my friends are absolutely for abortion. And I don't think I'm for abortion at all. There are a lot of things that it calls into question, a lot of fundamental things ... It's hard to make people understand, because I think I'm only at the beginning of another path of understanding.

Yoga practitioners often view difficult experiences, with oneself or in relation to the teacher or others as Melanie described, as transformative.

Two (non-exclusive) figures of the teacher or master emerge: a figure embodying benevolence and/or authoritarianism. The non-egalitarian relationship of teacher and student is dedicated to improving the autonomy and self-transformation of the student. The teacher is a figure of "inspiration," respected for their knowledge and experience, attributed with ordinary (intra-worldly) or extra-ordinary (connected to the invisible or spiritual world) qualities.

He [a teacher] has enormous resources. He always has an answer. What he teaches is what he has integrated and what he passes on ... All that I know about yoga, I owe to him, even if I am the one who integrate it, no one else has instilled in me as much richness, so for me in a sense he is my master.

(Janine, 51 years old, human resources consultant and yoga teacher)

And Felix remains my reference as an inspiration. We discuss various theories, we have fervent discussions. Thus, his presence in my life is regular and fundamental.

(Paula, 47 years old, yoga teacher)

Asymmetrical teacher-student relationships are often incorporated as a source and material for learning, and the teacher is a figure of traditional authority. This can be traced to the principle of *yama/niyama*<sup>12</sup> and also seen in styles such as in Bhajan's Kundalini yoga where archetypes of father, mother, and authority are at the heart of the teachings in order to work on a family anamnesis.

I did the kundalini [sic] teacher training 1, and I'm going to start the second one. But I'm not sure if I'll do it with the same teacher. During the first one, I did a kitchen *seva*<sup>13</sup>, and I felt in prison. Now I have to think about it. The teacher is very strict, that's something I liked a lot at the beginning, but now it's too much. And I also think that we are really in a period of freedom, where we really have to create. So I believe that you have to master the basics before you can be free and create. But I have this very strict teacher and it reminds me a lot of my mother, and authority.

(Juliette, 43 years old, therapist and yoga teacher)

This yogic master was not nice, not neat, there were rumors of sexual abuses on the internet, it wasn't easy. I didn't know where I stood, I felt bullied, I was in resistance. I told myself that I could do whatever I wanted, nobody would tell me what it was. And then I understood that the only reference instance is within oneself, no matter who you are with, you are always alone. And that was a lesson. There is no reference.

(Jasmine, 55 years old, owner of a yoga boutique)

According to principles of personal growth in yoga, all relationships and problems are part of the teaching process and invite the student to work on oneself. In this sense, the process of personal transformation takes place in a logic of adapting to social and family structures, without deconstructing or transforming these structures.

## On and Off the Mat: Yoga Commitments and Personal and Professional Realms

Yoga practice can be a source of self-realization whereby the transformation of the self, relationships with others, and relationships to the environment are shaped by tuning into an "inner power." Yet, according to Altglas (2014b) access to the tools of such self-transformation can be uneven. She outlines in her study of yoga practitioners in France and the UK that the empowering nature of self-realization happens mainly for "those who have the abilities and entitlement to undertake it" (333), in other words, for those who have the economic, cultural and social capital to practice yoga. Altglas (2014b) characterizes yoga as a set of resources intended mainly for the urban middle class, allowing a "New Petite Bourgeoisie" to transfer resources gained through yoga to their professional lives and improve their emotional capital.

At the level of the individual, yoga practitioners are regularly supported in making meaning of their biographical trajectories through narratives and practices. Yoga trajectories are commitments (Becker 1960) embedded in sociological biographies as well as social structures and social constraints. Self-transformation

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<sup>12</sup> These concepts are a part of Patanjali's classical yoga. *Yama* and *Niyama* are the first two of eight limbs intended to move towards the realization of the self. *Yama* concerns the moral rules towards others and *Niyama* concerns the observances towards oneself.

<sup>13</sup> *Seva* is voluntary selfless service to a master or/and the community.

can be understood to involve both decisions and changes. In order to examine the agency of participants, the complex interrelationships between personal/domestic, professional, and other realms must also be taken into account.

With this lens, we see how women's commitments result in a transfer of resources, and also, permeability between personal/domestic, professional, and other realms. Consistent with the literature, a main feature of most women's trajectories is a logic of care. When committed to a regular yoga practice, women usually share and pass on their yogic skills and knowledge, whether through informal transmission to their friends, children, family, or as a yoga teacher. Women's commitments are closely connected to social and familial configurations, and especially for yoga teachers, their professional trajectory can require negotiations and intertwining with other realms.

But my family didn't agree with my strong commitment. And I had to make a choice: either leave my family and live my commitment to the fullest. But I knew I was going to cause suffering, and for myself as well. And I asked myself if causing suffering was a path of love. So, finally I stayed ... Saving my marriage is a beautiful victory ... I learned to turn elements that were against me into elements playing for me.

(Julie, 51 years old, yoga teacher)

I had a really intense practice during all my studies ... And then, well, personally I was very taken by the family. And living with someone who is very busy on weekends, very busy in the evening, I was really responsible for the family. So, on a pragmatic level, my life as a teacher was very quickly oriented towards weekly courses such as they are practiced here, in collective classes, because that ensured me a schedule that was quite easy to combine with family requirements.

(Aurora, 64 years old, yoga teacher)

In this study, it is in the permeability/impermeability between yoga engagement and the personal/domestic and professional realms that we see a marked difference between female and male trajectories .

Men's trajectories tend to separate the realm of yoga practice ("on the mat") and daily life whether personal or professional ("off the mat"), except in cases where they manage to professionalize their practice by teaching.

The distinction men make between on and off the mat can be viewed with the backdrop of social representations of yoga. Cultures of dominant hegemonic masculinity socially devalue yoga as a male practice, despite the relative high consideration of self-care and well-being among middle-class men. Social representations of yoga as a soft and gentle activity position men who admit to practicing yoga as stigmatized and potentially subordinated. Male yoga practitioners in this study mentioned their unease about speaking about yoga with anyone outside of those also committed to the yoga world. They share little with relatives and acquaintances, but strongly value the need for and quality of exchanges among yoga practitioners, discussing bodily and sometimes intimate issues and building new relationships and often friendships.

I talk about it, people around me know about it. And it's true that it's a bit, not like a dual life, I wouldn't go that far. But it's true that with the people of yoga it's also a sharing with particular

energies, particular lives, food, which are very different from what we are used to meet every day. And this is not at all something that I share with my partner. And among the people I know, there are very few who practice. And so we don't talk about it very much either ... it's not something I live fully. When it's there, it's there, it's intense, but I also have a part where I can't live it.

(Georges, 48 years old, salesperson)

Other practitioners have similar experiences. They tend not to discuss yoga much around friends or family who are not involved in yoga, and sometimes feel confronted by negative views of the practice or a lack of understanding of the self-discipline required to maintain a certain diet or lifestyle. Such perspectives see yoga as cult-like, or do not view it as athletic enough to be considered a sport or an activity for men.

I do mention how yoga is good for me. But it's complicated because I can see around me that the reactions are varied. At my workplace, there are a lot of women, and I think there is an openness to this way of doing things. But in my groups of friends, they think that it is like a cult. They are a little tetanized by this openness, so it's not worth talking about it ... They don't know what I am talking about, they're a bit reticent. They may have an idea that it's not very manly, or not very sporty, but they are completely wrong.

(Fabrice, 57 years old, human resources manager)

These examples reveal that men separate their yoga trajectories from other realms in their lives. Alternatively, being a practitioner of yoga becomes socially legitimate only when they become a professional yoga teacher. The path of becoming a yoga teacher serves as a social position that enables men to reconcile social expectations and their involvement in the yoga world. According to Becker (1960), commitments are embedded in culture or subcultures and systems of values. Commitments depend on "valuables with which bets can be made in the world he lives in" (ibid, 39). Becoming a yoga teacher, or professional committed to well-being activities, allows men to negotiate or even escape their position of subordination in the gender order (Connell 2000).

## Conclusion

Multiple gendered dimensions operate in the experiences of yoga teachers and practitioners. In the case study of Kundalini yoga according to Yogi Bhanan, the organizational and interactional dynamics of this relatively standardized type of teaching construes binary representations of women and men and their interactions with rules of behavior and rituals. There are different expectations for male and female practitioners who are guided on a journey towards their "true self." Women are meant to uncover their divine femininity, to heal, and to nurture, while men are encouraged to build inner strength and communication abilities. Teachings and rituals allow some practitioners to perform gendered expectations, including a form of womanhood that valorizes embodied divinity and traditional roles of mothers and partners, or the male performance of self-discipline dedicated to improving embodied inner strength and sensitivity. As some practitioners appropriate teachings that value traditional institutions and gender roles, they experience tension and can feel restricted in their self-expression.

The relationship between teacher and practitioner also influences the self-transformation process. The teacher is a figure of benevolence and inspiration and/or an authoritarian figure. Practitioners integrate aspects of this relationship into their personal growth. Power dynamics, as well as physical, relational, contextual, or existential difficulty or even harm are framed as teachings, in some teaching contexts known as, “the poison is the medicine.” These results are consistent with Shaw’s study (2021) of Ashtanga yoga, highlighting the centrality of pain and suffering in certain teachings and therapeutic spaces dedicated to working on oneself. This type of meaning-making can be seen in a wide range of types of yoga, including Ashtanga, Bikram, and Kundalini. The approach potentially legitimates psychological or physical abuses within certain power dynamics.

Yoga trajectories interact with other social realms, notably the personal and the professional. Women’s trajectories evidence a strong permeability between realms, centered around a logic of care and negotiated with respect to other responsibilities. In men’s trajectories, practicing yoga potentially positions them in a subordinate position in the wider gender order, which has consequences for their strategies of commitment. Becoming a professional yoga teacher allows men to legitimize their yoga practice where they would normally maintain a separation from their personal and professional realms to avoid the stigma of participating in a so-called non-manly practice.

The emergence in the 2000s of a new or resurgent model of yoga teachings—vigorous and dedicated to pushing physical and mental limits to build a flexible yogi—came to compete with the model of a “soft and gentle” practice of the 1970s (Hauser 2013). However, statistics in Switzerland, as elsewhere in Europe, show that yoga has remained an activity practiced primarily by women. Furthermore, the social imagination paints yoga as a feminine practice, devalued by the dominant gender order. Additionally, as highlighted by Illouz (2008, 103) studying how contemporary therapeutic discourses pervaded professional realms, being able to control emotions and being a communicative leader are highly valued professional competencies, and these expectations are consistent with the discourse of the inner strong man. My results do not preclude that men cannot transfer skills or capital from one realm to another (and actually they are able to do it given this cultural correspondence), but rather that men’s trajectories fail to fully reconcile a strong interest in yoga with their everyday life.

The results of this study demonstrate that yoga practices do not challenge social structures or gender order. Within the last five years, feminist and decolonial critiques have emerged (also from some yoga insiders), questioning, for example, access to yoga classes and the normative language used in classes. These inquiries are scaffolded by the MeToo movement and arguments of cultural appropriation and intersectionality. In the Kundalini yoga community, testimonies of sexual and psychological abuse have urged some yoga teachers to separate themselves from Yogi Bhajan (as their dead master) and the controversial worldwide foundation that oversees the practice of Kundalini yoga. In Switzerland, changes like these are mainly absent, and this study did not identify transformations in the context of yoga teaching.

A limitation of this study is that yoga spaces such as classes in fitness centers were excluded from long-term observation, although a handful of these classes were included in the multi-sited ethnography. The results would likely be different if these sites were included in the fieldwork. In addition, the articulation between yoga trajectories and personal and professional realms was analyzed through the lens of negotiations and strategic commitments. Two dimensions would deserve further investigations: a deeper analysis focused on the sociological biographies and spiritual/religious dispositions of yoga practitioners and teachers could bring a wider perspective to yoga trajectories. This specific analysis was out of the scope of this article.

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