A friend of mine, Sarah, once told me about her experience with yoga. While in a doctor’s sterile waiting room, she picked up a yoga magazine. On the cover was a blonde, lithe woman knotted up like a pretzel. The woman wore a tight, salmon colored tank top and complimentary yoga pants. Sarah noticed the brand on the model as one that marketed itself as a “green,” socially responsible clothing company, which to Sarah meant fair trade, made of hemp, and organically dyed. Headlines surrounded the yoga model:

“Yoga Cures: Can the practice transform American medicine?”
“Twists for a healthy core and spine.”
“Happy inside: Simple practices that can truly change your mind.”
“Religion and yoga.”
“Heal your back with yoga.”

The nurse called her into the examination room. During her annual visit, the doctor recommended adding yoga to Sarah’s health regimen and extolled its numerous health benefits, including relaxation. The physician noted her slightly elevated blood pressure. Sarah thought back to the magazine, and asked herself, “How ‘relaxing’ is it to twist your organs into an unimaginable shape? Or how is bending yourself into a pretzel a spiritual experience?”

She left the air-conditioned doctor’s office and stepped out into the oppressive summer heat. The bank’s digital thermometer was bursting at 100 degrees Farenheit, and Sarah thought the humidity had to be at least 100 percent. On the way to her car, she passed a yoga studio. Through one of the studio’s windows, Sarah saw yoga paraphernalia for sale, which included brightly colored mats, books, wooden blocks, and clothes, similar to what she thought was the yoga outfit she had seen on the magazine cover.

Through a second set of voyeur-friendly windows, Sarah watched people sitting, lifeless, hands folded in prayer, as an instructor read something that did not sound like English. Nine people were in the room, mostly women in their

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1 Actual headline from Yoga Journal, May 2010.
mid-40s. Some of the women wore outfits similar to the yoga model’s on the magazine cover, but two wore cotton pants, resembling pajamas, with looser workout tops. She also noticed two men, one younger with a shaved head, who looked to be the youngest in the room. The other gentleman, who looked to be in his late 50s, wore an old t-shirt with the sleeves cut off and a pair of black basketball shorts.

She thought, “What exactly is this yoga? Is it exercise? Is it religious? Are they praying? Or are they just staring into space?” She also wondered what those people did for a living that allowed them to take a yoga class at three o’clock on a Wednesday afternoon. At home she began to research yoga on the Internet and found that her inner thoughts were similar to many others’ in the quest to define yoga.2 There were Internet articles about yoga’s ancient history, medical and spiritual benefits, and even debates on who owns yoga or who should practice it.

The yogic phenomenon in the West is multi-dimensional and threads through areas of history;3 market trends; fitness and exercise, medicine;4 religion and spirituality;5 and health and wellness.6 Yoga has meant different things to different people. For many, yoga participation has provided a religious or spiritual journey based primarily on meditation. For others, yoga participation has provided an embodied experience combining the physical and the spiritual. It has a long history rooted in ancient Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism,7 but the yoga practiced in the West has a different emphasis for some. For example, the health industry has promoted yoga as an ameliorating salve for lifestyle indulgences such as obesity8 and hypertension.9

Scholars have tracked yoga’s long journey back to 4500 BCE; its influential texts such as Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras; and its journey westward from the Indus

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5 DeMichelis, Modern Yoga; Feuerstein, The Yoga Tradition.