

YOGA A MOSLEM DAILY PRACTICE

By

VITRI W RACHMADIYANTO

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taught by TRICIA FISKE & CHRIS LUND

Introduction

I was born a Muslim but wasn't a religious person and hadn't learned or practiced the religion until I was in my 40s. Growing up in Indonesia, I had always been active, trying many sports and other activities, but never knew yoga until I was in college. Yoga classes weren't offered at my college, only at a yoga studio, and I couldn't afford them. When I asked my parents for extra money so I could learn about yoga, they discouraged me, saying yoga is a religious practice. Many of my other Muslim relatives and friends also called yoga a religious practice. This is why, although I'd heard about the mind-body benefits of yoga, I never got to learn about it and practice it.

In 2006, after my father passed away, I started to learn more about my religion and its practices, including wearing a hijab. Unfortunately, wearing a veil made me feel I couldn't be as active as before, and soon I started gaining weight. In 2014, at my heaviest weight ever, I decided to become active again. I started out jogging and then took up long-distance running. But running gave me new problems, from toe pain to plantar fasciitis. That year, I went to Indonesia for vacation, and a friend invited me to take a yoga class with her at her Iyengar school. There was no religious practice at all.

When I came back to the United States, I started to look for a yoga class but was intimidated by what I believed was the U.S. image of yoga as an expensive and exclusive sport. You have to be sexy, rich and limber to do yoga, I felt, and as a woman who wears a hijab, I already felt like I didn't belong in a yoga studio. So I gathered my courage and tried a yoga class offered at my community center, where I met my very first yoga teacher in the United States. Although her teaching style is different from my friend's Iyengar yoga style and the class was bigger, she showed me that yoga is for any type of woman--from thin to heavy, even one with a hijab--and that there was no religious practice. I found, however, that many of the basic poses are similar to Islamic daily prayer movements.

After I'd been practicing yoga regularly for more than a year, my teacher suggested I learn more by taking teacher training classes. The training program helped me see more parallels between

Islam and yoga--their values, way of prayer and yoga practices. Perhaps because yoga came from India, from a cultural perspective it is also similar to Indonesia, my homeland, especially in the language. Moreover, when I learned about Ayurveda, I found similarities to Islamic teaching.

Based on my experience, I decided to do my thesis on this matter: the parallel practices of yoga in Islam, the misunderstandings and misperceptions about yoga practice and also about Islam, especially nowadays with the negative portrayals of Islam by the media.

The space

Yoga can be done anywhere, indoors or outdoors, and it doesn't require a specific room for practice, as long as the environment is clean. Unlike other "exercise" classes, especially the cardio classes where students jump around and move a lot, yoga is done within the mat size. The reason for using a "sticky mat" is mostly to prevent slipping during practice and stay clean.

The same as in Salat (prayer), it also can be done anywhere as long as the place is clean & while doing solat one is facing the Ka'bah in Mecca. We also do use a mat or a rug and the reason for it to ensure the cleanliness of the prayer area and we do not move around beyond the mat just like in yoga practice.



Yoga sticky mat



Prayer rug

Daily prayer as a salutation

In Hatha yoga practice, there are poses that we hold for several breaths. There is also a flow called vinyasa, the most common of which is Surya Namaskara. In Tantric yoga, there is a practice combining dynamic movement of asanas with mantras.

Salat is similar to a vinyasa with mantras, too. The fard (obligatory) prayers are done five times a day, at specific times. Each salat has a different cycle/round of vinyasa called raka'at. There is a certain supplication or mantra for every asana or pose. During a prayer a Muslim concentrates and meditates on God by reciting Qur'an (the Holy book) verses.

The dhristi (gaze) in yoga is either on the horizon or the upper hand, depending on the pose, while during Salat, the dhristi stays on one focal point the ground.

In vinyasa, the poses flow from one to another, but Salat is more like regular yoga, in which we hold one pose while reciting the supplication, called tu'maninah. Also, as in yoga, where we quiet our minds and focus on our breathing while holding a position, the same thing happens in Salat. It is called khusyu'.

Here is a comparison of prayer position and yoga asanas:



Although there are no specific studies on why these prayer poses were chosen and what their benefits are, I learned through yoga teacher training the benefit of doing them properly. I also learned what I've been doing wrong alignment-wise in these positions.

Here, both positions of Tadasana and Qiyam are the same, standing with a straight back, with even distribution of weight on both feet. Before I learned more about yoga, while praying in

this position I often stood with one straight foot and one bent. Through yoga I also learned that I hyper-extend my knees and elbows. For years, I'd wondered what caused my left knee to make a crackling noise. Now I know to micro-bend my knee and push my thigh back to straighten my spine and to open my chest without hiking up my shoulders.

Tadasana in yoga is a basic standing pose which is very important.

Qiyam in prayer is when one is saying their intention before their prayer.

For everything I do in life I start by saying بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ (*b-ismi-llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm*) – *In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful*

Especially for yoga practice I added : सोऽहम् (*So Ham*) – I am

In yoga tradition, before practice, class usually open by saying ॐ (*aum*) or some other mantras such as Gayatri, Mahamrtyunjaya, etc lead by the teacher and the students will response. I guess this part is what a lot of Muslim believed as part as Hindu religion practices. What they don't know is yes there is this tradition but students are not mandatory to say the mantra. They can just sit there and listen, respecting the tradition. In many occasion both during classes or workshops I can excuse myself to do my own prayer in a different room, the teachers will allow it and other students will respect that.

To me the beginning of the practice is very important, that is when I gathered my energy and my concentration before I go further in the practice. I focus to dedicate my self and my time to something that I really love to do for myself.

In a yoga practice is when I have a conversation with my body, I listen very well to what my body is saying to me, if there is any pain, where I should stop and let go what I can't do, and where I can work more to try to find more length in my body. In salat, its when I have a conversation with and remembrance of God, where I come to His calling, obeying what He ordered his people to do, stand before Him, thank, praise, asking for guidance and also forgiveness from Him.



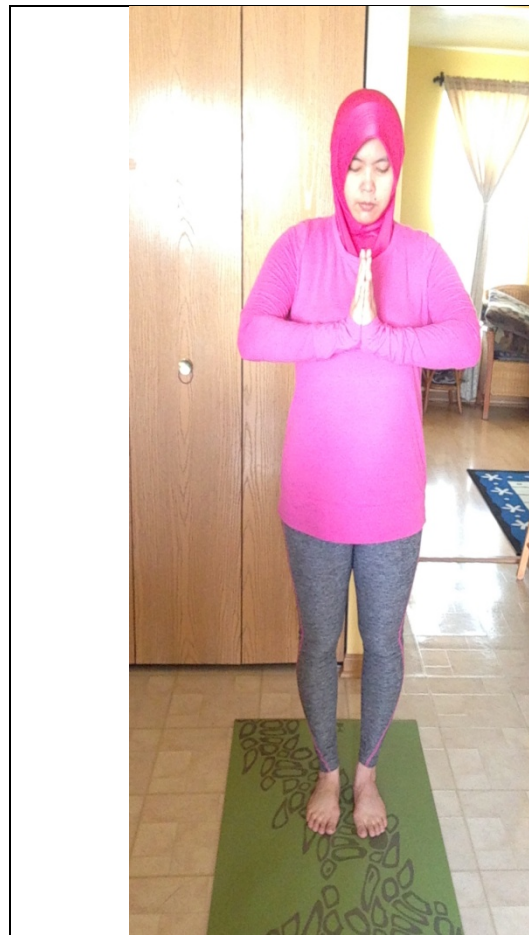
URDVA HASTASANA



TAKBIR

Urdva Hastasana in yoga is done by raising the arms up, with biceps close to the ears. This pose is done a lot in one yoga practice. It stretches the thoracic cavity, bringing fluid to the shoulder joints, stretches the belly and straightens the spine. It helps with plantar fasciitis, makes the diaphragmatic breath come more naturally and helps relieve mild anxiety.

As in the prayer, I look at it as a praise to God and also a surrender pose. We raised our hands while saying, "God is The Greatest," and by doing that we praise God and surrender to His greatness. As far as the benefit of this pose in Salat, I'm not quiet sure, because as you can see in the picture, the hands are not raised all the way up. It's a more gentle stretching of the thoracic and the shoulders.



SAMASHTITI



QIYAM

During Samastiti and/or Qiyam, there is even distribution of weight on both feet. In this position, the body is charged with positive energy, as the posture is being improved by keeping the spine tall, engaging the abdominals and aligning all the bones and joints.

In this position, a verse from the Qur'an is recited and repeated on every raka'ah (round): "and guide us to the straight path." Some scholars have interpreted this to mean alignment of the chakras, and some others interpret this as asking for guidance to stay on the right path in daily life.

To me, being in this position is a constant reminder of how in life we have to be mindful about being in balance. As for the reciting of the Qur'an, I ask to be guided in the positive path and not to follow more of my ego.



ARDHA UTTANASANA



RUK'U

Ardha Uttanasana is a gentle version of Uttanasana. This pose, if done properly, will stretch the back of the body and lengthen the hamstrings and spine. In yoga, this pose is practiced often. It calms the mind, strengthens the back, improves posture and stimulates the belly.

In prayer, though, in bowing I renew my submissiveness and humility. It also could be like honoring and respecting the Lord, like a person bowing to his or her king or queen.

In this pose before I learned yoga, I always pushed my hands to my knees. I wasn't aware I was hyper-extending my knees. Now that I know more about it, I only rest my hands on my knees.



ADHO MUKHA VIRASANA



SUJUD

In yoga, this pose is considered a resting pose. It supposed to be calming and relaxing to the nervous system and reduce blood pressure. In a prayer, Sujud is the most important position. Not only does this pose stimulate the brain's frontal cortex, but it also leaves the heart in a higher position than the brain. This position in salat can symbolize gratitude for the good in life and also asking forgiveness for our sins.

Through yoga, I learned that if I align my hips above my knees and lift my abdominals, it prevents the growth of flabbiness in the midsection.



VAJRASANA





JULUS

Vajrasana in yoga is supposedly to stretch the thighs, ankles, knees and feet. This pose is believed to help detoxify the liver and stimulate the intestines. Doing it regularly it will increase flexibility and strengthen the pelvic muscles.

Julus in prayer, to me, is like the moment when I have a conversation with God. In Southeast Asian culture, many important events are done in these positions, like the Japanese tea ceremony and the Indonesian Sungkeman, where the bride and groom ask for their parents' blessing.

Just like in Chandra Namaskara--from Balasana to salute and back to Balasana--in Salat, too--from Sujud to Julus and back to Sujud, with a different foot position.

 <p><u>VAJRASANA</u></p>	 <p><u>JULUS</u></p>
 <p>BROKEN TOE POSE</p>	 <p>COMBINATION OF VAJRASANA & BROKEN TOE</p>

These foot positions both in yoga and prayer stretch the fascial web of the feet. Staying in these positions for several breaths will help the feet stay healthy, especially when done barefoot, since our feet are usually stuck inside shoes



TAKHIYAT which is similar to **BHARADVAJASANA**
except without the twist



Same position of feet too

In yoga, Bharadvajasana is an open twist that works the lumbar, thoracic and cervical spine. In Salat, though, this pose is not done with a twist. Sitting in this pose with or without the twist for several breaths will stretch the hips, knees, ankles and feet.

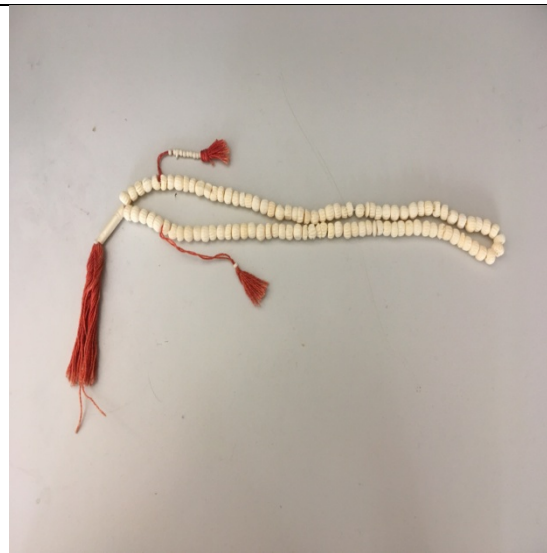
This is the last pose in Salat, and it ends with a head twist to the right and dhristi to shoulder then to the left side. Before I learned yoga, my body leaned to the right because of the nature of the pose and I slouched, dumping all my weight to my lower back. Now that I know more about yoga, I keep my back straight and engage my abdominals so I don't dump my weight into my lower back. Having my chest open also helps me breathe better.

Meditation

Islam also suggests meditation, which is called Dzikr. While doing the meditation, some people use their fingers' span to count the Dzikr, but, in another parallel between yogic and Islamic practices, most people also use the beads similar to Mala beads. These are called Tasbeeh. Mala has 108 beads but only 100 repetitions per mantra, while Tasbeeh has 103 beads, with the three beads to mark 33 counts. The most common Dzikr is 33 counts. Just as in yoga practice, Dzikir is usually done after a prayer, but one can do it anytime and anywhere even, when not praying.



MALA BEADS



TASBEEH BEADS

Ayurveda

Before humankind had a proper understanding of how germs and bacteria work, Islam had made it clear that cleanliness is important. Its teachings make sure Muslims clean themselves from anything that could possibly harm them--something people only understood the true importance of years and years later. In Islamic tradition, it is suggested to scrape the tongue and brush the teeth before every prayer. The use of holistic medicine is also among the traditions, including the oils. Many other Ayurvedic practices are also in Islamic tradition.

Yoga and prayer as personal daily practice

For me personally, finding out that there is so much similarity in Islamic prayer movement and yoga, I integrated my knowledge about the alignment in the poses of prayer that are similar to yoga poses. Also the focus of meditation in prayer and dhikr, engaging in these I could increase concentration, making it a more spiritually rewarding experience.

Practicing daily yoga is fulfilling the need of my healthy body, meditation is for my mind and praying is not only to fulfilling the obligation as a Muslim, but also for my spiritual need. I can say that combining all of these has helped me achieve power of mind and body and spiritual growth.

I could go and explain to friends and family who have been misinformed about yoga that they have actually been practicing yoga in their daily prayers. In the yoga community, too, I could explain that there are so many much parallels in Islamic teaching and yoga principle, especially the Yama and Niyamas.

Through a combination of yoga as a lifestyle and daily prayer, I have found myself. Yoga is a lifestyle for me, and prayer is the highest form of yoga. The combination of yoga and Salat doubles the advantage of enhancing my mental health. I found peace within myself that never in my life I could have achieved without integrating both in my daily life.

At the end of a yoga practice, the tradition is for both teacher and students to say नमस्ते (*Namaste*) – the divine in me honors the divine in you as a salutation and valediction.

In Islamic tradition as a salutation we say اَلْسَّلَامُ عَلَیْكُمْ (*As-salāmu ‘alaykum*) – Peace be upon you, and the response from the other party will be وَعَلَیْكُمْ اَلْسَّلَام (*wa ‘alaykumu s-salām*) – And upon you, peace.

I end everything I do by saying الحمد لله (*alḥamdulillāh*) – Praise be to God, even after a yoga practice, I thank and praise God for the precious gift which is my healthy body so I can practice my yoga. And doing yoga is a way for me to appreciate what God has given me, a healthy body, maintain it to stay healthy so I can continue to worship Him. It goes both ways.

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Happiness is



in Salah

HAPPINESS IS



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Namaste—
the Divine
in me
Honors
the Divine
in you