

## **Yoga as an Exclusive Culture: Why Men (and others) Feel Left Out**

**By Jim Cogan**

In the pantheon of irony, this resides in rarefied air: Yoga, a 5000 year old philosophy/practice/culture initially introduced by men and for men has overwhelmingly become the province of women. There are a myriad of factors that contribute to this paradox. While America ages—and seeks ever more costly means to fight that aging process—Yoga, with its emphasis on non-judgment, spiritual harmony and inner peace, has not exactly been bullish among the Weber-grill-and-Harley set. Another irony? Yoga is perhaps the most beneficial practice to radically improve not just men’s health, but also their careers, with a boost in mental focus, stamina, and diminution of stress.

So, if you were to tell a man that he could improve his sex life, his golf, tennis or racquet ball game, lower his blood pressure, improve his sleep habits, provide more energy, increase his mental focus while decreasing the stress in his life— and again, *improve his sex life*— the chances of his being “sold” are fairly high.

Now, if you were to tell this same man that all of these benefits would, like rubbing an Aladdin’s Lamp, come his way through Yoga....what might his response be? Perhaps that “Sold” sign would be turned over to the side that reads, “Closed”.

Sadly, this is the more likely response from most American men today.

Among the factors that contribute to this all too familiar response, many are anathema to modern men of the west; that is, Yoga, (as it has been portrayed by media) has become an object of testosterone-fueled ridicule. Chances are, if one sees Yoga in advertising (which has become more visible with the rise of women’s earning power) the

images are invariably soft, feminine, and yes, slightly 'new-agey'. A cursory glance at an *Oxygen* or *Lifetime* cablecast (or upscale women's magazine) reveals an Oprah-esque tableau where a slender 40-something woman is doing a Warrior pose (apparently advertisers think there is only one pose) while gentle music plays and her inner goddess is celebrated. Yet in the alternate universe of Sunday afternoon NFL football, where couch warriors scrutinize highly paid athletic warriors, should Madison Avenue mention Yoga, odds are it's not in a positive light. One recent ad for Dodge Charger mentioned things that you (the male buyer) were likely to NOT indulge in if you purchased this very Y-chromosome muscle car:

Male V.O: "I'll tell you what this car *isn't*: it isn't men's sandals, or a low cal plate. It isn't a *yoga class*...."

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYLtSl6RiPQ&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYLtSl6RiPQ&feature=relmfu)

This copy could have been penned by Don Draper from *Mad Men* while Alka-seltzering a nasty hangover.

Indeed, it's an almost quixotic struggle to capture the hearts and minds of men proud of leaving the toilet seat up. In another ad for Budweiser, the king of Beer advertising, two 30-something men are taking in a Yoga class—with two ice cold Buds in their hands, naturally. They are ostensibly taking part in a class with no one save lithesome beauties doing lascivious poses. They are *DUDES*, writ large, and they are part of a dumbed-down *Maxim* culture that is the diametric opposite of all things Yogic. These ads are so

antithetical to the advertising for Women of the exact same age group, it's almost as if Men were from Mars and Women from Venus.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcV8WN1YIL4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcV8WN1YIL4)

Yet it's so much more than simple advertising to a demographic. The very nature of Yoga itself seems to have a profoundly off-putting effect on otherwise health-seeking males.

Again, a multiplicity of factors are involved; some include the aforementioned Pop Culture image that displays a highly feminized (non-*Maxim*) Goddess-in-stretch-pants iteration of Yoga. This is largely the image most men have of Yoga; it's for *chicks*, and slightly more upscale (snooty?) ones at that. But to see why men are chronically resistant, we need to look at men themselves.

According to Tias Little, a master Yogi who makes Sante Fe his home base, Yoga was initiated by and for men as, "a means of ensuring that men have a sense of moderation in all things, specifically sexual moderation". As Yoga spread westerly, in this case to America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, men were the exemplars of Yoga. By the late 1960s, Yoga witnessed an increase in popularity. As the 80s health craze surged (along with a commensurate boost in disposable income) Yoga studios sprang up in trendy urban areas like day lilies. Suddenly, the face of Yoga was wearing light make up, even if confined more to students than teachers.

### **Men and Competition**

Then as now, male students were the minority. Many of the reasons have to do with American Male culture itself. Men are highly unlikely to invest in something that might

make them look weak. And not just weak, but incompetent. And not merely incompetent, but incompetent in front of a room of more able bodied women. This does not sit well with men. While women of a certain age may have grown up being the physically inferior gender, most men have never had the experience of looking foolish in the physical realm—again, *in full view of women*. To say this is unnerving is to understate the case.

This might explain why so many men, either with spouses or on their own, show up for Yoga class once, never to return. The experience is too humbling, too foreign, to repeat. Far easier then to say, “hey, I tried it. It was just not for me.”

But there are other aspects of why a man might not “get into” the Yoga experience. One has to do with the very non-judgmental/non-competitive nature of Yoga itself. Specifically when it involves the lack of a metric, the absence of any sort of measurable competitive yardstick, as in golf, racquetball, cycling—most any endeavor that men take part in involves some form of “winning”. This lack of ‘competitive metric’ alone is likely to turn men off, whether they’ll admit this or not. Men are just not accustomed to engaging in something in which they cannot measure and thereby gain status.

When combined with the fact that Yoga espouses an opposing gospel— of moderation, non-judgment, non-harm, and intrinsic spiritual harmony—perhaps this makes the highly wound master of the universe feeling as though he is in *terra incognita*. Couple this with the notion that men are largely uninterested in exploring that which has little to do with their career, sports, sex, or finances, and you have still another reason for blanket resistance.

## **Goddess Culture**

In the spirit of disclosure, allow me to offer a personal note in terms of why I have not been resistant to Yoga. I started on my path due primarily to health issues; in my case I had grown tired of Chiropractors repeatedly tell me I wouldn't have to see them so frequently if I practiced Yoga. I tried Yoga once or twice and enjoyed it, but never took it up until 2002, when I had time and curiosity to burn. I attended Yoga classes at the local YMCA and was "bitten by the bug".

Yet there was something else, in addition to the wonderfully affirming feeling of increased flexibility and core strength: I was very comfortable around women. Being the only man in the room was simply not a negative in any way. Many of my close friends today are women, and in fact, the data from the surveys will confirm that many men who engage in Yoga are similarly comfortable with the predominately female culture that characterizes modern Yoga.

Yet there is what I term a '*Goddess culture*' that can be unwelcoming to many men.

Here is a scenario that may be all too familiar to men who enter into an urban, upscale Yoga studio:

The female instructor is wafting gentle instrumental music or, if it's a Vinyasa flow or Ashtanga class, perhaps the latest Pink, Adele, or Annie Lennox single. She and the rest of the female class are in form fitting and expensive yoga gear. Mats all around are decorative and colorful. The lone man on the other hand is wearing gym shorts, a generic mat under his inflexible body, longing to hear at least one Tom Petty song that might call out to him like an old friend.

Some women nearby are avoiding eye contact with a man who may or may not be there for voyeuristic purposes. A few seem vaguely hostile to this interloper/perv who is crowding them and annoying them with groans of discomfort.

And now the female instructor is telling her charges to “let their tummy melt into their midline”. She is telling all in the room to keep their faces “soft”. She cues the students to have “Barbie toes”. She suggests that the best way to engage in the next pose is to have “sassy hips”. Talk of pre-natal yoga and yoga for new moms filters around. More Annie Lennox or Sarah McLaughlin.

“...the next pose is ‘Happy Baby’ ....”

It takes a special man to want to engage in this on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

### **Socio-Economic Factors**

This section of the essay cannot be easily quantified. In America, we are conditioned to think (unlike the UK or India) in terms of classlessness. We are taught that class makes people uncomfortable to discuss and so it does. However, for the purpose of this topic, socio-economic factors matter. A great deal.

If we look at who is practicing Yoga, who is actually paying cash money to enroll in weeklong seminars (at \$1,000 a pop) or 200/500 hour Teacher trainings (which average between \$3,000 and \$7,000 to attend), if we look at who is in fact shopping at Lululemon for Yoga wear, it’s almost exclusively the domain of college educated, middle to upper middle class white women. Simply put, you are more likely to find Yoga devotees shopping at Target instead of Walmart; sipping Starbucks lattés, not Dunkin’ Donuts with ‘room for sugar’.

This female-rich culture has now spawned a feature film: Yogawoman. The copy for the film speaks to this exact culture. This is great for women all around the globe, yet the message subtly seems to be: we have taken over this formerly male bastion and are empowering goddesses to be! As a man, I have to say, I am glad for anyone who is empowered in this life, but still... as a guy, this proves my whole thesis. I am uncomfortable with this, and maybe I should not be. Here is a brief snippet of copy: (italics *mine*)

Led by a new generation of dynamic female teachers, this “new” yoga *replaces the male-centered, rigid style with a distinctly feminine practice* that honors intuition, family, flow, connection, community, activism, and the cyclical nature of women’s lives. **YOGWOMAN** (*sic*) is a groundbreaking film that captures this fascinating time of awakening female power.

Through rich personal stories, **YOGAWOMAN** reveals how yoga has utterly transformed the lives of *thousands of over-stimulated, overscheduled, and multitasking modern women*. From the buzzing streets of Manhattan to the dusty slums of Kenya, from the golden beaches of Australia to the serene piazzas of Italy, the film follows the heart-rending stories of women who have found a lifeline through this magical and mystical practice.

[www.yogawoman.tv](http://www.yogawoman.tv)

This is a ripe, if uncomfortable, topic for a much larger discussion or blog. There is the sense one gets when looking at Yoga studio websites (or attending classes) that is frankly intimidating: the yogis are better dressed, better educated and more fit and sophisticated than you, Joe or Josephine six pack. Take a look at one highly visible studio in the Chicago metro area. Most of the teachers are formers marathoners, or dancers or...highly motivated overachievers, it can seem. Each one is more accomplished and fit than the last, traveling to Nepal, studying in exotic locales right out of *Eat, Pray, Love*.

If you are a high school graduate, who perhaps smokes, cuts hair, or bartends for a living, how does this resonate with you? Now, factor in gender, and it becomes clear: Yoga

may not only be intimidating, but downright *elitist*. Is it any wonder, then, that Yoga has a “perception problem”?

If we were to chart on a map areas of the population most likely to do Yoga, those in the urban, metro areas of the country and/or in the middle to upper class suburbs would, and do, greatly outweigh less affluent enclaves. If this seems suspect, there is a very simple experiment: Google ‘Yoga studios’ in and around the North Shore of Chicago, and then do the same for the less affluent south suburbs.

If we widen the lens, we can see not only affluence, education and regionalism at play, but also, I suspect, political leaning. In other words, a college-educated liberal is more likely to be a Yogi than a rurally based Tea Partier. These are not judgments, merely perceptions that we do not talk openly about. Yet if Yoga is ever to “break out” to the masses, this demographic must evolve, and it can best evolve by becoming less...snooty, less exclusive, and more egalitarian.

Again, if one factors in not only class and gender, but age—if your body at 35 is not screaming in discomfort in the joints and muscles—if advertisers are telling you its *unmanly* (the *adjective du jour* for NFL commercials), let’s be real: there isn’t a high probability of capturing this 25-45 male market.

To take this a step further, how many non-whites are attending Yoga classes or enrolling in costly and time consuming teacher trainings?

### **Role Models**

We all need role models. Mentors, trailblazers. In the Yoga community of 2012, there is a dearth of “average Joes” who do Yoga. This is a difficult but intriguing topic. As



**Prairie Yoga** founder Lori Gaspar has said, “Yoga needs more men.” Maybe one could add, ‘Yoga needs more *dudes*’. Guys.

{But, let’s hold up here for a quick second; does Yoga really have to be all things to all people? Why should we hold Yoga to a different standard than the built-in exclusivity of, say, NASCAR? The answer for me is this: Yoga *should be available to all groups*, no less so than eating right the right foods. There is nothing inherently religious, political, and to my point, cultural that should preclude any group—be they men or women, rich or poor, educated or not—from not doing something (Yoga) that is as fundamental as proper nutrition.

And how about that GED or high school grad that cuts hair in a lower middle class suburb? She is more than likely not one of the, “over-stimulated, overscheduled, and multitasking modern women”. She is more likely to do pilates or Zumba if she is to work out. Why? I think it has to do with class, and the intimidation of slightly thinner and better-educated females, who most likely have passports so they can go, “from the golden beaches of Australia to the serene piazzas of Italy”}

So, who are the role models for men? Not many men can relate to Sting, unfortunately for them. Rahm Emanuel, the feisty mayor of Chicago? He is a Yoga devotee, and also a trained dancer. Ok, so maybe not him either. (The thought occurs: how might it look in the current political landscape of America if, say, a candidate for the Presidency were “discovered” to be a Yogi)? And for every pro athlete who gets PR for practicing Yoga, there are 99% of his teammates who “razz” him for it.

## **Inroads**

Lest this sound dire or self-defeating, there are inroads being made in today's American Yoga culture for men. Americans innovate. It's what has distinguished us from every other superpower of the past one hundred years. So it is with Yoga, and sure enough, the innovators—and in some cases, flat out scoundrels— have been men. By far, the fastest growing and “hottest” (pun may or may not have been intended) form of Yoga today is Bikram Yoga, developed by Bikram Choudray. This form of Yoga has caught fire in cities across the country. This is the pre-eminent (and lucrative for studio owners willing to heat rooms to 105 degrees) form of Yoga that both men and women alike engage in, albeit far more of the latter than former. In this way, perhaps Yoga may finally be “catching on” but at what cost?

### **Conclusion**

Although there have been increases in the Yoga population over the past three decades, American Yoga is largely the province of educated white females. This, again, is a demographical fact, not a value judgment in any manner. Many confluences conspire to keep a “do not enter” sign affixed to the Yoga culture, but most especially if you happen to be a less educated, non-white male, between the ages of 25 and 45 and living in the rural or poorer suburban areas of the United States. Advertising (for both men and women), the predominance of female influence, the lack of competitive metric and relatable role models inherent in Yoga all account. The unspoken barrier(s) is not gender so much as class, education and race. Yet in this slippery slope of perception and demographics, Yoga *is* gaining in popularity and practice as people seek ways to fight aging and injury. However,

for men, this acceptance is largely relegated to middle class whites, and aging middle class whites at that.

But in this dilemma there is opportunity.