Situating 'mainstream' yoga: A survey of British yoga teachers

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Abstract

Yoga has become a highly visible commodity over recent decades, often promoted through images of sculpted bodies on exotic beaches and perfect Instagram homes. This paper explores the less glamorous everyday yoga class – more village hall than Bali beach – describing exploratory surveys and focus groups with teachers from two major British yoga organisations. These teachers offer widely accessed presentations of modern postural yoga and therefore play an important role in how yoga is conceived and continues to evolve. Whilst boutique studios now account for 20% of class locations, the majority of classes still take place in community centres, gyms, church and village halls, schools, and workplaces. This suggests that for the moment yoga in Britain remains deeply embedded in community settings. The paper concludes that despite yoga's association with secularized health and wellness most teachers attribute a strong spiritual dimension to the practice. However, in the personal ways yoga is imagined, life history and local context appear as important, if not more important, than yoga lineages and yoga philosophy.

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Introduction

> *'At the turn of the twenty-first century, yoga moved to the mainstream of many parts of the world (especially the West).'* (Black 2020: 16).

Yoga has become a highly visible part of popular culture in recent decades. Often marketed as an aspirational lifestyle choice, it lends itself to striking images of sculpted bodies on exotic beaches and perfect Instagram homes. This paper explores the less glamorous everyday class – more village hall than Bali beach – describing exploratory surveys and focus groups with teachers from two British yoga organisations: Yoga Alliance Professionals and the British Wheel of Yoga. Considered collectively, these teachers offer widely accessed presentations of popular yoga and therefore play an essential role in how the practice is conceived and continues to evolve in popular culture.

I start by revisiting de Michelis' widely recognised definition of modern postural yoga (2007), situating this definition and recent ethnographic contributions within broader narratives of modernity and secularization. I then describe why the membership organisations surveyed offer a good representation of mainstream yoga in Britain; compare

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my dataset with two published surveys undertaken in the UK (Newcombe 2005; Cartwright 2020)[2] and enumerate my findings on spirituality, pedagogical goals, yoga philosophy, lineages, and class locations.

As a mapping exercise, the survey locates ordinary teachers who constitute 'mainstream' yoga *within* mainstream popular culture, identifying common vectors that situate yoga teachers within the wider social landscape. I make no positivist claim to statistical significance, but as an exploratory approach the survey provides evidence that yoga is spiritually significant for many British teachers. In this sense, my methodology attempts to thread the needle of a cultural landscape understood though deterministic sociology – the gridlines which delineate the field – and the contours of a more humanistic-interpretative account of a practice that is 'imagined, reasoned, chosen, and enacted' (Pfau 2015: 16). The focus groups in particular, highlighted the importance of teachers reflecting on embodied experiences and life histories in constructing their spiritual beliefs.

In my concluding remarks, I draw attention to this lived context, suggesting that it matters as much as, and possibly more than, the traditional canon of yoga philosophy and adopted teaching lineages in developing identity and belief for these yoga teachers. I stop short of elaborating on the varied and composite experiences and beliefs that make yoga a spiritual practice. However, in anticipating the qualitative phase of my research, I review the questions raised by my results, and given the scarcity of data about yoga teachers in Britain, I share these results at an early stage of my project, hoping they offer useful lines of inquiry to other researchers.

Modern postural yoga in the mainstream

> Modern postural yoga schools put a much stronger emphasis on postural practice… Their religio-philosophical teachings, however, are relatively unfocused and usually polyvalent and therefore mostly compatible with transnational trends towards secularization and/or acculturation. By and large, when people talk about 'yoga' in everyday English, this is the type of practice that is intended.
>
> (de Michelis 2007: 6)

Widely recognised amongst scholars, the de Michelis definition is precise to a point, but leaves open the institutional and economic structures that sustain the practice in popular culture. A focus of my research is understanding how the British historical and normative context contributes to local understandings of yoga and the ways in which this confirms or contrasts with narratives of globalised yoga. If we only analyze modern yoga under the rubric of transnational acculturation, might we overlook generative forces contributing to the development of local yoga traditions within the boundaries of nation-states?

[2] A further unpublished survey of British yoga teachers was undertaken by SOAS master's student, Diego Lourenço, in 2019. He surveyed teachers from the British Wheel of Yoga, Yoga Alliance Professionals and several other yoga organisations in the UK. I have not included his results within this paper, but have added footnotes pointing towards his research where appropriate.

Within the academy, transnational postural yoga has become paradigmatically linked to normative beliefs associated with secularization: the methods and triumph of science (Alter 2004; Nussbaum 1962), the growth in no religion (Kripal 2007; Lee 2015; Woodhead 2016, 2017), and the spiritual but not religious (Fuller 2001). Carrette and King (2005) lament the ways in which corporeal and consciousness-raising techniques originating in South Asian religious traditions have been commodified for western consumption, regarding this as 'the silent takeover of religion.' Guest (2022) sketches wider normative trends in neoliberal societies: 'a heightened individualism… a taken for granted assumption that market competition is the best measure of value and a tendency to treat cultural objects as commodities' (Guest 2022: 1). Jain (2015) acknowledges that the popularization of yoga cannot be understood without reference to consumer culture, but also makes the point that 'popularized postural yoga systems are not *mere* 'commodifications' or 'borrowings' but idiosyncratic and complex creations' (Jain 2015: xvii-xviii).

The work of Asad (1993, 2003), Mahmood (2010, 2015), McCutcheon (1997), Said (1978) and others, challenging Euro-centric genealogies of modernity and secularization, is instructive here, as is Lee's work on recognising the non-religious (2015). Combined, they argue that categories such as belief and faith need to expand beyond the metaphysical, existential, and moral frameworks of Christian epistemology. Rather than straightforwardly adopting the same institutional and intellectual logic privatizing belief, separating the sacred from the profane, and separating the transcendent from the material world so that belief 'comes more and more to reside "in the head"' (Taylor 2007: 613), we need to be open to new ways in which yoga practitioners[3] inhabit spaces and re-imagine their embodied experiences.

Contemporary ethnographic accounts suggest that these spaces vary considerably and matter a great deal, both in the social imaginary and therefore in the *imagined* constructs of what yoga means for practitioners. For example, Wildcroft contrasts the '*Visible Yoga Mainstream*' with the spaces of her ethnography and the practitioners that occupy them, writing:

> a broad sketch of a typical modern postural yoga lesson is commonly recognizable. It occurs in a clean, tidy space, with identical, teacher-provided mats carefully aligned and the teacher's place and role distinct from that of students.
>
> (Wildcroft 2020: 16)

In contrast with this portrait of a mainstream yoga class, Wildcroft, like Lucia (2020), starts her research in the self-consciously transformational space of festival yoga; Ciołkosz (2022) and Strauss (2005) in India; Altglas (2014) in the Sivananda ashrams of London and Paris; and Von Ostrowksi (2022) within the German Ashtanga Yoga school. Bar's unpublished thesis (2013) is located in the quintessentially neoliberal mecca of Silicon Valley's yoga

[3] To avoid confusion, I will use the term 'practitioners' to include teachers and their students. If I am referring to practitioners who are not teachers, I will use the term 'student'. This reflects the language used by most teachers. Personally speaking, I find the word 'student' problematic in the commercial settings where this research is situated. That said, the alternatives—'client', 'customer' or 'member'—are scarcely more satisfactory in describing the often complex relationships between yoga teachers and their students.

studios. For some teachers, boundaries between these spaces are relatively porous, for other teachers, less so. For example, a focus group participant invited me to a festival, and several described transformative holidays to India and elsewhere. On the other hand, Ciołkosz describes the Ashtanga Yoga community in Mysore as 'a world within a world, removed from the external reality' (Ciołkosz 2022: 164).

Similarly, I suggest that geographical places vary considerably and can matter a great deal. Within the context of this study, provincial Britain looks and feels very different from cosmopolitan centres (Altglas 2014). I suggest that mainstream yoga *aspires* to be cosmopolitan but remains uncomfortably situated between the racialized and classed spatial boundaries of rural and urban spaces in Britain (Tyler 2003; Benson and Jackson 2013). Against this expanded narrative, I went in search of the mainstream, surveying teachers from two of the major membership organisations.

Yoga Teacher Training and Membership Organisations

The empirical concern of this paper is focused on surveys and follow-up focus groups conducted with Yoga Alliance Professionals and the British Wheel of Yoga, hereafter referred to as 'The Wheel'. Along with a third major organisation, also called Yoga Alliance,[4] these membership organisations oversee standards and development, accredit teacher training, and promote continuing professional development, all delivered through their members' affiliated schools. Surveying two of the three major membership organisations operating in the UK therefore generates a reasonable sample of mainstream teachers, and I contend that the key to this claim lies in their administration of teacher training programmes.

The popular expansion of yoga in the UK began with yoga's inclusion in government-funded adult education during the 1970s, introducing yoga to the expanding middle classes and to women in particular. The development of teacher training programmes by the Wheel, and separately by BKS Iyengar, was a valiant effort to respond to local education authority requirements for curriculum, teacher authentication and growing demand. This rich history is exquisitely described in Newcombe's *Yoga in Britain* (2019). When adult education collapsed under Margaret Thatcher in the late 1980s, the accelerating demand for yoga and yoga teachers continued, with the 'keep-fit' boom and the subsequent explosion of the wellness industry. As the market became increasingly commercialised, including the introduction of boutique studios and the expansion of yoga tourism, more commercially oriented teachers responded to these market demands, offering retreats and training intensives. By this time, the mechanics of developing curricula, creating standards, and training and accrediting teachers had already been long established.

More recently, the formation of Yoga Alliance Professionals in 2006 has been claimed as a response to 'declining standards in teacher training, and… to stand up to the attempted hijacking of yoga by the fitness industry.'[5] This speaks to the competitive market in which

[4] The third major membership organisation operating in the UK is, confusingly, also called Yoga Alliance. Whilst it offers membership globally including the UK, it is headquartered in the USA.

[5] Yoga Alliance Professionals website, last accessed 14/10/23.

these two organisations operate, their different values,[6] and hard-to-resolve tensions between the teleology and diversity of yoga practices and the fitness industry. It also points to a tension between the establishment of standards as a necessary part of accreditation, and teacher concerns about the heavy hand of institutional regulation. Over recent years these tensions have paradoxically included concern over the degradation of standards through the widespread expansion of 'intensive 200 hour' trainings (not offered by the Wheel), and failed attempts by the Wheel (most recently in 2016) to leverage their 'governing body status',[7] extending the 'National Occupational Standards' operating in the fitness industry to yoga teachers. On this occasion there was a significant backlash from many yoga teachers who felt yoga could not be constrained within the parameters of physical fitness and sport, forcing the Wheel and Sport England (the responsible government agency) to abandon the proposal.

Nevertheless, teacher training is seen as a rite of passage for practitioners wishing to deepen their practice, regardless of whether they intend to teach, and a certificate of competence for aspiring teachers. Lourenço's survey of British yoga teachers reported that 90% of respondents had completed a teacher training programme (Lourenço 2019: 26). Most studios, and many teachers, display the logos of one of the membership organisations on their websites. Even teacher training programmes directly associated with Indian lineages often include accreditation with one of these membership organisations. The training offered by The Society of Yoga Practitioners, linked with Desikachar, is accredited by the Wheel. The training offered by the Sivananda Centre in London is accredited by Yoga Alliance.[8] The fact that most yoga teachers have completed a teacher training programme, and that many teachers continue to belong to one of the three membership organisations, provided a reasonable route into researching mainstream yoga in the UK.

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[6] The values of each organisation are quite different. Yoga Alliance Professionals state that they 'accept teachers from non-accredited schools and senior teachers who have been teaching since 2001!' The online sign-up page reveals a strong commercial focus, asking 'What is the number 1 benefit you are looking to get from your membership? A – Insurance. B – Get more leads. C – Business/Marketing support. D – Accreditation.' (Yoga Alliance Professionals 2023, website last accessed 16/02/2023). The Wheel has played a historically important role in the development of British yoga (above; Newcombe 2019) and is organised around its network of volunteer-run committees. The Wheel describes itself as 'the heart of yoga', but its messaging can be oppressively bureaucratic: 'qualifications are regulated by the Office for Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and are bench marked to national educational standards...' (British Wheel of Yoga 2023, website last accessed 16/02/2023)

[7] This status has no legal binding force, and yoga remains unregulated within the UK. A separate and much smaller membership organisation, Yoga Scotland, has 'governing body status' for Scotland. Separate to the Wheel's governing body status in England, teacher training qualifications with the Wheel are accredited through an institutionally separate vocational training scheme; see note 6 above.

[8] Iyengar Yoga UK, which has a history of training teachers in the UK even longer than the Wheel, does not participate in external accreditation; but the length of training with Iyengar (six years on average), and the relative lack of Iyengar teachers outside of London, precludes many aspiring teachers from undertaking this training.

Survey development and distribution

In developing the survey, I used the two published British yoga surveys available: Newcombe's survey of Iyengar teachers (2005), and a cross-sectional survey of teachers and practitioners reporting on motivations and health outcomes (Cartwright et al. 2020). I also used a national survey on spirituality (Westminster Faith Debates 2013) and questions drawn from the 2021 national census. I tested my prototype with a small group of yoga teachers, postgraduate researchers, and academic supervisors. The project was approved by Lancaster University's Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

153 responses were collected from Yoga Alliance Professionals between May and July 2021. A further 116 responses were collected from the Wheel during January-February 2023. Neither sponsoring organisation shared precise circulation numbers, but as they both claim between 5000-6000 members, distribution was approximately 10,000 teachers across both surveys. Assuming an optimistic 30% open rate,[9] 269 completed surveys provided an acceptable 9% return. Responses were all from qualified yoga teachers, teachers in training, or teachers who had recently retired. I invited all respondents to participate in a 90-minute focus group at the end of each survey. 39 Yoga Alliance Professionals teachers joined one of six focus groups held during June 2021, and 36 Wheel teachers joined one of six focus groups held during April 2023: a total of 12 focus groups averaging 6 participants in each discussion.

An observation relating to the timing of the two surveys is worth making at this point. As the first survey was distributed towards the end of the Covid lockdown in May 2021, teachers were asked to respond based on their normal teaching practice *before* the pandemic. Only 2% (n.3) reported regularly teaching online *before* the pandemic.[10] In the 2023 survey, this percentage had grown to 17.5% (n.34) suggesting online classes are now a permanent feature of the yoga landscape. There is evidence to suggest that post-Covid, the yoga landscape is continuing to change. One teacher recently emailed to say:

> Post Covid, yoga teaching has dramatically changed… I see a lot of second-hand yoga equipment, books, even clothing for sale on Facebook most days, suggesting that studios are closing en masse as the soaring cost of living bites hard. But what is gained and what is lost in the virtual world of online yoga classes?
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> (Focus Group Participant, email received 9/7/2023)

Comparison with other yoga surveys and the national census

Table 1 compares the socio-demographic characteristics between my results, Newcombe's survey conducted in 2002 (published in 2005), Cartwright et al.'s survey conducted in 2016 (published in 2020), and the 2021 National Census.

[9] There is some evidence that the 'open, and then read in detail' rate for intra-organisational bulk emails (like newsletters) can be as low as 9-13% (Kong, Zhu and Konstan 2021: 9)

[10] In Lourenço's 2019 survey of British yoga teachers, a similarly small percentage of teachers (3.3%) were conducting online classes before the pandemic (Lourenço 2019: 31).

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics: yoga surveys and 2021 census data.

Lead Researcher	**Lawler**	**Newcombe**	**Cartwright**	**National Census**
Data Collection (year)	(2021, 2023)	(2002)	(2016)*	(2021)
Number for each variable in bold type	**269**	**188**	**899**	**59.6m ⊕**
Mean Age in years	51.8	47	48.7	50.5
	Percent (number) ◇			
Biological Sex	**265**	**188**	**899**	**59.6m**
Female	90.2 (239)	84 (158)	89.5 (808)	51 (30.4m)
Male	9.8 (26)	16 (30)	9.9 (89)	49 (29.2m)
Ethnicity	**260**	**-**	**897**	**59.6m**
Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh	3.1 (8)	-	2.7 (24)	9.3 (5.5m)
Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or Africar	0.8 (2)	-	0.3 (3)	4.0 (2.4m)
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	1.9 (5)	-	3.7 (33)	2.9 (1.7m)
White	94.2 (245)	-	90.9 (815)	81.7 (48.7m)
Other ethnic group	0.0 (0)	-	2.5 (22)	2.1 (1.3m)
Religion	**269**	**188**	**-**	**59.6m**
Buddhist	7.4 (20)	13 (24)	-	0.5 (0.3m)
Christian	23.8 (64)	28 (53)	-	46.2 (27.5m)
Hindu	2.2 (6)	2 (3)	-	1.7 (1.0m)
Jewish	1.9 (5)	1 (2)	-	0.5 (0.3m)
Muslim	0	0	-	6.5 (3.9m)
Sikh	0	0	-	0.9 (0.5m)
Other religion/Multiple religion	11.5 (31)	19 (37)	-	0.6 (0.3m)
No religion	51.3 (138)	32 (60)	-	37.2 (22.2m)
Not answered	1.9 (5)	5 (9)	-	6.0 (3.6m)
Region	**181**	**-**	**844**	**66.9m ⊗**
East England	7.2 (13)	-	5.3 (45)	9.5 (6.3m)
East/West Midlands	11.6 (21)	-	9.2 (77)	16.2 (10.8m)
London	13.8 (25)	-	20.9 (176)	13.1 (8.8m)
North East/West (including Yorkshire and the Humbe	21.0 (38)	-	18.6 (155)	23.2 (15.5m)
Northern Ireland	1.1 (2)	-	1.8 (15)	2.8 (1.9m)
Scotland	4.4 (8)	-	6.5 (55)	8.2 (5.5m)
South East/West	37.0 (67)	-	33.3 (370)	22.4 (15.0m)
Wales	3.9 (7)	-	4.7 (40)	4.6 (3.1m)

* Data drawn from Cartwright et al.'s survey of yoga teachers, excluding yoga practitioners

◇ Of total responses (valid percent)

⊕ Population for England and Wales (Source: Office for National Statistics - 2021 Census)

⊗ Population for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (Source: Office for National Statistics - 2021 Census)

Biological sex and religious affiliation for my survey population were broadly comparable with the Newcombe and Cartwright surveys. Ethnicity was comparable to Cartwright's results, especially as my results were skewed by a higher percentage of white teachers amongst Wheel members (97%) compared with Yoga Alliance Professional teachers (88%). Yoga teachers are much whiter than the overall population. Regional distribution was comparable with national census data except for the southern regions which appear to have a higher concentration of yoga teachers per capita. The southeast and southwest have

much smaller ethnic minority populations compared with London and other metropolitan centres and are generally more affluent than northern regions. Yoga teachers tend to come from relatively affluent and educated backgrounds themselves (Newcombe 2005), and it is possible that the higher density of teachers in southern England also reflects higher demand for yoga amongst the local population.

The average age of Yoga Alliance Professionals teachers was comparable with the Newcombe and Cartwright surveys (mean age 47 years). Wheel teachers were older (mean age 58.4 years). More Wheel respondents had retired from regular classes compared with the younger group of Yoga Alliance teachers, more of whom were still in training. Some semi-retired Wheel teachers reported that the shift to online classes had allowed them to continue teaching. The fact that retired teachers continue to pay their subscriptions speaks of the loyalty felt towards the Wheel. There were other more fine-grained differences between the teachers in these two organisations that I draw attention to in the course of this paper.

Compared with the general population, yoga teachers are a relatively homogeneous group of white, middle-aged women. Rather than the broad category of 'culturally mainstream suburban housewives' (de Michelis 2020: 440) which does not represent yoga teachers' professional occupations[11] and is open to caricature, the gendered space of modern yoga deserves detailed consideration. Taken in combination with the results on spirituality below, this gendered space suggests that yoga, along with other alternative spiritualities (Woodhead 2008) offers (re)generative possibilities, 'weaving' (Chambers 2022: 141)[12] expressions of selfhood, social justice, and climate activism, as well as challenging patriarchal understandings of femininity (Wildcroft 2020; Wittich 2018, 2020). It also points towards the gender implications of emotional labour, the representation of women's bodies, and the distribution of power in social hierarchies. (Chambers 2022; England 2005; George 2008; Hochschild 1983; Wharton 1999, 2009). In my ongoing qualitative work, I focus on the intersection between gender and spirituality and, as I describe in this next section, there are significant differences between the religious identity of yoga teachers and the general population. I describe how teachers' yoga practice informs, and is informed by, their spiritual beliefs.

Religious identity and spirituality: What does yoga mean to you?

Yoga teachers are more likely to identify as 'no religion' (53.7% cf. 37.2%) and less likely to identify as Christian (24.8% cf. 46.3%) compared with the general population. This difference is even more pronounced amongst women (24.8% cf. 52%). This represents a

[11] Whilst I did not survey participants specifically on their educational background or occupation, most of the focus group participants volunteered information on their professional background and current occupational status. With the exception of the retired teachers, almost none were running a family household as their sole occupation and many were juggling multiple roles, including teaching yoga, part-time.

[12] Clare Chambers describes *weaving* as a 'metaphor used by ecofeminists evoking women's creativity and the interdependence of life' (2022: 141)

step-change since the Newcombe survey reflecting the long-term trend towards 'no religion.'[13] Yoga teachers are more 'eclectic', with a number of teachers identifying with non-mainstream religions, or multiple religions. Paganism, shamanism, the Goddess Path, and Taoism were all represented in my survey. Consequently, in focus group conversations, teachers often contrasted beliefs they hold now with their Christian upbringing. This reflection was typical of many:

> I was brought up a Catholic, and so as a Catholic you're expected to believe everything. You can't just leave bits out. That was always very frowned on. But I've come to terms with the fact that I feel like I'm more eclectic. I'm drawing things from different directions that are like tools for life and they fit with my values…
>
> (Focus group participant)[14]

Of the South Asian religions, there were just 5 (2.2%) Hindus, 4 of whom were of South Asian heritage, but 20 (7.9%) Buddhists (the percentage was even higher in Newcombe's survey), of which all but one were white.[15] This relationship between yoga and contemporary Western Buddhism deserves more focussed research. The general literature suggests in its Western incarnations, Buddhism has been 'heavily influenced by Western psychological thought' (Coleman 2002: 8-9) and Western Buddhists are 'more interested in what Buddhism teaches…. than they are in its Asian cultural forms' (Waterhouse 2001: 119). It is therefore the religious tradition most compatible with secularity. One survey respondent answered: 'Buddhism is not a religion. It is a philosophy of consciousness.'

Most teachers regard themselves as 'spiritual' (57%) or 'spiritual and religious' (13%). A combined total of 70%.[16] Swimming against the national trend, it is the youngest age group of yoga teachers (20-39 years old) most likely to describe themselves as spiritual (76%).[17] I explored this further, comparing my results with the 2013 YouGov/Westminster Faith Debates survey (Woodhead 2017). Woodhead differentiates the 'somes' from the 'nones'

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[13] The number of people in England and Wales describing themselves as 'no religion' has grown by over 8 million, from 14 million to 22 million (37.2% of the population), whilst the number of people describing themselves as Christian has fallen from 33.3 million to 27.5 million (46.2%). All other religions have grown slightly to 10.7% of the population. Office for National Statistics: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021

[14] Focus group participant, 21st June 2021

[15] The latest data from the Office of National Statistics, 2021 census, reveals that more women identify as Buddhist, Christian and 'Other Religion' than men compared with the overall population for England and Wales.

[17] This is less than Newcombe's Iyengar teachers (83%) who were asked 'Do you have a spiritual life?' but much larger than the 31% of the general population who identified themselves as spiritual and/or religious in the 2013 Westminster Faith Debates survey. Nobody amongst my yoga teacher group regarded themselves as religious but not spiritual, compared to 10% of the Westminster Faith Debates population who did so. Cartwright asked about the primary motivation for practising yoga which makes a direct comparison difficult, but she noted that spirituality became an increasingly important motivation for teachers who continued to practice.

and I followed her example, grouping teachers identifying with any religion as 'somes' and teachers describing themselves as 'no religion' as 'nones'. As Table 2 shows, there are major differences between yoga teachers and the general population: 79% of yoga teachers who identify as religious also consider themselves spiritual, suggesting teachers see these categories as irreducible. The figure amongst the general population is just 25%. However, what is even more interesting is that the yoga 'nones' are profoundly spiritual (63%) compared with just 9% of the general population. Identifying as 'spiritual but not religious' has real meaning amongst a large group of yoga teachers.

Table 2: Spirituality & Religiosity - Yoga teachers compared with general population

Which, if any, of the following best describes you?		**Yoga Teachers** Lawler (2021,2023)				**General Population*** Woodhead/Yougov (2013)◇	
All teachers (both "somes" and "nones")		**ALL AGES**	**20-39**	**40-59**	**60+**	**ALL AGES**	
Number for each variable in bold type		**267**	**46**	**143**	**72**	---	
A spiritual person		57%	63%	59%	51%	---	
Both spiritual and religious	70%	0%	0%	1%	0%	---	
A religious person		13%	13%	10%	18%	---	
I would not describe myself, or my values and beliefs, as spiritual or religious		20%	17%	22%	19%	---	
None of these, don't know, blank		10%	7%	8%	11%	---	
Total "Somes"		**127**	**22**	**55**	**42**	---	
A spiritual person		51%	64%	53%	43%	15%	
Both spiritual and religious	80%	28%	27%	25%	31%	33% 10%	
A religious person		1%	0%	2%	0%	8%	
I would not describe myself, or my values and beliefs, as spiritual or religious		10%	0%	11%	17%	48%	
None of these, don't know, blank		10%	10%	9%	9%	19%	
Total "Nones"		**142**	**23**	**86**	**30**	---	
A spiritual person		63%	61%	63%	63%	8%	
Both spiritual and religious	63%	0%	0%	0%	0%	10% 1%	
A religious person		0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	
I would not describe myself, or my values and beliefs, as spiritual or religious		29%	35%	29%	23%	67%	
None of these, don't know, blank		8%	4%	8%	13%	22%	

* Raw numbers from the YouGov survey were not available.
◇ Published Woodhead, 2017

I also asked about the motivation for yoga practice offering a more direct comparison with the Newcombe and Cartwright surveys. Both surveys reported most British people *start* yoga for 'well-being'. They also reported spirituality becomes more important, second only to well-being, for practitioners who continue to practice yoga over time. My data adds further weight to this finding. In response to the question 'Which, if any, of the following best describes your yoga practice?' under 20% (n.52) regard yoga as a physical or mindfulness-based practice that is not spiritual whilst nearly 70% (n.183) of teachers regard yoga as spiritually important. There was no difference in spiritual motivation between Yoga Alliance Professionals and Wheel teachers.

Table 3: Is yoga a spiritual practice?

Which, if any, of the following best describes your yoga practice?	Percent of total teachers in each age group*			
	Total	20-39	40-59	60+
Number for each variable in bold type and brackets	**264**	**46**	**145**	**73**
Spiritual Yoga				
I lead, or aspire to lead, a spiritual life primarily guided by yoga philosophy and my personal practice My yoga practice complements my religious and/or spiritual beliefs and practice	69.3 (183)	76.1 (35)	69.4 (100)	64.4 (47)
(100%)				
Secular Yoga				
I have a physical practice which I do not consider spiritual I have a mindfulness based practice which I do not consider spiritual I have a physical and mindfulness practice which I do not consider spiritual	19.7 (52)	13.0 (6)	20.1 (29)	23.3 (17)
None of these / Don't know	11.0 (29)	10.9 (5)	10.4 (15)	12.3 (9)

* Of total responses (valid percent)

There is a strong relation between identifying as a spiritual person (Table 2) and yoga having spiritual meaning (Table 3). In the complex and individual ways spirituality is expressed, these results confirm a spiritual life guided by yoga is highly significant for this group of mainstream yoga teachers. If anything, the spiritual importance of the practice is becoming more important for the younger generation of teachers (76.1%). A trend some older focus group participants had noticed and felt important enough to mention. This suggests a virtuous circle as younger teachers are introduced to yoga and then encouraged to train as teachers by the older generation.

Under the normative conditions of neoliberalism, the 'courage to become one's own authority' (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 4) has increasingly disrupted orthodox concepts of divine and institutional authority. Instead, an ethic of self-cultivation or personal authenticity (Taylor 1991) flourishes. In the long-form answers provided to the question, 'What does Yoga mean to you?' many respondents replied with some version of *'a gateway to understanding myself… [and] to connect with others in a meaningful, compassionate way'*.[18] Heelas and Woodhead anticipated this growth in 'subjective-life spirituality' (2005: 7) arguing a direct relationship between the growth in the 'holistic milieu', including yoga, and the generational decline in Christianity (Crockett and Voas 2006), signalling a 'spiritual revolution.'

My data adds further empirical weight to the 'spiritual revolution', at least as far as yoga teachers are concerned. Identifying as 'spiritual but not religious' has real, *heart*-felt meaning for a large group of yoga teachers. They understand religion and spirituality across moral, metaphysical, and existential domains and are generally thoughtful about what beliefs matter to them. If they identify as Christian in terms other than this, for example, personal history or kinship, they say so.

They are also clear yoga is *not* a religious practice. In one focus group I suggested class rituals could look an awful lot like religion from the outside looking in. The suggestion was so strongly rejected I did not dare repeat the experiment! This suggests scholarly attempts

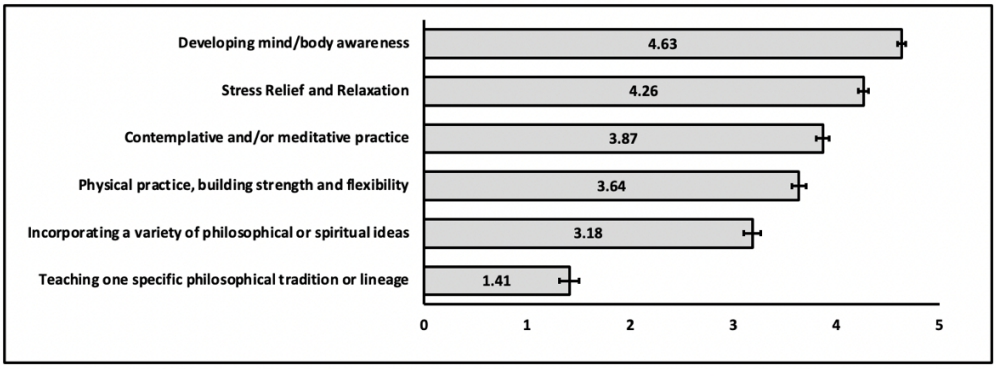
[18] Survey respondent, ID:40

to expand our understanding of religiosity (Davie 1994; Harvey 2013) are unlikely to find a receptive audience amongst yoga teachers. Instead, as Lee (2015) has argued, we need to find ways to re-imagine the secular, developing our concepts of moral, metaphysical, and existential cultures so that expressions of non-religion need not, *ipso facto*, be juxtaposed with the religious. In so doing, we will likely have to abandon the idea of an orthodox hierarchy in which belief shapes identity, and informs practice (Appiah 2018; Day 2010, Hackett 2014). As Newcombe observed in her own empirical work, 'yoga teachers were often silent about metaphysical aspects, although this might simply imply an awareness that spiritual experiences might not sit well with secular teaching contexts or understandings of traditional, institutional religiosity' (Newcombe 2019: 254). Precipitating my own research, Newcombe concluded: 'it is hard to measure the importance of unarticulated experiences to those who continue to practise' (p. 254).

Teaching Goals

Following the implications of Newcombe's empirical work, I asked teachers to score aspects of their teaching practice against a series of statements using a Likert scale where '0' indicated 'not part of my teaching practice', and '5' indicated 'the most important part of my teaching practice'.[19] Comparing teachers' pedagogical goals with other data points in this survey offers a more nuanced understanding of how identity and personal beliefs translate into teaching practices, and therefore into the transmission of contemporary yoga. Figure 1 shows the results along with the standard error from the mean.

Figure 1: Teaching goals



Expressed as pedagogical principles, the results confirm that yoga is taught as a secularized practice. An overwhelming majority of teachers focus on developing mind/body awareness (mean 4.63), closely followed by stress relief and relaxation (mean 4.26). Developing a contemplative or meditative practice (mean 3.87) and building strength and flexibility are considered somewhat important goals (mean 3.64). The responses were more mixed when it came to incorporating philosophical or spiritual ideas into classes, but this could still be described as somewhat important (mean 3.18). The only statement that produced a strong negative reaction was 'teaching from one specific philosophical tradition or lineage'. This principle was not important for most teachers, with the exception of the Buddhist teachers

[19] The choice of statements offered were based on my own subjective experience, Newcombe's survey (2005), and conclusions drawn from the literature.

who leaned more towards developing the contemplative and meditative (4.35 cf. 3.87), and less towards the physical (3.25 cf. 3.64) in their teaching practice. Buddhist teachers were also more attached to teaching from their singular ideological perspective (2.25 cf. 1.41) than other teachers. This may be related to the relative synchronicity of Western Buddhism and secularized yoga goals, but, as I expressed earlier, this deserves more focused research.

Clearly there is tension between secularized pedagogical goals and the personally held spiritual significance many teachers attribute to their yoga practice. One trainee teacher and focus group participant voiced this out loud, asking the others present: 'Do you believe what you teach? Or practice what you believe?'[20] Not only was she questioning her subjective experience, but she was also seeking views on how yoga positions itself in the social world and the performative role she was adopting as a new yoga teacher. As a trainee, she was likely also grappling with the yoga philosophy module on her teacher training programme, questioning whether these teachings held personal relevance, and whether she should incorporate them in her own pedagogical practice. As an introduction to yoga philosophy is mandatory in most teacher training programmes, I asked survey respondents how important yoga philosophy and lineage was to them. I discuss their responses in the following section.

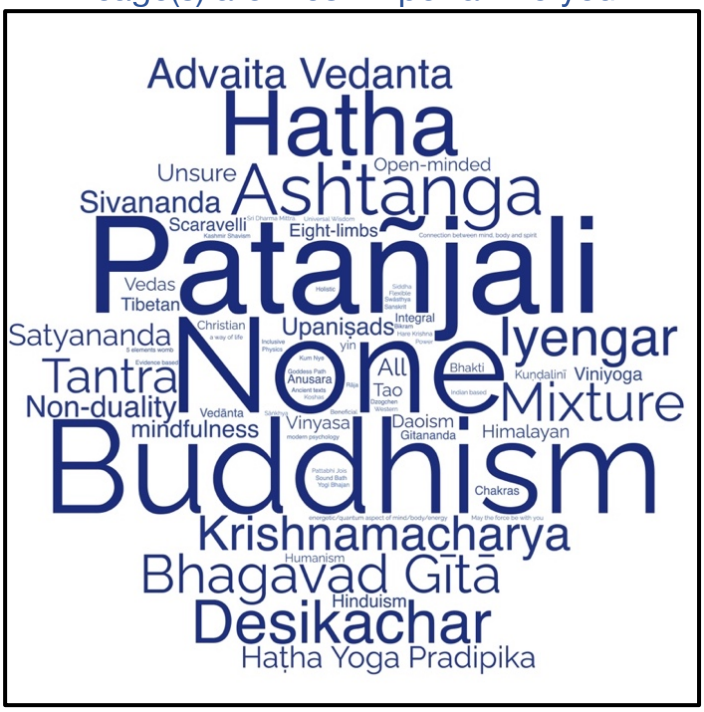
Philosophy, lineage, and pedagogy

Focus group participants were generally ambivalent and sometimes hostile towards institutional authority – by nature bureaucratic, and often based on normative Christian assumptions – and this attitude was also true when I asked which philosophical traditions and lineage(s) were important to them.[21] The largest single answer was '*None*.' Others replied with variations of '*all*', and a '*mixture*'. Others offered commitments with their own form of '*true*', '*authentic*', or '*traditional yoga*'. One teacher responded '*None. Very wary of lineages and following specific traditions over others, given the amount of abuse perpetuated by a number of well-known teachers/ lineages.*' From the outside looking in, the experience is one of confusion, suggesting syncretism in action as teachers adopt, adapt, and create new meanings. The word cloud in Figure 2 gives a sense of this confusion.

[20] Focus group participant, 8th June 2021

[21] Just over 50% of Lourenço's survey respondents identified with a 'yoga tradition', of which 'a significant majority (about 70%)… specified modern yoga styles and teachers as their tradition. Iyengar being the most popular. The remaining answers covered a broader milieu of traditions, such as Buddhism, Vedānta or haṭha yoga.' (Lourenço 2019: 26)

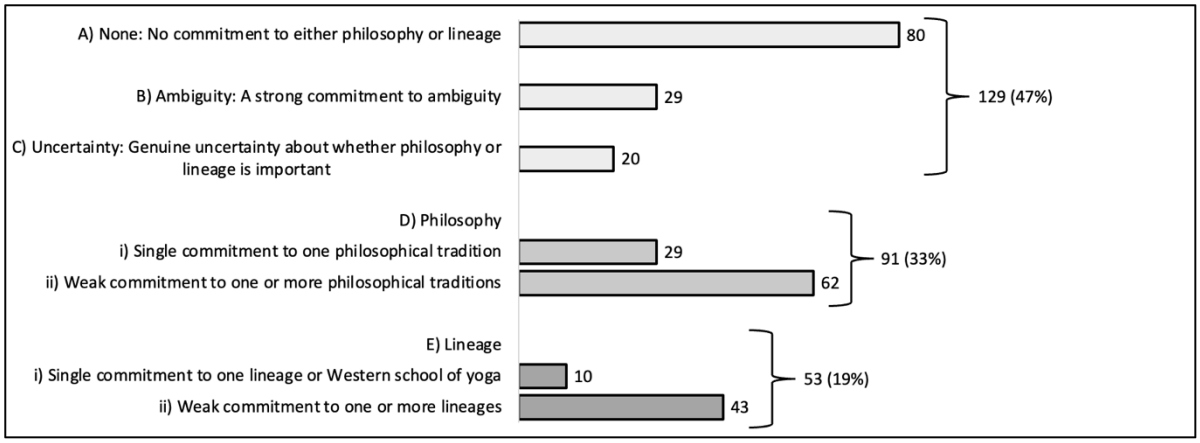
Figure 2: Word cloud generated from 'Which philosophical tradition(s) or lineage(s) are most important to you?'



Reflecting the methodological limit of the question and the ambiguity of the responses, attempting to make sense of teachers' responses required some subjective interpretation. However, developing an outline taxonomy allowed me to sketch a hierarchy of value. This suggests that philosophy and lineage are not important to a large group of mainstream teachers (type A). Secondly, deliberate ambiguity (type B) or genuine confusion (type C)[22] can be adopted as open-minded and principled positions. A typical response from type B was 'I like to have a completely open mind. I'm always on the lookout for anything to expand my way of thinking.' A typical response for type C was 'I'm not sure how to answer this'. These three groups account for just under half the responses. For the smaller group of teachers for whom philosophy (type D) is important, they are less likely to adopt a single philosophical school (sub-type Di) and more likely to adopt a polyvalent relationship with multiple philosophical traditions (sub-type Dii). This group differed from type B (deliberate ambiguity) in that they expressed a clear commitment to the study of philosophical texts. For example, one teacher replied, 'While I use the Yoga Sutras and the Hatha Yoga Pradipika to underpin my teaching I also draw on Daoism.' Ideological affiliation with a teaching lineage (type E) is valued least in this hierarchy, which is also sub-divided into single (Ei) and multiple (Eii) commitments. Figure 3 tabulates responses for each of the main types.

[22] Some teachers expressed genuine uncertainty and/or confusion about these terms, and therefore whether they are personally important (type 'C'). One survey respondent answered 'I am working on my answer to this at the moment. I am overwhelmed by the information available.' The responses I also categorized in this group included a style of yoga rather than a philosophical tradition or a lineage. For example, '*vinyasa*' and 'mindfulness'. Depending on whether there was any further explanation offered, I also included '*haṭha*' in this group unless it was specifically linked to the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, judging that it was being used to describe a style of postural yoga rather than the philosophical tradition.

Figure 3: An outline hierarchy of philosophy and lineage amongst mainstream yoga teachers



Among those teachers who attached importance to the philosophical traditions, there was a relatively small group who attached to a singular philosophical tradition (Di). In this group, Patañjali was most frequently cited; but I am wary of attaching too much importance to this affiliation, and have avoided describing this as a 'strong' commitment. For example, Patañjali was hardly mentioned during the Yoga Alliance Professionals focus groups, even though they responded with 'Patañjali', the 'Yoga Sūtras' or the 'eight limbs' to the survey question; as Singleton puts it, this is 'symptomatic of the post hoc grafting of modern *āsana* practice onto the perceived "Pātañjala tradition"' (Singleton 2010: 185). In contrast, several teachers in the Wheel focus groups are studying Sanskrit, and many more maintain an ongoing meditation on the Yoga Sūtra, Bhagavad Gītā and other texts. Most Wheel teachers were schooled to include a 'philosophical' theme to their class, and remained committed to this teaching practice, though often drawing on contemporary texts as well as the yoga canon for their inspiration.

The different quality of focus group conversations between Yoga Alliance Professionals and Wheel participants was also indicated by a response difference to the pedagogical commitment incorporating philosophical or spiritual ideas in their teaching (see Figure 1 above). Yoga Alliance Professionals teachers scored lower than the mean (3.02 cf. 3.18) whilst Wheel teachers scored higher than the mean (3.41 cf. 3.18). As the average age of Yoga Alliance teachers was younger, this raises a question whether both teacher training curricula *and* the age of teachers affects what they pay attention to and how they explicate these meanings in their classes. This warrants further attention as younger teachers generally self-report as more 'spiritual' than older teachers (see Table 2 and 3 above) but appear less educated in, or inclined towards, the classical yoga canon.

Delineation between these groups is a step towards analysing polyvalent beliefs within mainstream yoga. Not only is the milieu characterized by a macro-polyvalence where subjects hold separate positions—for example 'none' by one, '*advaita vedānta*' by another, and 'Buddhism' by a third teacher—but micro-polyvalence exists where individuals hold multiple positions in deliberate ambiguity. For example, one teacher responded: 'I think every philosophy contributes to the richness of knowledge in yoga, so I do not subscribe to just one philosophical lineage. I teach tantric, vedantic and mindfulness techniques.'

Overall, there was a much stronger representation of the philosophical traditions than of lineages (Type E). Lineage was commonly associated with the style of yoga: for example, Iyengar, Ashtanga, Viniyoga, or the Scaravelli 'lineage'.[23] Of the ten teachers who clearly aligned with a single lineage in a living tradition, six were Ashtanga Yoga teachers, two were members of the Society of Yoga Practitioners (TSYP, the Krishnamacharya and Desikachar lineage), and two teachers were in a traditional *guru-śiṣya* relationship (Swasthya and Sri Dharma Mittra). Apart from the two TSYP teachers, I interpreted any other mention of Krishnamacharya as a weak commitment to lineage. These teachers often constructed a line from Patañjali, Haṭha, Krishnamacharya and his son, Desikachar, but gave no indication of affiliation with a specific lineage. There was a further contrast between the two membership organisations: Only two (1%) Yoga Alliance Professionals teachers mentioned Desikachar compared with eighteen (15%) Wheel teachers. This is possibly the historical legacy of Desikachar being favoured by the Wheel's founding members (Newcombe 2019: 65), and his subsequent long-term inclusion in the Wheel's recommended reading lists.

It is also likely that 'lineage', as understood by scholars and by the engaged subculture of 'post-lineage' British yoga teachers (Wildcroft 2020), is not similarly understood by mainstream teachers. Most teachers have no experience of, or commitment to *sampradāya*, undertaking their initial teacher training with teachers or 'schools' that have already de-coupled from South Asian lineages. They are therefore trained in an environment which historicizes the South Asian *sampradāya*, adopting a polyvalent ethos towards the philosophical traditions. Whilst this is not true for all teachers in the mainstream, the commodification of teacher training courses and the very loose network of teacher communities indicates that for many yoga teachers operating in the UK, the teacher's teacher is no longer the conduit of a living tradition. Instead, their teachings are remotely situated in an abstract relationship with the historical lineages. In this final section I turn from the philosophical spaces to the locations that mainstream yoga classes inhabit.

The importance of space: yoga studios, gyms, and church halls

> If one looks at yoga from all the spatial positions it can occupy it is obvious that yoga is immensely flexible and amorphous.
>
> (Newcombe 2018: 569)

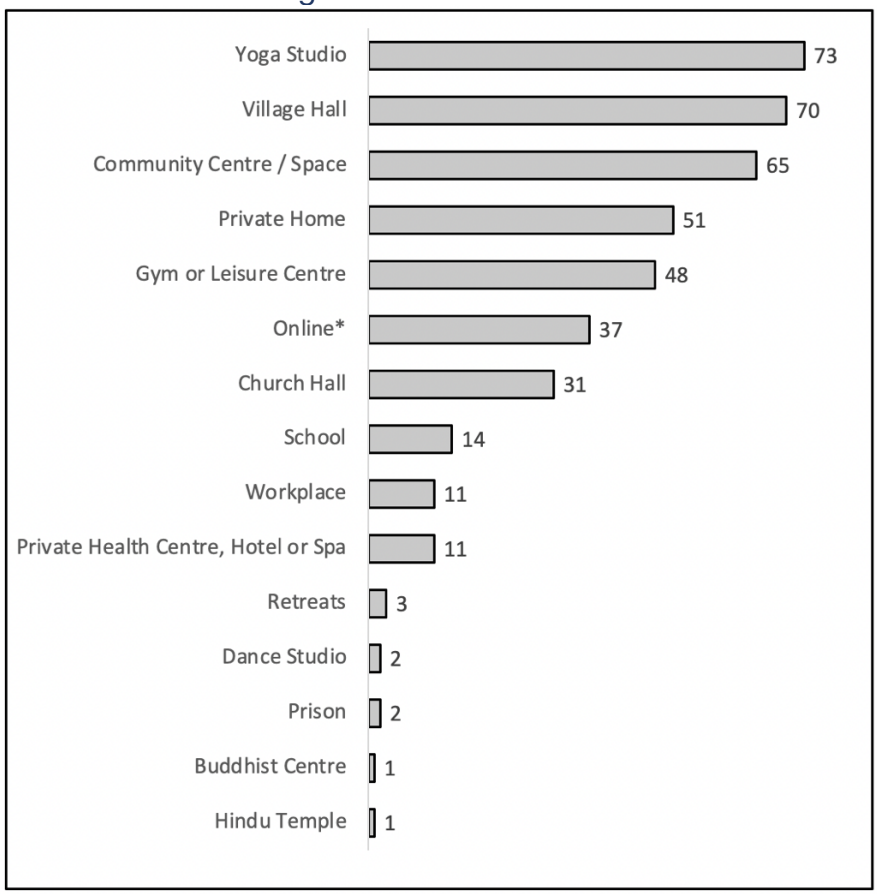
As far as I am aware, this is the first published survey describing where yoga takes place in Britain.[24] I did not anticipate how rich the data would be, nor the questions I would now ask.

[23] I also assumed that when teachers mentioned Iyengar alongside other styles of yoga this precluded an ongoing 'mentoring' relationship with a senior Iyengar teacher. No one asserted they were a qualified Iyengar teacher and a member of Iyengar Yoga UK. Where Sivananda was mentioned, it was always in the context of his writing, and so I interpreted this as a weak philosophical commitment rather than an ideological commitment and/or practice with the London Sivananda ashram (Altglas 2014).

[24] Heelas and Woodhead's Kendal Project, published as *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005), looked at location of holistic wellness services, including yoga, alongside surveying church attendance and affiliation in the market town of Kendal, Cumbria. Lourenço's (2019) dissertation surveyed yoga locations amongst British yoga teachers. Unfortunately, there was limited value comparing the two datasets because of the difference in our questions.

As Newcombe has argued, 'physical space becomes an exceptionally useful focus for understanding controversy, contested meanings and the complex and multivalent place of yoga in contemporary society.' (Newcombe 2018: 552). I asked: 'What is the normal location, or locations, for the classes you teach?'[25] Excluding retired teachers and trainees, active teachers (n. 200) work across 1.8 locations each week, averaging 4.4 classes. As teachers are mostly self-employed, this can only provide a modest supplemental income—an important corrective to Carrette and King's (2005) polemic. Figure 4 shows the total number of locations:

Figure 4: Class location



* This number may be under-stated because I asked about teaching location before the pandemic in my 2021 survey.

Yoga studios top the chart, but still only account for 20% of the public spaces where yoga is taught, including community centres, gyms, church halls, online, schools[26] and workplaces (excluding private homes). These spaces criss-cross rural and urban, cosmopolitan, and provincial locations, and the detail is fascinating. Within the community spaces, teachers

[25] In my question, I provided examples 'for example, yoga studio, gym, leisure centre, village hall, community centre, online, etc.'. With hindsight, had I asked respondents to complete a weekly schedule including average numbers of students, this would have generated additional useful data. However, the complexity of this task and additional time required may have reduced the number of completed surveys.

[26] Whilst some teachers do offer children's yoga in school buildings, this is almost always an extra-curricular activity. For the most part, teachers offering classes in school buildings are renting space as they would any other community space.

told me they were working in parks, libraries, museums, local charities, elderly residential care, and working men's clubs. I was surprised by the number of teachers working from home, sometimes described as a 'home studio', but also peripatetically, teaching individuals and small group classes in students' homes. Despite the growth in urban studios since the 1990s (Newcombe 2018), the number of non-studio spaces is strong evidence that at present, yoga in Britain remains embedded within local community settings.

However, there is some evidence showing that a generational shift from community-orientated spaces is underway. 50% of the younger age group (20-39 years old) are teaching in yoga studios. Table 4 details the percentage of teachers working in each of the five major locations split by age group and average years teaching. If this is an inexorable shift to more commercial urban spaces, how might this impact future access?

Table 4: Teaching location by average years teaching and age group.

	Average years teaching		Percent of total teachers in each age group* 20-39	40-59	60+
Number for each variable in bold type and brackets ◈	**10.9**		**36**	**152**	**89**
Yoga Studio (n.71)	7.8	↑	50.0 (18)	27.6 (42)	12.4 (11)
Village Hall (n.69)	11.1		19.4 (7)	24.3 (37)	28.1 (25)
Community Centre (n.62)	12.4	(100%)	8.3 (3)	23.0 (35)	27.0 (24)
Gym or Leisure Centre (n.46)	11.4		19.4 (7)	15.8 (24)	16.9 (15)
Church Hall (n.29)	13.9	↓	2.8 (1)	9.2 (14)	15.7 (14)

* Of total responses (valid percent)

◈ These numbers are slightly reduced from Fig. 4 totals as some respondents did not provide their age

I looked at location against two further variables: Christian teachers and the 'nones', and the 'spirituals' versus secular 'physicals'. Unsurprisingly, there were more Christian teachers working in church halls; but, challenging my preconceptions, I was surprised teachers working in gyms were not markedly more secular. In fact, they were the second most spiritual group after those in church halls. Nor were they any more committed to strength and flexibility as a pedagogical goal (scoring 3.63 against the mean of 3.64). One focus group participant commented that she adapts her messaging in gym classes and will not refer to yoga philosophy. However, two other gym-based teachers remarked on the enthusiasm for the spiritual elements of the class amongst several of their body-builder clients. This speaks to the complex relationship between space, the motivations of attending students, and the situatedness of pedagogy.

With a nod to my numbers-driven methodology, I want to take a moment at the edge of the mainstream, exploring the small group of older teachers working in church halls. Of the 29 teachers that provided their age, 14 were over 60 years old (ranging from 34 to 78 years old, mean age 60.9 years) and 14 were Christian. Given this older demographic, my conjecture is church hall yoga developed as an extension of the pastoral role women parishioners held in

their church communities. [27] If this is the case, church hall yoga is especially poignant, symbolic of the declining use of church buildings, and symbolic of the tension expressed by yoga teachers in their own complicated relationship with Christianity.

Focus group participants told me that in their efforts to rent church halls, they have sometimes been welcomed with open arms and other times strongly rebuffed. One teacher who previously worked for Stephen Cottrell, the current Archbishop of York, recounted his support for her teaching yoga on church premises. This is consistent with his open approach to mission and the 'doors of opportunity.'[28] At the same time, reports occasionally surface when yoga teachers are turned away by parochial councils who take the strong view that yoga doesn't pass *the test*: 'Jesus Christ is God himself… [yoga] doesn't stand this test' (The Telegraph 2019. See also Halifax Courier 2019; Halfpenny 2012).

Yoga classes are always situated somewhere, and a more granular understanding of yoga spaces within the wider social landscape would offer better data on the yoga economy, and on the demography and motivations of practitioners attending classes, not just teachers. Surveying these larger social spaces, and the communities who inhabit them, would add significantly to our understanding of how modern yoga is incorporated in mainstream culture. For example, whilst yoga teachers are a relatively homogeneous group, I know teachers who work with soldiers and rugby teams. The anecdotal evidence from gym practitioners suggests that they too may differ from stereotypical ideas of masculine physicality.

Discussion: Situating mainstream yoga in a local context

Brought together in the focus groups to collectively explore the overarching question of 'What does Yoga mean to you?', I was struck by how quickly these strangers formed connections with each other, many of them sharing deeply personal, sometimes tragic, stories from their own 'yoga journey'. Participants performatively sought connection and common grounds, establishing shared identity.

The more mundane goals of Yoga Alliance Professionals and the Wheel were not mentioned, suggesting they may be necessary but are not regarded as important. I also overlooked their importance. It was self-evident to me that I should approach these membership organisations for help promoting the survey, but I did not consider this institutional superstructure actually said anything important about contemporary yoga. Yet, as this paper has demonstrated, their unseen influence affects mainstream yoga in a number of ways.

[27] Newcombe interviewed one such teacher for *Yoga in Britain* who subsequently became a trustee of the Wheel. Newcombe writes Mrs Neale-Smith 'had heard about the yoga class after expressing an interest in the subject at a church tea. A friend in her young-wives group attended a class in a nearby village and took her along' (Newcombe 2019: 71).

[28] This phrase, based on 1 Corinthians 16.9, has been a consistent message in the Archbishop's ministry (Cottrell 2022) and as described in an interview with an anonymous participant, recorded on May 10th, 2023.

As teachers from both Yoga Alliance Professionals and the Wheel are equally committed to the spiritual goals of yoga, the different pedagogical weight they attach to the philosophical tradition raises important questions. If Yoga Alliance Professional teachers are less committed than Wheel teachers to the 'classical' yoga canon, one wonders, then, from where do they draw inspiration?

One younger Yoga Alliance Professionals teacher drew attention to this tension between the historical roots of yoga, the yoga texts found within many teacher training courses and the wider social context:

> The fact is we live in England. And we live in a society that runs on an economy and that's reality. We don't live in a jungle in the middle of nowhere, or like a mountain in the middle of nowhere just meditating, and not having anything around us to deal with in the way that we deal with. So, we have to kind of apply yoga philosophy in a way that's relevant because this is our reality, do you see what I mean?
>
> (Focus group participant)[29]

She offers several clues to her situated-ness: an economy which requires her to work; a modern busy-ness historically separated from meditating on a mountain; and 'because this is our reality': an epistemic immanence that buffers 'the ways we are able to think or imagine the whole of society' (Taylor 2007: 156). As yoga teachers are predominantly women, the intersection between economic and social inequalities, and the spiritual and social 'connection' which communities of yoga teachers provide, deserves more detailed empirical research. In the context of the economic and social juggling act, the double-meaning teachers place on community-building activities makes sense: 'community' is an idealistic principle and necessary emotional support, but 'community' also consists of paying members or students.

For many British yoga teachers, their identity often includes a reorientation to their Christian heritage, and focus group participants frequently alluded to this residual asymmetry:

> So, I'm going to church, everybody's playing these beautiful roles, but there was no feeling there for me, you know, there was no joy, and deep, I don't know, trust in whatever these theologies were teaching these people.
>
> (Focus group participant)[30]

Because sense of self and the yogic goal of self-cultivation is tied to these historical narratives, I suggest the move away from Christianity should be considered alongside any

[29] Focus group participant, 11th June 2021.

[30] Focus group participant, 11th June 2021.

move towards the South Asian traditions. My evidence suggests that yoga philosophy and the historical lineages may not be so important in the construction of identity, or belief, or teaching practice, for many mainstream yoga teachers. At the same time, identifying as 'spiritual but not religious' has real meaning. They understand religion and spirituality across moral, metaphysical, and existential domains, and are generally thoughtful about what beliefs matter to them, defining themselves as religious or spiritual on their own terms. As I continue with the ethnographic work of my thesis, attempting to expand our understanding of the 'unarticulated experiences' (Newcombe 2019: 254), my survey confirms that I am, at least, looking in the right place.

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