



## Stretching for Health and Well-Being: Yoga and Women in Britain, 1960–1980

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### Abstract

In Britain, yoga became an increasingly popular group activity from the 1960s onwards in government-subsidised adult-education evening classes. Although yoga classes were open to everyone, women tended to make up 70 to 90 per cent of the student base of most classes as well as the majority of yoga teachers. This article briefly outlines how yoga became popular in Britain and then explores yoga's particular appeal to women during this period. Yoga's popularity can be partially accounted for by the way it simultaneously supported women's traditional identities of wife and mother, as well as a more independent identity promoted by second-wave feminism. Women typically attributed better physical health and emotional well-being to their practice of yoga and this was an important reason for their participation in the classes. Additionally, yoga served as an important support for women becoming more aware of feelings of alienation from traditional biomedical practitioners.

### Keywords

gender, easternisation, pregnancy, BKS Iyengar, British Wheel of Yoga, natural birth movement, adult education, physical education

The idea of yoga has a long legacy in Britain with many different associations and entry points. Thus by the 1960s, when yoga classes began appearing on adult education evening class syllabuses, there was some familiarity with yoga amongst the middle-class population. Initial British associations for yoga came from the traveller and missionary descriptions of exotic fakirs<sup>1</sup> and the early translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* into English by the British East India Company.<sup>2</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, a small number of Britons found personal and spiritual interest in yoga via the Romantic poets,<sup>3</sup> especially Edwin Arnold,<sup>4</sup> and Orientalist

<sup>1</sup> Fryer 1698; Wilson 1846; Heber 1828.

<sup>2</sup> Wilkins 1785 was funded by the British East India Company and was probably read by poet Edwin Arnold in the mid-nineteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> Leask 1992; Arnold 2004.

<sup>4</sup> The first widely circulating translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* was likely to have been Arnold 1885 which went through several editions. Arnold's poem, *The Light of Asia* (1879), which was

scholars,<sup>5</sup> such as Max Müller at Oxford.<sup>6</sup> Interest in yoga as a subject increased dramatically after the establishment of the Theosophical Society in 1875<sup>7</sup> and specifically with the visits of Swami Vivekananda to England in 1896 and 1899.<sup>8</sup> From these various entry points, amongst others, books on yoga found their way into the personal libraries of middle-class eccentrics. In the first half of the twentieth century, yoga was rarely taught in Britain.<sup>9</sup> Yoga was largely identified with the meditation and concentration exercises found in books and the yoga correspondence courses in physical culture journals.<sup>10</sup> The practice of yoga was able to become widespread in Britain since the local educational authority adult education classes acted as an institutional infrastructure. In 1965 Birmingham educational authorities undertook an ‘official enquiry’ into yoga concerning the ‘hundreds’ of students taking yoga classes under the city’s further education programmes.<sup>11</sup>

The early 1960s growth of yoga classes in Birmingham was catalysed by a Solihull resident named Wilfred Clark (1898–1981). Clarke worked as an editor in local newspapers and additionally lectured for the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) in Birmingham on topics such as the art of writing and amateur dramatics. He also offered on his WEA documentation an expertise in ‘Oriental Philosophy’ which he had gained by taking an Oxford University Extension Society course in the subject.<sup>12</sup> In 1961, the WEA commissioned Wilfred Clark to talk on ‘Yoga’ to its members in Coventry. The positive response to these lectures inspired him to propose the introduction of

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a biographical narrative of the Buddha, received favourable reviews and inspired many towards a serious consideration of Buddhism as a philosophical system. The poet T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) was particularly influenced by this poem; it was a partial inspiration for Eliot’s study of Sanskrit and Pali while he was an undergraduate at Harvard University. Kearns 1987, pp. 21–5.

<sup>5</sup> For early British Orientalists, see De Michelis 2004, pp. 42–3.

<sup>6</sup> Van den Bosch 2002.

<sup>7</sup> The Theosophical Society was first established in New York, but was active in London by 1880, see Ransom 1938, Santucci 1985 and Dixon 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Vivekananda’s visits were sponsored by members of the Theosophical Society. For a history of this interesting episode of Hinduism in Britain, see Beckerlegge 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Important exceptions include Dr Hari Shastri who taught Advaita Vedanta in London from 1929 (under the name of the *Shanti Sadan*), a few members of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Order, Sri Nandi who taught meditation and *āsana* in Hampstead from 1939, Desmond Dunne’s School of Yogism in the late 1940s, and Sir Paul Dukes who also taught *āsanas* in London during the late 1940s.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Anon. 1956.

<sup>11</sup> Anon 1965. I have tried to find further records of this enquiry, but neither the Birmingham City Council nor the Local History Archivist at the Birmingham Central Library know of any relevant documentation.

<sup>12</sup> Clark 1987, p. 24.

yoga classes into the further education curriculum in Birmingham.<sup>13</sup> Early in 1962, he submitted a proposal for a class to the local education authority in Birmingham, which put him in contact with Margaret Ward. Together, Wilfred Clark and Margaret Ward organised the Birmingham Yoga Club in 1963, expanding it to the Midlands Yoga Association in 1964, and founding the Wheel of British Yoga in 1965.<sup>14</sup> The later renamed British Wheel of Yoga gained an official status as the ‘ruling body for yoga’ by the British Sports Council in 1995.<sup>15</sup>

Wilfred Clark systematically built up a network of people interested in yoga across Britain. Using his experience with local newspapers, he sent letters to local papers throughout the country asking for individuals interested in yoga to write to him. He would file the letters geographically, usually also posting back a personal type-written reply. When Wilfred collected a few names and addresses in a vicinity, he chose one correspondent and suggested that they organise group meetings. These small cells sprouted up all over Britain and Wilfred kept in touch with them through a monthly carbon-paper, type-written newsletter, in which he suggested further reading in yoga. Some groups met in church or school halls (the room rental was often organised by the local educational authority) while others met in private homes. Wilfred Clark also encouraged regular correspondence and questions from yoga students to whom he offered advice based on personal experience. As his involvement in yoga grew, he began to spend most of his time in a caravan at the bottom of his garden in the village of Wootton Wawen, just south of Birmingham.<sup>16</sup> Soon, Wilfred was spending many of his weekends visiting and advising yoga groups throughout the country and offering ‘pranic’ healing sessions.<sup>17</sup> Wheel

<sup>13</sup> Clark n.d. I was unable to find prospectuses for Birmingham local education authority in the Birmingham Central Library prior to 1985, and was therefore unable to ascertain the extent or location of such classes. Clark 1987, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Yoga* 1971, 7, p. 3. Although I have asked interviewees who were involved with the Wheel about Margaret Ward, I have been unable to secure much information about her identity or background. When Wilfred Clark left the Wheel to found the British wing of FRYOG (The Friends of Yoga International) in the mid-1970s Margaret Ward joined him and by the late 1970s had become interested in western esotericism and kabbalah; she then appears to have dropped out of yoga networks.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion on the contemporary British yoga scene, see De Michelis 2004, pp. 190–1.

<sup>16</sup> Pym 2005; Thompson 2004.

<sup>17</sup> *Yoga* 1969–1975. Pranic healing sessions consisted of Wilfred Clark transferring healing energy by holding his hand above an injured area or by light touch through clothes, Swami Satyar Atman Saraswati 2005. This form of healing has a long tradition in Christianity and English culture; the UK National Federation for Spiritual Healers was founded in 1954–5 to promote this practice; see <http://www.nfsh.org.uk>

of British Yoga classes were particularly successful in Birmingham and Bristol, although groups of people began practising all over Britain. These Birmingham classes were not the first local education authority evening classes in Britain, but they mark the beginning of the rise of popular participation in yoga.<sup>18</sup>

An important appeal of yoga in Europe has been its practical benefits in association with an ancient (i.e. legitimate) spiritual tradition. Meditation techniques and seated people on ancient coins aside, the physical postures now associated with yoga were probably developed by groups of renunciates in northern medieval India.<sup>19</sup> The philosophical tradition of Yoga was delineated in the early centuries of the common era as an explanation and technique for realising the nature of consciousness (*puruṣa*) unfettered by the real empirical world (*prakṛti*). During the classical period, the system of Yoga was summarised in the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* written sometime between 300 BCE and 200 CE.<sup>20</sup> Traditionally, instruction in yoga was imparted in a pedagogical relationship between teacher and student and not by the solitary reading of texts.<sup>21</sup> The non-textual aspect of the yoga tradition is exemplified by aspects of Krishnamacharya's life story, particularly his seven years of studies with Śrī Rāmamohan Brahmācāri in the heights of the Himalayas.<sup>22</sup> An assessment of the veracity of this oral transmission cannot be undertaken by historical or sociological methods. However, the importance placed on retelling such stories in other contexts can be analysed.

It was widely believed that what people were practising in 1960s and 1970s Britain was a direct expression of thousands of years of tradition. An early journal of British yoga practitioners asserted: 'The Yoga of bodily posture and breath-control, even in its classical form is but a particular specialized technique within a wider discipline that goes back... nearly a thousand years before Christ'.<sup>23</sup> British Yoga teacher Philip Jones commented in 1975 that: 'Thus we have in this ancient system of self-improvement an answer to prob-

<sup>18</sup> There is a claim from Mr Henry J. Instance of Formby, Lancashire that he taught yoga in local education authority evening classes in that area from 1947. Clark n.d.

<sup>19</sup> White 1996; Feuerstein 1998, p. 508.

<sup>20</sup> Flood 1996, p. 96.

<sup>21</sup> Whicher 1998, pp. 34–8.

<sup>22</sup> Krishnamacharya is particularly important for contemporary yoga traditions as the teacher of B. K. S. Iyengar, Pattabi Jois and T. K. V. Desikachar, whose students and methods currently enjoy considerable popularity. For Krishnamacharya's life story, see Desikachar and Cravens 1998, pp. 42–5.

<sup>23</sup> 'Means Better Than The End?' *Yoga*, Spring 1972 No. 11, p. 12, quotation from the *Shanti Sadan Journal*.

lems of modern day living'.<sup>24</sup> However, more recent research has raised questions regarding the validity of any continuous tradition dating back to antiquity. The way yoga practitioners have attempted to establish a lineage for post-war popular yoga practice has similarities to Hobsbawm's concept of 'invented traditions' which he argued characterised nationalism in the modern period.<sup>25</sup> The popularisation of yoga as adult physical education courses in Britain during the 1960s is a later chapter in thousands of years of a fluid and responsive yoga tradition. As the recent work of Joseph Alter, Elizabeth De Michelis and Mark Singleton has shown, the periods of colonisation and *fin-de-siècle* exchange caused a reframing of the yoga tradition in response to European thought and culture.<sup>26</sup>

Yoga entered adult education in London somewhat later and with different influences than those of the Wheel of British Yoga. Popular request led to an experimental class at the Clapton Adult Education Institute in Hackney in Spring 1967. From the opening of the class, Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) officials had the opinion that 'Instructional classes in Hatha Yoga need not and should not involve treatment of the philosophy of Yoga. They can be justified only as a form of "Keep Fit" or physical training', and were particularly interested in yoga as a form of Keep Fit for the 'over forty' age group.<sup>27</sup> However, they had a few concerns: the first was that 'Yoga can lend itself to forms of exhibitionism which can hardly be called education'. The second was that 'Owing to the growing demand for classes there is a tendency for well-meaning enthusiasts—some perhaps not so well-meaning—to push themselves forward as teachers. Inspectors of physical education do not have the experience in this particular subject necessary to ensure good standards of teaching and work'.<sup>28</sup> Due to these concerns, it was recommended to keep the Clapton class open, but not generally approve yoga classes in the ILEA while further investigations were conducted about ensuring the quality of Hatha Yoga Instruction. A report to the ILEA in September 1968 noted the newly founded Wheel of British Yoga as a possible authority for certifying quality Hatha yoga instruction and suggested that it be investigated further. However,

<sup>24</sup> *Yoga*, 1975 No. 24, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Eric Hobsbawm defines 'inventing tradition' as 'essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition', Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> De Michelis 2004; Alter 2004; Singleton 2007.

<sup>27</sup> ILEA Further and Higher Education Sub-Committee Papers May/June 1968, Report submitted on 2 September 1968 by the Education Officer and presented on 10 July 1968. London Metropolitan Archives, ILEA/CL/PRE/16/17.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

the ILEA did not choose to recognise the Wheel of British Yoga as offering the assurances that teachers were ‘competent and reliable’.<sup>29</sup>

In 1969, the Chief Inspector for Physical Education of the ILEA, Peter McIntosh (1915–2000) had a casual conversation about yoga with Yehudi Menuhin’s sister.<sup>30</sup> The internationally known virtuoso violinist Yehudi Menuhin (1916–1999) had been taking yoga lessons from an Indian called B. K. S. Iyengar (1918–) for over a decade, sponsoring Iyengar to spend at least a month a year with his family in Europe.<sup>31</sup> From the early 1960s, Iyengar’s annual visits to London were accompanied by public demonstrations and open classes<sup>32</sup> organised by the Asian Music Circle.<sup>33</sup> Peter McIntosh attended some of Iyengar’s classes in London and was impressed by Iyengar’s book *Light on Yoga* (1965) which was described in an ILEA report as ‘what is probably the most reliable English text on the subject’.<sup>34</sup> Iyengar was already concentrating on perfecting the physical postures of yoga, although the stipulation that yoga could be approved ‘provided that instruction is confined to “asanas” and “pranayamas” (postures and breathing disciplines) and does not extend to the philosophy of Yoga as a whole’ came from the ILEA and not Iyengar.<sup>35</sup> From 1970, yoga teachers approved by Iyengar were allowed to teach in the ILEA PE department. Officially, prior approval of all yoga course tutors was required from the Chief Inspector of Physical Education which allowed the ability to review the suitability of this preference for Iyengar-approved teachers. The first ILEA-approved teacher training programme for yoga teachers consisted of weekly lessons in yoga by Iyengar’s long-term student Silva Mehta (1926–1994). The personal approval of Iyengar to teach others was given, or

<sup>29</sup> ILEA Further and Higher Education Sub-Committee Papers October–December 1969, Report No. 11 Presented to the ILEA 3 December 1969, London Metropolitan Archive, ILEA/CL/PRE/16/24.

<sup>30</sup> Marris 2005. However, yoga was taught in a few individual adult education institutes London for several years previously, Thompson 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Menuhin 1996, pp. 256–8.

<sup>32</sup> *Daily Mail*, 16 June 1961, clipping in the archives of the Iyengar Yoga Institute, Maida Vale and Anon. 1961b and Clifton 2000.

<sup>33</sup> The Asian Music Circle was also responsible for introducing Ravi Shankar to George Harrison in 1965, Harrison 2002, p. 55. Yehudi Menuhin was the nominal President of the society, but it was run by Ayana and Patricia Angadi; the latter was chair of the Hampstead Arts Council from 1953. Gorb 2001.

<sup>34</sup> ILEA Further and Higher Education Sub-Committee Papers October–December 1969, Report No. 11 Presented to the ILEA 3 December 1969, London Metropolitan Archive, ILEA/CL/PRE/16/24.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

not, on his annual visits to London.<sup>36</sup> Thus yoga was given a place firmly in the physical education department in London, whereas other local authorities had occasionally placed yoga in the philosophy or religion department.

Outside of the ILEA classes, Iyengar profoundly influenced the understanding of yoga with the publication of *Light on Yoga* (1966). Often referred to as a 'Bible' of *āsana*, *Light on Yoga* offered a systematic exposition of the postures, its 602 clear and precise photographic plates, as well as the concise summary of yoga philosophy in the introduction. This encyclopaedia to yoga *āsana* demonstrates an attention to physical details not found in any other yoga books; it quickly became, according to Elizabeth De Michelis, 'the acknowledged point of reference in the sense that no modern postural yoga practitioner or school could afford to ignore its existence'.<sup>37</sup> Much of Iyengar's instruction was focused on details of how to work in the physical postures. One pupil's notes, taken from a class taught by Iyengar in May 1974 in London, consists entirely of anatomical physical instructions. For example, notes for the yoga posture *Virabhadrasana I* (Warrior I) include 'Turn at the kidneys. Inner arms straight. Raise arms stretching from coccyx'.<sup>38</sup> This focus on details of *āsana* performance contrasted with the yoga teaching promoted by the Wheel of British Yoga.

While *āsana* was included in the British Wheel teaching, introductory classes were to emphasise in equal measure 'postures, breathing, relaxation, concentration, and philosophical discussions'.<sup>39</sup> The concentration and precision that Iyengar demanded from his students' yoga *āsana* was sometimes perceived as authoritarian and motivated by anger. In 1972, Iyengar gave a major demonstration at the Friends' House on Euston Road. Some people associated with the Wheel of British Yoga left the demonstration in anger at the perceived violence of Iyengar's approach.<sup>40</sup> This emphasis on discipline was perceived to conflict with The Wheel of British Yoga's promotion of 'Gentle Yoga With A Smile'.<sup>41</sup> But Iyengar's 'hardness' was not without philosophical and soteriological intent. In response to criticisms, Iyengar describes his style of teaching yoga as a pragmatic expedient: 'Better life can be taught without using religious words. Meditation is of two types, active and passive. I took the

<sup>36</sup> Claxton 2004. However, other sources have said that Silva Mehta herself sometimes gave approval for her students to teach in the absence of B. K. S. Iyengar.

<sup>37</sup> De Michelis 2004, p. 211.

<sup>38</sup> Herremans n.d.

<sup>39</sup> Letter Wilfred Clark to Ken Thompson, 12 April 1967.

<sup>40</sup> Thompson 2004.

<sup>41</sup> 'Gentle Yoga With A Smile', *Yoga*, Winter 1970/71, p. 4.

active side of meditation by making students totally absorbed in the poses.<sup>42</sup> In another person's notes, Iyengar was quoted as saying: 'The end of discipline is the beginning of freedom. Only a disciplined person is a free person. So-called "freedom" is only a licence to act and do as we like. Yoga is to train and discipline the worries and anxieties of men and women'.<sup>43</sup> Through disciplining the bodies, Iyengar hoped to discipline his students' minds and his approach was influential beyond his direct student base.

During this period, yoga classes largely depended on the adult education infrastructure of local educational authorities. However, the significant numbers of practitioners appeared only after the screening of yoga classes on television in 1971. It is estimated that at least 4 million Britons saw Richard Hittleman (1927–1991) on the 'Yoga for Health' television series presented between 1971 and 1975.<sup>44</sup> Hittleman had screened his first successful ITV half-hour programme in California during the early 1960s. By 1970, the pilot had been syndicated on over 40 television networks in the United States. Hittleman presented a de-mystified yoga consisting of relatively simple exercises for health, relaxation, and (not least) beauty.<sup>45</sup> In Britain, Hittleman series was complemented by a glossy magazine, and a series of practise-along books and vinyl records.<sup>46</sup> During the 1970s, the producer of the series, Howard Kent, organised a national network of yoga teachers based on the principles of 'Yoga for Health' called Yoga for Health Clubs. This further popularised yoga in Britain and made classes more accessible throughout the nation.

It is very difficult to find reliable ways of measuring the number of yoga practitioners in Britain during this period. However, those involved in yoga from time to time guessed roughly how many practitioners there were usually based on numbers of known teachers and pupils per class. From these estimates, the following table of practitioners of yoga in Britain has been constructed:

<sup>42</sup> Dale n.d.

<sup>43</sup> 'The Sutras of Iyengar' n.d., p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Anon. 2005.

<sup>45</sup> While I have not been able to find video copies of Hittleman's original series, he produced numerous books. Specifically, his 1971 *Yoga for Health* was remarketed to accompany the ITV series. Hittleman's British model, Lyn Marshall went on to produce several yoga television series and books. The first season of ITV's 'Keep Up With Yoga' 1976–7 is available at the British Film Institute Archive.

<sup>46</sup> Kent 1971, p. 17. Initial research suggests that a nationally-circulating glossy yoga magazine might have started in Britain, rather than the USA. The Library of Congress Catalogue has the national US magazine *Yoga Journal* beginning its run in 1975 and no serials with 'yoga' in the title before this date.



Year of Estimate	Number of Practitioners
1950	+1,000 <sup>47</sup>
1967	5,000 <sup>48</sup>
1973	50,000 <sup>49</sup>
1975	25,000–80,000 <sup>50</sup>
1979	100,000 <sup>51</sup>

After the yoga series appeared on ITV, the number of practitioners increased tenfold—from 5,000 to 50,000. Yoga became an increasingly popular activity throughout the 1970s, doubling again between 1973 and 1980. From 1967, the concept of the mystic East entered mainstream media with the activities of pop stars George Harrison and Pete Townshend (amongst others) and yoga moved from a crank eccentricity to a trendy household activity.<sup>52</sup> Yoga was publicised by male celebrities, but yoga classes were particularly appealing to middle-class women. Although yoga classes were open to everyone, women made up 70 to 90 per cent of the student base of most classes, as well as the majority of yoga teachers.<sup>53</sup>

### Women, class and adult education in Britain

Education in Britain was a private initiative until the late nineteenth century. The idea that all children should be educated for basic literacy for all was only

<sup>47</sup> From the number of students reported to have voluntarily completed a questionnaire for Desmond Dunne's School of Yogism in London; Dunne 1951.

<sup>48</sup> Personal estimate of Wilfred Clark in a letter to Ken Thompson dated 16 March 1967.

<sup>49</sup> Kent 1973, pp. 20–1. The figure is based on an estimate of over 2,000 yoga classes in evening institutes in Britain with an average of 26 students per class. Kent also estimates in this article that over four million viewed the *Yoga and Health* television series.

<sup>50</sup> Estimate found in the British Wheel's journal *Yoga*, Summer 1975, 24, p. 14. In this article, the British Wheel of Yoga itself claimed 1,500 members and 500 teachers.

<sup>51</sup> Personal estimate by Feuerstein 1979.

<sup>52</sup> The media made much of the Beatles' short-lived association with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, teacher of Transcendental Meditation, from the summer of 1967 until March 1968 and gave Indian spirituality headline publicity. In 1969 George Harrison produced the Radha Krishna Temple's mantra records and helped them appear on *Top of the Pops* in 1970, and Harrison's financial support was invaluable in establishing the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in Britain. See Greene, 2005, pp. 158–60.

<sup>53</sup> This estimate was remarkably consistent through interviews with many practitioners and teachers of yoga in post-war Britain; particularly Jon and Ros Claxton, Sophie Hoare, Kathleen and Roy Pepper, Ken and Angela Thompson, Swami Satyar Atman Saraswati and Lorna Walker.

institutionalised in the 1870 Education Act. However, the working classes had a long history of autodidact study, particularly in non-conformist churches.<sup>54</sup> The 1870 Act was largely a compromise between the traditional, church-sponsored education and the campaigning of liberal and some dissenters to have a purely secular education sponsored by the state. The compromise allowed for non-sectarian Bible readings at the discretion of local educational authorities and the option for any child's removal from these sessions at the request of their parents.<sup>55</sup> The interpretation of legislation on religious education was largely left up to the individual school boards, who found themselves trying to balance political and community interests.<sup>56</sup> In 1944, religious and moral instruction was legislated more explicitly as an important part of the local educational authority's duty. While requiring all schoolchildren to have the opportunity of enacting daily worship in school (where physically possible), it retained the opt-out right of parents.<sup>57</sup> Thus a delicate balance of religious interest was legislated in the establishment of government-authority schools. Heads of schools attempted to meet government directives and maintain popular approval of those attending, or sending their children to, local institutions. This meant that when yoga was introduced as a subject in schools, the principals had quite a lot of individual initiative as to the appropriateness of the subject. Local administrators also were well practised as to how not to offend popular sensibilities or insinuate controversy. Thus courses on yoga that did not have much ideological instruction, unless presented in the context of comparative religion, were preferred.

Soon after the 1870 Education Act was introduced, there were attempts to more formally organise non-sectarian courses for the basic literacy of adults. In London, the Recreative Evening Schools Association was founded in 1885, which 'widened the curriculum (on a self-supporting basis) by introducing subjects like cookery, wood-carving, physical training and music'.<sup>58</sup> In 1903, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) was formed with the late-Victorian ideal of providing both vocational and 'liberal' education for those denied such an education in their youth.<sup>59</sup> The WEA became a powerful lobbying and organising force for adult technical and liberal education. By 1960, the WEA celebrated the diversity of the adult education institutions which

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<sup>54</sup> Rose 2001, pp. 13–16.

<sup>55</sup> Maclure 1986, p. 135.

<sup>56</sup> Stephens 1998, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Maclure 1986, p. 224.

<sup>58</sup> Maclure 1990, p. 68.

<sup>59</sup> Rose 2001, p. 256. Matthew Arnold (1822–88) is one of the thinkers strongly identified with this ideology. See Arnold 1964.

included two and a quarter million people from school-leavers to the retired.<sup>60</sup> In dedicated adult education institutes, courses on typing and car maintenance were held in the same building as courses on modern languages, great books and physical fitness. Classes for adults had the dual role of providing further vocational training in practical skills as well as that of liberal self-development. As one principal of a further education institute in the Manchester area put it:

This is a marvellous opportunity for people of Openshaw to further their education. The school can come in useful for a variety of things, workers can undertake courses of training, immigrants can overcome language difficulties, and handicapped people can be provided with facilities to gain examinations which they would normally never think of taking.<sup>61</sup>

A 1960 social class comparison with the national statistics in this report shows that the adult education participants generally reflected well the social classes of the general population.

Provision for general education was revolutionised with the 1944 Butler Education Act, which attempted to equalise opportunity by ensuring every child a full-time education up to the age of fifteen. The new educational system was designed to equally reward achievement. However, critics charged it with ignoring the structural elements that gave middle- and upper-class children greater opportunities outside school hours to support their learning. Historians generally concede that the restructuring of the educational system in 1944 did more to reinforce educational class divisions than alleviate them.<sup>62</sup> The Act also made it a statutory duty for local education authorities to provide for adult education, which likewise continued to reinforce rather than erase class divisions.<sup>63</sup>

The report implies that the middle classes enrolled more in the liberal education courses, whilst the working classes were disproportionately enrolled in the vocational courses, possibly as a requirement of employment. The authors go on to reflect that: 'Access to adult education is easier for the educated. This may be largely a matter of social confidence, but it is bound up with the kind of education received at school'.<sup>64</sup> The over-representation of the middle classes was often noted in the journal *Adult Education*, aimed at those directing and

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<sup>60</sup> WEA Working Party 1960, p. 2. Attendance at the evening institutes compares to the 1949 government social survey with social classes I–VII as follows: I–II 1949 government social survey 7.4%, WEA students 7.9%; III–V 63.7% vs. 59.4%; VI and VII 28.9% vs. 32.7%, p. 69.

<sup>61</sup> Anon. 1967.

<sup>62</sup> Lowe 1988; Clark 2004, pp. 283–5.

<sup>63</sup> Chitty 2004; WEA Working Party 1960.

<sup>64</sup> WEA Working Party 1960, p. 4.

teaching in LEA evening classes. One 1973 article evocatively described the situation by remarking, ‘people think that LEA adult education consists of bingo substitutes for the middle classes’.<sup>65</sup> Those whose backgrounds had valued learning and education, and had already completed more than the minimal amount of schooling, were more interested in accessing the non-vocational resources of adult education. Those who had grown up with an emphasis on the importance of education were more likely to see learning as a lifelong process and attend non-vocational evening courses for personal enjoyment.

The cultural climate in 1960 was much more affluent and less radically inclined than those attending adult education institutes before the Second World War. The 1960 WEA report describes Britain as becoming increasingly what American Sociologist John Kenneth Galbraith described as an ‘affluent society’.<sup>66</sup> The report commented that although there are ‘pockets of distress and innumerable weak points in the social system... we live in a society where many people find it increasingly difficult to focus social purpose and where domestic social abuses are certainly less obvious than they were in the past’.<sup>67</sup> The 1960s were an optimistic moment in British history where the possibilities of technological advance made it seem like a four-day work week was a real possibility.<sup>68</sup> The adult education institutes saw themselves as having a key role in the educated use of leisure time in an increasingly affluent society. Although the adult education population for non-vocational courses still numbered a million in 1960, the place adult education held in society was changing.

An important aspect of this change was that women were becoming numerically important in adult education courses. During the 1950s, there was a rapid growth in numbers of Women’s Institutes and the Townswomen’s Guilds as well as women’s membership and participation in co-educational bodies. The WEA welcomed this development ‘unreservedly’ but it also noted that:

So far the influx of women has consisted mainly of those from a comparatively favourable social and educational background. There is still a lack of women recruits from lower income groups and who left school at the age of fourteen or fifteen... recruitment difficulties are obviously the growing practice of married women going out to work, the low age of marriage and child bearing, and also perhaps lingering traditional self mistrust.<sup>69</sup>

Middle-class women generally did not need to work outside the home for economic reasons during the 1950s, but initially were looking to expand their

<sup>65</sup> Wegg 1973, p. 185.

<sup>66</sup> Galbraith 1958; WEA Working Party 1960, p. 8.

<sup>67</sup> WEA Working Party 1960, p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> Munrow 1966.

<sup>69</sup> WEA Working Party 1960, p. 31.

identity with a connection to the world outside the home and the personal autonomy earning money entailed. For middle-class women, the goals of freedom and autonomy were more psychological and ideological rather than coming out of economic necessity.<sup>70</sup> The more economically disadvantaged working-class and single mothers who had to support a family economically simply did not have the leisure time for either yoga or other non-vocational or family-oriented pursuits.

Resentments of middle-class women for their new duty of managing every aspect of housework and childcare was an important part of how aspirations conflicted with restricted social roles. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska points out that until the Second World War the majority of middle-class households employed domestic help of some kind.<sup>71</sup> Where they previously had leisure time to devote to culture and liberal education within the home, there was now 'only' housework. This was an impetus for second-wave feminists to compare their positions less favourably to those of men. Other classes of women may have felt similar difficulties between a personal and family identity. However, the middle-class women were articulate about their concerns while enjoying a relative economic freedom that allowed for reflective thought and experimentation in lifestyle. Middle-class women's sentiments were reinforced by increasing numbers of publications by women addressing these issues.<sup>72</sup> Many influential books voiced the discontent and frustration of women's attempts at having an independent identity, these included Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and the second-wave feminist manifestos of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and Ann Oakley's *Housewife* (1974).<sup>73</sup> The complaints and desires of second-wave feminists were echoed in the pages of the British yoga journals. Yoga was often described as a cure for women's specific problems. One yoga teacher in the 1970s conducted a survey and found that many of her yoga students were housewives suffering from 'monotony and lack of recognition, indeterminate pains and psychosomatic symptoms' and identified this as 'housewife syndrome'. Through the practice of yoga, the teacher concluded that most students suffering from the 'housewife syndrome' found that their lives improved. In fact, she stated that through yoga, 90 per cent of 'sufferers' regained 'lost vitality' and enabled a woman to 'face her problems without tension'.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Hobsbawm 1994, p. 318.

<sup>71</sup> Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2001a, p. 153.

<sup>72</sup> See Sandbrook 2006, pp. 648–64.

<sup>73</sup> For descriptions of other influential ideas and books, see Bruley 1999, p. 145; Rowbottom 2001.

<sup>74</sup> *Yoga* Spring 1976, No. 27, p. 7.

It was women's desire for freedom and autonomy, both mental and financial, that made the adult educational centres an attractive place to spend time. Being state funded, women attending courses were seen as participating in a socially acceptable activity. For a middle-class man, having his wife attend courses on traditionally feminine subjects like flower arranging or cooking may have felt less threatening and more respectable than employment outside the home. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, middle-class women were not expected to earn an independent wage, but they were more educated than ever before and had time on their hands. In the conditions of affluence in the early 1960s, evening further education classes were a safe and interesting place to learn new things and make new friends with similar interests. This was particularly true of physical education classes. In 1966, the Leicestershire advisor for PE noted in the journal *Adult Education* that there were three types of evening classes in his subject: men's activities, women's activities and family activities. The advisor reflected that the non-threatening expansion to the social network was an important appeal for both women and men, reflecting that men's classes, 'offer an opportunity to get-together with the "boys" away from the feminine home influence and yet with a clear conscious', while women's 'keep fit' classes were often perceived as 'an opportunity for a good "natter" between women.'<sup>75</sup>

As this 1966 PE educator's comments demonstrate, there was an assumed tradition of gendered physical education in Britain. Women's attendance at physical culture courses for improving health and beauty were an established part of popular middle-class women's culture during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>76</sup> Before the Second World War, middle-class women were taught gymnastics, Swedish drill, and dance at school; middle-class men played team sports like rugby and cricket.<sup>77</sup> After leaving school, men who were interested in physical culture often followed the tradition of George Sando's exercises, while women joined Mary Bagot Stack's Women's League of Health and Beauty.<sup>78</sup> In particular, the Bagot Stack exercises had many parallels to the forms of yoga as group physical activity that became popular after the war. In her autobiography, she describes that some of her exercises were based on yoga postures learned while living in India.<sup>79</sup> Bagot Stack's group

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<sup>75</sup> Johnson 1966.

<sup>76</sup> Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2005; Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2001b.

<sup>77</sup> McIntosh 1972.

<sup>78</sup> Stack 1931; Atkinson 1985; Hargreaves 1994; McCrone 1988; Mangan and Walvin (eds.) 1987.

<sup>79</sup> Stack 1988, p. 69.

movements, often done to classical music, designed to create health and beauty from the inside out, have many similarities to the language used to promote yoga in the 1970s. During the 1950s, women attended Keep Fit<sup>80</sup> and Medau Rhythmic Movement<sup>81</sup> classes in great numbers.

Educated, middle-class women's discontent at being confined within the home was noted explicitly by those in the adult education community. Someone involved with a Liverpool initiative to train women as teachers of crafts reported in 1968 that: 'the ever-increasing desire of women to do some kind of work outside the home has resulted in many housewives with young families coming forward, eager to develop an outside interest and to achieve some degree of status and financial independence'.<sup>82</sup> In 1973, another tutor involved in the same programme reported on the reasons given for wishing to join a course to teach crafts in the adult education system. The female candidates, who were mostly married, would often report in their intake interviews: "I feel like I am becoming a cabbage"; "I cannot stand the four walls"; "I need adult company" etc.<sup>83</sup> She went on to analyse the situation, remarking that many of these women had educational qualifications that could allow for university entry. But 'these women, like many others, being conscientious about their role as mother, will not train at the expense of their children's security. . . . [Furthermore t]he drive is not an economic one . . . employment is not guaranteed and trainees do not receive any grant'.<sup>84</sup> The course only required six hours a week attendance and none of the interviewees were reported to have asked about employment prospects at the time of the interview. The situation

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<sup>80</sup> Keep Fit Association of England and Wales was founded in 1956. In 1961, Keep Fit classes were described as consisting of 'movement based on Ling's system of free standing exercises with the additional activities of skipping, hoop-work, ball-work and national dancing'. Groups of women performed coordinated movements, usually accompanied by classical music. Hundreds of women would perform together for national rallies and demonstrations, much like the Women's League of Health and Beauty. Anon. 1961a.

<sup>81</sup> Medau Rhythmic Movement was introduced in Britain in 1931. It is popular largely with women and uses some 'apparatus', particularly Indian wooden clubs for exercises. A recent leaflet describes the technique as being defined by: 'variety of rhythm, pace, form, and pattern support basic training in the technique of movement, which should be effortless, natural, harmonious, skilled and controlled but at the same time retain the unique quality which expresses personality. Instead of teaching exercises, the emphasis was on creating a class to suit the needs of the individuals, as it still is today'. Medau Society 2007. In 1959–60, there were 16 separate Medau courses advertised in the inner London guide to evening classes, *Floodlight*, and in 1971–2 there were 18 Medau courses compared to 13 yoga courses on offer. For more information on the history of Indian clubs in European and American sports, see Alter 2004b.

<sup>82</sup> Burgess 1968, p. 94.

<sup>83</sup> Hughes 1973, p. 167.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

described amongst those training to be crafts-teachers also applied to those attending and teaching yoga classes in the local educational system.<sup>85</sup>

### The appeal of yoga to middle-class women

The presentation of yoga in popular culture during the 1960s and 1970s was often as an aid to women's health and beauty. During the 1970s, the women-and-beauty element of yoga was often implicit, and was not assumed until Richard Hittleman's choice of glamorous, stylish models and the similar images on the cover of the glossy magazine *Yoga & Health*. The toned cover models, whether thin or curvaceous, always looked attractive in matching leotards and tights. During the 1960s and 1970s, the models often wore flattering and sexy fishnet stockings and a tight-fitting leotard top. Since the 1960s, the images of women used to model yoga have tended to change with the ideal body image projected by society. They have become noticeably thinner, especially in comparison to the average body size of women in the general population.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps the female image of yoga on magazine covers originated from a long tradition of women selling things in advertisements, a proven way of attracting the interest of both women and men. Fashion followed the growing consumer market of the youth. Designer clothes, such as Mary Quant's short dresses, emphasised and glorified a youthful androgyny rather than a womanly body.<sup>87</sup> The middle-aged population that made up the bulk of yoga practitioners were also affected by the social discrimination of their age relative to the cultural standard of youth as essential to feminine beauty.<sup>88</sup> Yoga was specifically presented as something that could make one's appearance more youthful.

A 1970 *Evening Standard* article made just this appeal explicit. The journalist was sent a copy of a booklet that reported: 'those who take hatha-yoga

<sup>85</sup> Neale-Smith remembers when she started teaching yoga in 1974 that the local authority would pay her £6 an hour for teaching yoga compared to the £3 an hour she made as a part-time medical secretary, Neale-Smith 2004. Jeanne Maslen, who was influential in establishing Iyengar yoga in Manchester, first attended keep-fit classes at her local FE College because 'as a housewife with two small children, I wanted to do something more with my time', Maslen 1997. A list of Iyengar teachers in the Manchester area in 1972 includes 17 names, 1 'Miss', 1 'Mr' and 15 'Mrs'; *Manchester and District Centre for Iyengar Yoga* 1972.

<sup>86</sup> Offer 2001; Offer 2006.

<sup>87</sup> Both *Yoga Today* and *Yoga and Health* tended to use fashionable young women as cover models. For the cult of youth and the influence of Quant on fashion in the context of the sixties, see Sandbrook 2006, p. 220. For more detail on the fashion of this period, see Breward, Gilber and Lister (eds) 2006.

<sup>88</sup> Benson 2001, p. 82.



seriously believe that we do not reach maturity at 21 but at 33 and to them the springtime of life is between 55 and 75'. So the author of this article telephoned the editor of the *Evening Standard* beauty section, who had been attending yoga classes for seven years already. When asked if yoga made her look younger, the Beauty Editor commented: 'the furrows on my brow look the same as they always have but maybe they would have been worse'.<sup>89</sup> Another woman reported: 'Four years ago I was a tired old grandmother, quite unable to touch my toes. A bulging tummy and skinny legs kept me well away from the beach. I had more than a fair share of back trouble and was a victim to chronic hay-fever and sinusitis. All that, yoga has brought under control'.<sup>90</sup> This article was illustrated by an elderly woman in headstand *padmāsana* (lotus posture), wearing a black leotard and fishnet tights. In 1982, at the age of 72, Clara Buck explained to a newspaper reporter how she began her yoga practice at the age of 60 and 'at the age of seventy, I have a profession that makes me feel younger than I felt when I was twenty'.<sup>91</sup> The perception that yoga was something you could continue learning and teaching well into old age added to its popularity. This technique of discipline was more accessible to the relatively well-to-do older women.

An early book explicitly on this theme is Nancy Phelan and Michael Volin's *Yoga For Women* (1963), which declares:

Women can become better-looking through yoga, not only by improving their health but through the development of a more positive interest in life and their own physical and mental problems. Most yoga teachers know cases of women who have astonished everyone, including themselves, by exchanging a drawn and harassed, middle-aged look for a youthful, vital one; by discarding stiffness and tension for suppleness, slimness, serenity and poise.<sup>92</sup>

As Swami Sarasvati, who had a successful television programme on yoga in Australia during the 1970s, claimed: 'Breathing, gentle exercise and a little relaxation each day will not only reveal your inner beauty but will also give you a firm body and a healthy mental outlook... you will become more energetic, active and younger looking (Would you believe I am forty?)'.<sup>93</sup> Phelan and Volin as well as Swami Sarasvati were based in Australia, but their books had a wide circulation in Britain. After being a model in the series with Richard Hittleman, British actress Lyn Marshall went on to publish several books based

<sup>89</sup> Thomas 1970.

<sup>90</sup> Anon. 1970.

<sup>91</sup> Buck 1982.

<sup>92</sup> Phelan and Volin 1963, p. 16.

<sup>93</sup> Sarasvati 1970, p. i.

on her yoga practice. These books were marketed on the basis of Lyn Marshall's reputation as a beautiful woman with a kind of knowledge of how to maintain this physical appearance and good health rather than her intimate knowledge of Indian esoteric religion.<sup>94</sup>

The way of thinking about women's health and beauty in these yoga books fits in well with the more mainstream ideas being presented in popular culture. For example, *The Vogue Body and Beauty Book* (1978) was illustrated by Richard Avedon photographs of models in yoga positions.<sup>95</sup> These photographs imply that yoga was not only health-providing, but that it was also glamorous. The introduction explains the popular assumption that 'Beauty, today, is not a perfect face or a certain look . . . it is glowing health and vitality, it is awareness and action, it is science and technology and of course marvellous looks, a perfect skin, a superb body'.<sup>96</sup> At the same time as purporting the old adage that beauty is 'more than skin deep', this book implies that a woman should also have perfect skin and a superb body that is an expression of her inner beauty. The *Vogue* book provides sensible advice on nutrition, sexual health and exercises including, but not exclusively, yoga. While the ideas presented about yoga in the media might be difficult for most women to attain, the relaxation and 'gentle' exercise of evening education yoga classes provided women a way of working towards this standard of beauty in a context that was not overly competitive and was emotionally supportive.

### **Yoga and the natural birth movement**

Alleviation of physical pain, or at least learning to manage it better, was one of the particular appeals of yoga, for both men and women. Yoga teacher Earnest Coates began yoga in part to deal with stress from work and a resulting duodenal ulcer that he did not want operated upon by his doctors.<sup>97</sup> B. K. S. Iyengar and his daughter Geeta initially became serious in their practice of yoga because it offered an affordable way to deal with illness and poor health.<sup>98</sup> But yoga exercises also offered corporeal freedom and autonomy in the face of medical issues considered particular to women's bodies. Many women suffering from vague complaints such as mood swings, menstrual pains, or bowel difficulties found yoga an effective balm if not a cure for their condition. For

<sup>94</sup> Marshall 1975; Marshall, Farrell, et al. 1976; Marshall 1978; Marshall 1982.

<sup>95</sup> Bronwen 1978.

<sup>96</sup> Bronwen 1978, p. 7.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Coates 2004.

<sup>98</sup> Iyengar 1990, pp. 3–4; Iyengar 1978.

example, yoga teacher Kathleen Pepper was drawn to yoga in the mid-1960s after finding a book called *Yoga and Your Health* in her local London library. She was suffering from serious pain and fainting during her menstruation and at that time biomedical interventions (such as the contraceptive pill) were unavailable or unknown to her.<sup>99</sup> She found relief for her condition by following the instructions in the book.<sup>100</sup>

During the 1970s, parallel to social critics like Tomas Szasz, R. D. Laing,<sup>101</sup> Ivan Illich,<sup>102</sup> and Thomas McKeown,<sup>103</sup> educated women began vocalising difficulties with the biomedical profession. Initially, the focus for women's discontent centred upon their experiences during childbirth. An author in what became the 'natural birth movement' during the 1970s described the birth of her first child in the early 1960s:

The day the baby was due I was despatched to hospital by my doctor, although I had no sign of contractions. My blood pressure was up a little and I was told it would be more convenient for the doctor if I were to agree to an induction the following morning. Not knowing the pros and cons, I could not weigh them.

Labour was induced at eight in the morning. While I was under general anaesthetic, the membrane holding my waters was broken. I drowsily awoke from the drug half an hour later to find my body in the grip of something like a wrenching tool. . . . I asked the nurse to call my husband and my mother, but she gave me pills instead, and my husband and mother were only allowed to stay an hour before being sent home.

I was in labour for fourteen hours under the kind of medication which made me too woolly to deal with myself or anything that was going on. Too weak to stand up for my own rights. I'd forgotten I had any rights. I didn't care how my baby was born. I was put on an intravenous drip to speed up contractions and left alone for most of the labour; shovelled from bed to stretcher to delivery table at the most intense point of discomfort, had a gas mask slapped on my face, although I summoned all remaining strength to push it away, and I was oblivious when my baby was born. . . . for reasons never explained to me, I was not permitted to hold my son until hours later, when he was wheeled in to me bathed and cleanly

<sup>99</sup> The first contraceptive pills were introduced in Britain in 1962 but took some time to become widely available. Jones 2001, p. 95. For more detail on family planning and birth control in Britain, see Cook 2005.

<sup>100</sup> Pepper 2005.

<sup>101</sup> Thomas Szasz and R. D. Laing challenged medical authority in the 1950s, particularly in charges against psychiatric diagnosis and the dehumanising treatment of psychiatric patients. This challenge to the medical profession also had an important, though largely indirect, gender element to it, see Showalter 1985.

<sup>102</sup> Illich 1976 was the definitive publication that began as a series of working papers published in *Ideas in Progress* from January 1975.

<sup>103</sup> McKeown's attack on conventional assumptions of biomedical efficacy began in the late 1950s. His most popularly-read challenge was published in McKeown 1976.

wrapped in his first trappings of so-called civilization. I had to unwrap him like a sterile parcel before I could touch his newborn skin.<sup>104</sup>

The feelings of isolation, lack of body awareness due to medication, and absence of consultation with the woman about possibilities for intervention were just a few of the discontents many women had with their experience of labour. Very often, women felt as though they were given no choice about the nature or extent of medical interventions and that their own experience of labour was less important than what the medical professionals expected to happen.<sup>105</sup> As educated women talked more about their experiences, feelings of disempowerment and a need for more information and autonomy over their bodies during the birthing process inspired a number of women's self-help organisations.

The subject of women's labour has been a perennial concern of both doctors and families. With an eye on the fast-changing medical technology of the time, Prunella Briance set up the National Childbirth Trust in 1956 to facilitate the accessibility of information on pregnancy, childbirth and parenting. The active birth movement in Britain was primarily an attempt to educate women so that they could make informed choices about the medical interventions they wanted during labour.<sup>106</sup> Then in 1961, trust in medical expertise was severely undermined when severely deformed children were born to mothers prescribed thalidomide for morning sickness during pregnancy.<sup>107</sup> Women increasingly considered that doctors might not always know best. Anthropological comparisons with other cultures stressed the unnaturalness of giving birth on one's back in stirrups surrounded by men.<sup>108</sup> Following from this insight, the natural birth movement encouraged women to listen to their bodies during the labour process, and published images and exercises of alternative positions that can ease the baby out during labour. Many of these had overlaps with yoga as taught at this time.<sup>109</sup>

Yoga and active birth were linked in experience by many of the women staffing the natural birth centre at the East-West Centre near Old Street in London, which also was an early and enthusiastic promoter of macrobiotics and shiatsu. For much of the 1970s, several women held an open office for a

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<sup>104</sup> Brook 1976, p. 9.

<sup>105</sup> Claxton 2004; Hoare 2005; Brook 1976; Kitzinger 1967.

<sup>106</sup> See National Childbirth Trust 1973; Balaskas 1983.

<sup>107</sup> Lock 1997, pp. 137–8.

<sup>108</sup> Particularly influential were Kitzinger 1972 and Kitzinger 1967.

<sup>109</sup> For example, in 1972 the National Childbirth Trust produced a series of A5 booklets under the titles of 'Breathing during labour', 'Breathing control in labour', and 'Keeping fit for pregnancy'. See also Balaskas 1979.

few hours each week to advise on the birthing process and related issues and provide speakers on these topics. Although the birth movement made efforts to reach all classes of women, it was primarily staffed and used by educated middle-class women.<sup>110</sup> The group arranged screenings of Frédéric Leboyer's film *Birth Without Violence* (1969) and made available his book by the same name (1975).<sup>111</sup> Leboyer is a French physician who specialised in gynaecology and obstetrics. After undergoing his own psychoanalysis in France, he became very interested in birthing techniques. He travelled to India in 1959 and returned there annually for two decades. During his time in India, he studied birthing practices as well as yoga and karnatic singing.<sup>112</sup> In 1978, Leboyer published a book containing inspirational photographs of one of B. K. S. Iyengar's daughter practising yoga late in pregnancy, making his personal connection between 'natural birth' and yoga more explicit.<sup>113</sup> The highly influential *Birth Without Violence* poetically championed the personhood of the newborn and called parents and physicians to care for the newborn as a person, not a thing. He was also a critic of labour practices popular in western hospitals, arguing that a woman should move around and take more active positions in the birthing process. Leboyer was very influential in some circles among middle-class women; his films and photographs emotively illustrated what other authors only described in words. The body awareness, the deep respect of personal somatic experience and an insistence on non-violence all resonated with the ideas commonly championed by those practising yoga in Britain during this period.

In valuing a woman's embodied subjective experience, yoga was a natural complement to the reproductive awareness of the birth movement. Until the 1980s, there was little explicit instruction on modifying yoga postures for pre- or post-natal women. In general, women carried on in normal evening classes as best as they were able, using this increased body awareness to monitor their body's changing ability.<sup>114</sup> Yoga as practised in Britain was generally done cautiously and sensibly; the principals of the local educational authority evening institutes were under pressure to provide safe and non-controversial activities for their populations. Most yoga classes emphasised increasing body awareness through postures and breathing exercises, and not on inducing notably altered states of consciousness or dramatic contortions. In a prosaic way, the practice of yoga increased awareness of subjective embodied experiences and provided

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<sup>110</sup> Claxton 2004; Hoare 2005.

<sup>111</sup> Leboyer 1975, which has been reprinted in 1977, 1979, 1991 and 1995.

<sup>112</sup> I.e., singing from the Indian state of Karnataka. Birthlight Conference 2006.

<sup>113</sup> Leboyer 1978.

<sup>114</sup> Interviews with Ros Claxton and Sophy Hoare.

techniques to manage stress as well as emotions and physical pain.<sup>115</sup> This appealed to pregnant and non-pregnant women, as well as men.

One of the few books explicitly discussing yoga and pregnancy during the 1970s was Wheel member Tony Crisp's *Yoga and Childbirth* (1975, 1976, and 1977).<sup>116</sup> Tony Crisp was concerned with getting the woman's 'body, mind and soul ready for the event of childbirth'. He spends more time on diet and influencing the unborn child through the mother's emotional and psychological well-being than on any *āsanas*, *prāṇāyāma* exercises or anything that might be taken from Sanskrit texts. In fact, the idea of yoga for pregnant women had more to do with *being* in the body—he suggests 'let any movements or positions occur which suggest themselves to you. Let your emotions flow and arise as postures and movements. Open to the light, while holding firmly to the earth. Then let the light penetrate your very being'. This is accompanied by suggestions and photographs of 'being a lioness, being a snake, being a baby, being a turtle...'. More than anything else, yoga for pregnant women during this period seemed to be about encouraging a body and diet awareness. The idea that women's behaviour during pregnancy could have a profound effect on the unborn child was an increasing emphasis on the mother's influence on the psychological development of children.<sup>117</sup>

## Conclusion

The way women practised yoga during the 1960s and 1970s supported their traditional responsibilities while encouraging, in a socially acceptable way, an experience of greater freedom and autonomy. Yoga was particularly successful amongst women during this period because it offered practical ways of expanding a middle-class lifestyle without unduly impinging on responsibilities towards home and family. The integration of yoga into the network of adult education classes greatly assisted the growth and popularity of yoga by providing a safe, cheap venue for women's attendance as well as an institutional network that paid yoga teachers and provided rooms for classes. The physical practice of yoga created a sense of freedom and autonomy within the body, much like the bicycle was physically liberating for a previous generation of

<sup>115</sup> For a sensitive positive description of this relationship, see Tourniere 2002, which reflects on her experience with B. K. S. Iyengar in the mid-1970s.

<sup>116</sup> Yoga and pregnancy featured widely in book titles from the mid-1980s onwards. Other early books include Weller 1978, Berg 1981, and Hoare 1985.

<sup>117</sup> There was an increasing emphasis on the psychological implications of mother-love in the childrearing manuals of this time, for example, Spock 1955 and his later publications.

women.<sup>118</sup> Yoga was believed to be capable of creating the ‘body beautiful’ while simultaneously drawing attention away from physical perfection and towards goals of mental stability and general health. Women were interested in yoga practice that advertised more pragmatic and immediate benefits than enlightenment. During this period, yoga was perceived to support and validate women’s somatic experiences in the face of a growing awareness of women being marginalised and objectified by a male-dominated medical profession. In Britain, middle-class women found yoga an important support in many different practical ways including as an aid to health and beauty, a positive approach to ageing, a complementary support to medical treatment for chronic conditions, social contact with other women and a meaningful hobby. In addition to all these there is also, of course, the spiritual importance of yoga for many practitioners, which this article has not discussed. I have focused rather, on the expanding popularity of yoga during this period as partially attributable to its perceived ability to promote a woman’s freedom, health, and well-being while simultaneously supporting her traditional obligations to be beautiful and available to husband and children.

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<sup>118</sup> Willard 1979; Herlihy 2004.

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