



UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education

Between sports and subjective spirituality

Nordic yoga practitioners' perspectives on yoga, religion, and spirituality

Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen

A dissertation for the degree of philosophiae doctor - September 2021



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Foreword

The years as a PhD candidate and the work with this dissertation has been quite the journey. I have gained both knowledge and experience, and although it has been both lonely and frustrating the work has also been rewarding, worthwhile, and sometimes even fun. I am very grateful that the interview participants and questionnaire respondents decided to take the time to share a piece of their lives with me, without them there would be nothing to write about.

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Part 1

Introduction, methods, and yoga history

1 Introduction

This dissertation is an in-depth exploration of yoga teachers and yoga practitioners in the Nordic countries. I look at three interconnected questions, namely *who* Nordic yoga teachers and practitioners are, *why* they have started practicing yoga, and *what* yoga means to them. I also explore respondents' beliefs and belonging, both to traditional religion, non-religion, and subjective spiritualities.

There are several reasons why I have chosen yoga as a dissertation topic. I have never taught yoga, but over the last decade I have tried many styles ranging from power yoga in my undergraduate days, to Iyengar-inspired yoga on various rooftops around India, and on to Ashtanga yoga. I have always been interested in who my fellow yoga practitioners are, and why they have decided to start practicing. Therefore, now that yoga has become ubiquitous in popular culture and is a growing field of academic study, modern postural yoga (MPY) emerged as an interesting theme for my dissertation.

The respondents who contribute to this dissertation are practitioners of modern postural yoga (MPY). Yoga scholar Elizabeth De Michelis coined the MPY term in her 2004 volume *A History of Modern Yoga*, as she was subdividing her main category (modern yoga) into four main types.¹ Postural yogis' primary emphasis is yoga *asanas* (yoga postures). Yoga scholar, teacher and entrepreneur Jannicke Wiel (2020) writes that physical yoga is by far the most common form of yoga in the contemporary west, where it is found in gyms, yoga studios, health centers and spa hotels (to this, I would add popular culture and social media, as well as the tourism industry). Wiel also writes that

The physical yoga, which is called *yogāsana* or yoga postures, was an aid for all the other forms of yoga. By keeping the body strong, healthy, moveable, and pain free through refining and channeling the energy along with breathing deeply and controlled, we were supposed to support the mind to immerse itself in meditation, insight into the self, devotion to something bigger, and egoless actions that could serve the community (2020, 11).

Wiel lets the reader know that the 'traditional' purpose of modern postural yoga is to be an aid for other forms of yoga, as the practitioner cultivates liberation, enlightenment,

¹ Modern Psychosomatic Yoga, Modern Meditational Yoga, Modern Denominational Yoga and Modern Postural Yoga.

knowledge, devotion and good actions. Elements of these other traditional yogic paths are integrated in how physical yoga is taught, where “[...] small kernels of the yoga of knowledge, of the heart, and of action show the attachment physical yoga has to the spiritual methods of liberation that are part of yoga in a bigger sense” (Wiel 2020, 11).

In the contemporary setting, however, postural yoga has become more than a complimentary practice. Physical yoga can be practiced in a completely secular fashion, without any attachment to religion or eastern philosophy. The perceived benefits are many. Yoga can be understood as exercise, as stress reduction, and/or as a way to gain better health. Physical yoga can also help practitioners to increase concentration, or perform better at sports, at work, or at school. That physical yoga can encompass the entire spectrum from a ‘spiritual method of liberation’ to secular gymnastics, depending on what the individual practitioner wants and needs, is an important aspect of why the activity has become so popular around the world. Yoga is a meaning-making activity which explicitly and implicitly is connected to religious tradition, contemporary secular-spiritual activities, and health concerns. However, like in any other human activity, the actors who have participated in this project do not necessarily agree on what exactly this ‘meaning’ is.

One of the conclusions from Religious Studies scholar Andrea Jain’s 2015 volume *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* is that yoga(s) are living, dynamic, and heterogeneous traditions that are deeply embedded in, shape, and are shaped by their social contexts. The insight gleaned from the respondents regarding their backgrounds and motivations for yoga may be illuminating both for future researchers and for those who practice yoga in some capacity, but who perhaps have not given particular thought to the complexity of this modern, transnational, gendered activity.

1.1 Previous research

Yoga has become a mainstream activity, and the field of Yoga Studies has grown alongside. Yoga Studies is a broad and interdisciplinary field, ranging from philology and history to anthropology, sociology, and health sciences. While I am aware of the work done on yoga from the fields of sports research, CAM, or medical science, in this research overview I focus primarily on scholarship from the history and sociology of religion and the growing field of interdisciplinary yoga research, the majority from an Anglophone context. While there has been important scholarship on yoga in the last century (see for example Eliade 1958), it is only in the last twenty years or so the field of yoga studies has come into its own. Since then, scholarship has burgeoned, and many well-written and well-researched works on yoga have been published. I return to previous research many times throughout the dissertation – and therefore I in this introduction mention only a few works.

In this dissertation I have chosen to build primarily on the work of researchers who focus on the development of modern postural yoga (MPY), and whose perspectives on the practice encompass thinking about religion and spirituality, health, consumption, authority, and individuality. Much of the research on modern yoga focus on Anglophone areas, especially North America and the UK. The work of Elizabeth De Michelis has been important, particularly in describing the field and its research history, and in categorizing MPY. Suzanne Newcombe's work has been invaluable for this dissertation. Newcombe has provided articles and books from the UK and European context, with a historical and sociological point of view and a gender perspective. Mark Singleton's (2010) book *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, along with Andrea Jain's 2015 volume *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*, have been central in determining the direction of this dissertation. Singleton (2010) has traced the historical development of postural yoga from pre-modern India into its modern, multi-origin, transnational, masculine-connoted phase. Jain (2015) has picked up the thread where Singleton left off and examined yoga in a North American context. Jain highlights that MPY has developed from an elite, countercultural phenomenon to a mainstream, pop-cultural, feminine-connoted activity.

In a sense I pick up where Jain (2015) ended, shifting the focus from a North American to a North European context. The Nordic countries are deeply influenced by Anglophone popular culture, and modern postural yoga is increasingly mainstream here as well. However, yoga in the Nordic countries is arguably an under-researched subject. The research from the Nordic

context I have engaged with focuses primarily on ethnography of practitioners in Mysore, India (Langøien 2013), on yoga practitioners' motivations for practice (Steen Haugen 2016), and a general historical overview (Wiel 2020). However, apart from Henriette Bjerrum and Maja Pilgaard's (2014) report on Danish yoga practitioners there is not (as far as I know) any work that combines qualitative and quantitative data with a focus on demographics, religious and non-religious background, yoga 'conversion,' and subjective spiritualities in the way I do in this dissertation.

1.2 An overview of the dissertation

1.2.1 Part one: methods and historical overview

Part one of the dissertation, which includes this introduction, presents the methods I have used, and a brief historical overview of yoga. In the chapter on methods, I reflect on Yoga Questionnaire, qualitative, thematic, open-ended, active interview (Marander-Eklund 2004; Holstein and Gubrium 1995), and research ethics.

The project begun with developing the Yoga Questionnaire (YQ, Nordic residency practitioners, N=170). This online questionnaire (hosted on the SurveyMonkey platform) covers a wide variety of themes related to demographics, yoga practice, traditional religion, and 'alternative' ideas and beliefs. A questionnaire, by default, provides different perspectives than interviews. The questionnaire has provided me with a wealth of data, of which I use only a certain amount. I have chosen not to apply statistical tools to the questionnaire material, beyond the very easiest of operations regarding demography and the like. Rather, I have shifted focus to the qualitative aspects of the questionnaire material.

The second stage of the project method was to host seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews, with altogether eight yoga teachers and/ or practitioners. The first question I asked in most interviews is what does yoga mean to you? The ensuing conversations offered snapshots of how practitioners talk, feel about, and understand their practice and their spiritual concerns. They reflect upon what body, soul, and spirit is, upon gender, health, and ritual, and on what relevance yoga practice can hold both for an individual and in a social/ cultural perspective. I chose the open and exploratory interview method because this method provides data that is complementary to what the questionnaire gives. In interviews, I could move deeper into respondents' narratives and give room for complexity and diversity.

I transcribed, analyzed, and compared the interviews, to identify overlapping themes. The excerpts I have used in the text were translated into English as needed. In addition to the interviews, I have recorded, transcribed, and analyzed a few lectures and question-and-answer/ non-structured group interview sessions from yoga workshops. These are not referred to in the text, but primarily used as background material. Research ethics is also a core part of methodology, and in the methods chapter, I reflect on aspects of selecting and protecting the informants, sensitive data and data storage and access.

In the third chapter I present a brief history of yoga. The chapter starts with a short introduction to pre-historical yoga and moves on to an examination of modern yoga and important figures and trends in the formation of the field. Authority, lineage, and historical legitimation has been core themes in the formation of modern yoga. These aspects continue to be important in the contemporary setting, as practitioners are socialized into a yoga milieu and lifestyle. These processes also provide various yoga ‘brands’ with a sense of authenticity, and yoga gurus with the means and methods to propagate their teachings. In the historical introduction, gender emerges as an important theme. Historically males dominated yoga, but through the story of Indra Devi the readers find out how modern *asana* practices diversified and popularized, and increasingly became the domain of women (and western women in particular). A history of yoga in the west is also connected to esoteric and New Age cultural currents, and yoga’s development from elite to popular culture.

1.2.2 Part two: demographics and yoga conversion

The chapters in part two explore different aspects of the yogic life. The red thread is the individual actor navigating and negotiating identity and social connections within a socio-cultural field filled with different narratives and discourses. These chapters show that although respondents on some levels are similar in terms of demographics, they emphasize different motivations and meanings.

Part two begins with a chapter on the demographics of the yoga practitioners who have participated in this research project. It becomes apparent that respondents belong to a particular segment of the population. The majority are female, very highly educated, politically progressive, relatively green, and left leaning. If they are not yoga teachers they generally work in white-collar professions, and some of them spend significant amounts of money on yoga in a year. They practice all forms of modern postural yoga, and many respondents have practiced for a long time.

The two following chapters (5 and 6) highlight interactions between a social milieu and respondents' own attitudes and motivations, as I explore why respondents have taken up a yoga practice and what the practice has 'given' them. This part draws on themes that are well known in religious studies, using conversion as a governing metaphor. The reader may balk at my choice of conversion theory and terminology to analyze yoga, as the very word conversion is deeply tied to religion. However, as yoga is not religion *per se* (neither in respondents' perspectives nor in my opinion), I do not address conversion in the traditional fashion. Rather, I examine which perspectives a theorization of conversion can offer to the pieces of life stories that emerge in yoga research.

Starting with yoga is a process. The processual perspective is visible in the material, as the data is what Ann Taves (2011 [2009]) calls 'post-hoc' – that is, self-reports that take place after the events. Respondents describe their experiences in the process of becoming a yoga practitioner. It varies how well respondents remember the process, what they have chosen to report in the questionnaire and in interviews, and how they have interpreted the 'conversion' process. However, this line of inquiry has proven illuminating regarding both conversion – and motivational factors, and the many functions a MPY practice can have.

The data in these chapters primarily comes from the Yoga Questionnaire (Item 32, 33, and 34), although interview data figure prominently in some sections. The relevant questionnaire items are a mix of 'forced' factor questions and open-ended items. The latter have generated useful qualitative data, as respondents in their own words have commented on how and why they started practicing. When looking at the forced categories (32, 33) in relation to the open-ended answers in Item 34 it becomes clear that many respondents have had multiple points of contact with yoga.² However, three major factors emerge from the material: respondents start yoga to seek better health and/ or healing (primary factor N=47, secondary factor N=25), respondents see yoga as a social activity³ (primary factor N=77, secondary factor N= 45). Media is also an important avenue in the dissemination of yoga (primary factor N=27, secondary factor N=24), and is treated briefly in chapter 8. Mass media is a core feature of

² Some of these I had not considered when making the questionnaire, such as yoga for exercise (or as a practice complementary to other forms of exercise), compound 'secular-spiritual' experiences, spiritual travel, and explicit connections to meditation.

³ Initial point of contact: friend, relative, partner/ spouse, professional contact, student group, co-worker

globalization, with a dynamic that influences both religious practice and recruitment (Gooren 2010, 8).

To categorize and analyze health – and social factors I have turned to the literature, more specifically Henri Gooren's (2010) work on religious involvement and conversion. Some of the factors he presents in the volume converge neatly with the material from my study. Starting a yoga practice seeking better health is an *individual and/ or contingency factor* and becoming introduced to the practice through a friend (or in a few cases, family or co-worker/ professional contact), or meeting yoga through the social practice of traveling, is a *social factor* (Gooren 2010, 139). Chapter 5 examines the individual/ contingency factor of yoga as a health-promoting practice, first through respondents' views on yoga as exercise and as a mind-body practice. I then address respondents' health issues, such as stress, muscular/skeletal problems, chronic illnesses, mental health, and addiction. The chapter ends with a discussion of perspectives on yoga in the light of a modern health paradigm, and gendering of fitness and exercise.

The importance of friends and family is well known from conversion literature (Lofland and Stark 1965, Dawson 2003, Gooren 2010). For the respondent this means being introduced to yoga by someone in her/ his social circle – such as family, friends, or even random acquaintances. The social factor is a core or complementary factor in almost all yoga conversion narratives. In this chapter I look at social factors as a structure that moves the discussion from an individual, somatic perspective to a focus on the wider social context of yoga practice. Becoming (and staying) a yoga practitioner is a way of relating to the world and creating and maintaining an identity in relation to one's social context.

The social factor in yoga conversion also includes travel. The travel motif was an unexpected result from the YQ, and therefore worth attending to. Encountering yoga when traveling and using travel and retreats as a motivating factor for continued yoga practice, is something that many respondents mention. In this chapter I place travel yogis into different (but interrelated) categories and discuss what traveling can mean in terms of place and identity building. Traveling and retreats are discussed as liminal and liminoid experiences, and Mysore is used as a 'case study' for a form of yoga pilgrimage that is intimately connected to issues of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986), authenticity, and exoticism/ neo-orientalism.

1.2.3 Part three: religion, non-religion, and subjective spiritualities

Part 3 presents and discusses respondents' relations and attitudes to Christianity and non-religion in the first chapter, and subjective or 'inner life' spiritualities (Heelas 2007) in the second.

Chapter 7 focuses on the religion(s), if any, respondents have grown up and been socialized into. In the Nordic context, this means Christianity and non-religion – and in this chapter I discuss varieties of religion and secularity that are particular to the Nordic context. The main trend is that a majority of respondents have grown up in a very low-intensity form of State Church Christianity but has later chosen to leave organized religion behind. A significant number define themselves as non-religious. However, the religion that is present in the material is largely an open, non-dogmatic, individualistic form of Christianity.

The last chapter in part 3 engages with the material that comes closest to an expression of New Age culture, alternative religion, or occulture. Negotiations between the collective and the individual continue to be important as I move the narrative from respondents' childhood religion (or non-religion) to their current, adult, subjective spiritualities. Chapter 8 is saturated with data from the YQ and interviews. Beginning with a short discussion of yoga spirituality, I find that the picture is diverse. As a general tendency, respondents tend to be influenced by the style or brand of yoga they practice, and how important philosophy/ spirituality is within that brand. A couple of interviewees belong to esoteric or sectarian brands, where socially coded 'alternative' ideas on metaphysics and the subtle body are accepted. General MPY practitioners, however, tend to be less explicitly spiritual, and focus more on the physical (*asana*) practice.

A majority of respondents self-define as some form of spiritual, and it seems that an interest in spirituality is the provenance of adolescence and adulthood. Among the 'spiritual options' in the material Buddhism is highly popular. Meditation is a large factor, and (a particular western interpretation of) Buddhist philosophy, ethics, and practices are used by several respondents as a way of living a better and more mindful life.

The YQ contains some belief items, and in this chapter, it becomes clear that instead of traditional Christian beliefs in God or an afterlife the majority hold vaguer notions which focus on energy and unity with the universe. A similar pattern is found with spiritual experiences, where lighter, low-intensity experiences (that are not socially coded as 'deviant')

or particularly alternative) are the most popular. I also attempt to measure engagement with so-called alternative spirituality through respondents' consumption of media, activities, techniques, and therapies. Among the books, websites and research topics respondents engage with it is not surprising that yoga and Buddhist literature is the most common. Astrology is the only form of divination with a significant foothold in the material, and (apart from yoga and meditation) it varies widely whether other forms of techniques, therapies and activities are popular. About half of the respondents can be categorized as (emphatic) non-seekers. The rest have various degrees of connection to what can be termed spiritual seekership (Sutcliffe 2000, 2008).

An important finding is that for respondents there is a difference between subjective spirituality and 'alternative' or New Age beliefs and practices. A surprising number of respondents are critical to calling their beliefs, experiences, or practices alternative. Looking at respondents' self-definitions and attitudes, I have categorized about half of respondents *spiritual-but-not-alternative*.

2 Methods, material, and ethical considerations

2.1 Introduction

Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (2014 [2011], 4-5) write about methods that they are the ‘rules of the game’ in work of a scholarly nature. The etymology of the word is Greek, from *meta* ‘after’ and *odos* ‘way’ – that is, a particular way of doing something. In research, methods refer to an organized, ‘generally accepted mode of procedure’ for gathering (constructing, collecting and/ or generating) data. Stausberg and Engler (2014) are very clear that data cannot exist independently of theories or methods. The scholarly methods available to the researcher is simultaneously used to construct and analyze data. In that sense, by “[...] partially producing the realities they then go about to analyze, methods are performative” (2014, 4-5).

Methods, as such, are performative both in that they *do* something (create data), and that they prescribe something that researchers do (the way to create data). In this project, the way data has been created is through using open-ended, thematic interviews and an online questionnaire. The data is primarily qualitative, although the questionnaire data contains a small measure of quantitative possibility. Through an active interview process and online data collection I have attempted a strategy of data analysis focused on meaning making through complex discursive activity (Holstein and Gubrium 1995), where I aim to understand how yoga practitioners and teachers reflect on their yoga practice.

In the questionnaire, my pre-conceived notions of what yoga is and how it may function has deeply informed which questions I have asked, and the way I have formulated them. It is interesting to note that questionnaire respondents (in particular) often have seen my perspectives and/ or bias in the construction and disagreed with my choices. The face-to-face situation of an interview leaves much more room for clarification and negotiation about the terms for - and content of the data that is created. While preparing and conducting the interviews, I have employed (both consciously and subconsciously) a constructivist perspective – locating the realm of knowledge construction in the space between interviewee and interviewer. In the interviews, I have met less overt criticism for my own biases, although they very much have been a part of the conversation and situation. However, compared to a questionnaire, an interview is a site for self-construction to a much higher degree, where the duration and form has allowed respondents to express themselves and the ambiguities in their perspective.

This chapter begins with a reflection over the interview process, and how participants have been located and recruited. The second part of the chapter revolves around the online questionnaire. The Yoga Questionnaire was the first part of the data collection for this thesis, producing both qualitative and quantitative data. The third part of the chapter takes up research ethics, where I detail the aspects of academic accountability that has been relevant to this dissertation.

2.2 The interview process

2.2.1 Practical aspects

The eight qualitative interviews that comprise the main empirical material of this dissertation were conducted in a relatively small town in Norway over a period of about nine months, in the fall semester of 2016 and the spring semester of 2017. The respondents were chosen because they belong to different traditions and practice different forms of yoga. Most interviewees also teach their preferred style. Respondents' age and experience vary widely. Most interviewees are female, which reflects the gender ratio in the yoga milieu. However, to ensure diversity and complexity in the data material I have been mindful to include men.

The interviews were carried out face-to-face, some at the university where I work and others at different cafés in town. Some of the informants are local, others were in town for yoga workshops or similar events. One interview was conducted over Skype, with a German informant who contacted me after seeing the Yoga Questionnaire, and who would rather be interviewed than filling out a long online survey. All interviews were conducted with a single informant, except interview 6 which is a conversation between two informants where I as an interviewer take a background position. All interviews were recorded using my cellphone and transcribed afterwards. The shortest interview, the one conducted on Skype, lasted for about 45 minutes. The rest of the conversations are significantly longer, on average two hours. In addition to the eight interviews, I conducted a (focus) group conversation and recorded a 'philosophy talk' with a yoga teacher.⁴

⁴ None of these is used in the text, but function as empirical background material. The talk and the focus group were conducted and recorded in the fall of 2016, during a workshop at a yoga studio.

The focus group conversation came about at a workshop I attended, where the teacher and several workshop participants agreed to join the conversation and let me record the proceedings. I provided the group with basic information about my study, and although the participants did not sign a participation agreement, I got their informed consent.

The philosophy talk, focus group session, and two of the interviews were conducted in English, and the remaining interviews were conducted in Norwegian. I have chosen to transcribe all interviews and background material, in full, and in the original language. Transcribing the material in full took a lot of time, and I did underestimate how time consuming and exhausting transcription is. However, the transcription work became an inseparable part of the analytical process (Marander-Eklund 2004). Already in the transcription categorization work began and different themes started to emerge. I worked with the interviews in physical format using Magic Markers in different colors for different themes, and I used a computer program (Nvivo) for simple word searches and categorizations. Working through the material several times helped me to gain control and to find recurring themes – both where they repeat and where they vary (Marander-Eklund 2004).

Because over half of the material is in Norwegian, it has been necessary to do some translation into English. I have attempted to keep the translation as close to the original transcription as possible to retain the ‘tone’ of the interviews -- while at the same time render them legible in English. Invariably, some nuances will have been lost in the process. However, although I do not provide the original Norwegian material in the dissertation, the original interviews can become available by application to NSD (Norwegian Center for Research Data). In this case it becomes possible for readers and other researchers to double check that my translations are good enough, and that I have not misunderstood or obscured anything. Open access to the research data is an important facet of research accountability, but the details in the participation agreement and respondents’ privacy does not allow me to publish my research data openly.

2.2.2 The interviewer: self-localization, reflexivity, and access

The double optic of being a researcher (and outsider⁵) and a practitioner (a relative insider) has influenced the interviews and the research process. In a fieldwork situation (which in this case includes interviews), a semi-insider position means that I am part of the milieu under scrutiny. This position has a positive aspect, namely access to the field, which the fully etic

⁵ The concepts of insider-outsider can partially be connected to the conceptual schema of emic and etic, originally coined by Kenneth Pike in 1954. Emic here is a development of the concept *phonemic*, which means ‘sound-like,’ and etic from *phonetic*; a linguistic term for the science of language sounds (Marander-Eklund 2004, 104).

researcher (who describes a culture completely from the outside) may find difficult to replicate.

A practical way of explaining access to a field is to use Erving Goffman's (1959) stage metaphors. The ideal for a researcher is to gain access to the 'backstage' of the social group in question, where the 'inner life' of its actors play out. My previous knowledge of the core teachings, concerns, and debates within the postural yoga milieu has helped to sharpen my foci and the directions this research project has taken, and I believe that I through a semi-insider position has been permitted high access to informants, which has allowed me to gather new data. Balancing insider- and outsider positions is quite common in the study of new religions, new age, and esotericism – and increasingly also in yoga studies, where the position of the scholar-practitioner is common. Being familiar is not the same as being *too* familiar.

At the same time, in my position as a researcher I build awareness of yoga as a cultural activity and 'social game' that allows me to be critical in my analyses – because there is a potential for negative consequences to the semi-insider position. The insider-outsider debate has been considered a core topic in theory and methods since the development of religious studies as a separate scientific field. In this dissertation, I have tried to avoid the type of insider perspective that can lead to apologetic scholarship or theology, and where the critical distance to the object of study evaporates. Another example could be the assumption that yoga practitioners are a homogenous group that share a similar language and common ideas, goals, and belief systems. This is quite simply not the case.

In the research process, I have tried to become aware of my own 'blind spots' and pre-conceived notions – and to be critical of my own position. Research on emic premises wants to understand and interpret culture on its own terms. However, rather than speaking from 'inside' the language of yoga, I use academic vocabulary, theory, and methods to look at the phenomenon. In the process I have been aware that the data has been sourced and treated from a position of access, and a certain type of knowledge/ familiarity. As expected, this has given the data a certain flavor. As a researcher I am trained to do a structured approach to a topic, with a high level of self-reflexivity and critical distance. This, I hope, is the antidote to overly apologetic perspectives.

2.2.3 Locating and recruiting participants

2.2.3.1 Email and face-to-face recruitment

I have located and recruited informants over a long period, and I have used several different approaches. One respondent was recruited via the questionnaire. This respondent (Informant 3, “Ella”) decided to contact me in person instead of filling in the long online form. The interview was conducted over Skype, and functioned reasonably well, despite physical distance. I used email and social media not only to spread the questionnaire, but also as an interview recruitment strategy. Informant number 4, “Simon”, I contacted by email. The email contact was successful because this informant and I were somewhat acquainted from before, and there was already some rapport built based on surface familiarity.

There are some drawbacks with email and social media as a recruitment strategy. Generally, the failed connections have been ‘snowballed’ to me by mutual friends or acquaintances and have had little interest in the project. These potential respondents have largely not replied to messages or emails, and I therefore I chose not to pursue these connections. Overall, potential respondents I have contacted using social media or email have been less willing to participate. Most interview respondents were recruited through face-to face interaction. Generally, it seems like informants were happy to be asked to participate, and before and during interviews most respondents affirmed the need for more research on yoga. A potential drawback using the face-to-face recruitment method is that a respondent can find it difficult to decline. A negative response (in certain contexts) can lead to what Goffman (1959) terms “losing face” (publicly suffering a weakened self-image) by being impolite or unforthcoming.

Recruiting my first informants was a daunting experience. I found informant 1 and 2 at a yoga festival, which I attended in the early stages of the project. I had put up posters and added ‘business cards’ with my contact information and some info about the project into festival goers’ goodie bags. The first few days I had very little luck recruiting. I found the thought of approaching random people and ask them to participate to be quite uncomfortable – so I decided not to do it and just give up. However, the posters and notes must have worked. I was sitting in the lounge with a cup of tea when a man who looked to be in his early fifties came by and asked if he could share the table. We greeted each other, and when he realized who I was, he said something to the effect that he *knew*, or somehow had the feeling/ intuition that he was going to participate in this research project. This informant was also the first one I

interviewed. In this project, I have given him the name “Tom,” and together with respondent 2, “Sara,” he was important in determining which way the project would take, and in teaching me how to do an interview in a style that works for both parties.

Sara was recruited at the same yoga festival. I had small-talked with her several times already, and as I was browsing the gift shop area I decided to ask if she could be interested in participating in my research. Sara, in accordance with her bubbly personality, was positive. Both Tom and Sara’s interviews took place in my office at the university and lasted about two hours each. In pre-interview communication, I gave the informants the choice whether they wanted to come to the university, or meet somewhere else (like their yoga studios, or at a café). Both respondents chose to come to my office, and I did not specifically ask for a reason. Conducting the interviews on my home turf was quite reassuring for me, as I in first interviews had not yet really found my footing yet. I relied quite heavily on a short interview guide I had made, which was both practical and constraining.

During the first interview with Tom, I found that the interview guide questions were both too broad and too scholarly. Although I received answers to most of the questions, I was left with the feeling that there could have been a lot more *conversation* happening. The urge to follow the interview guide sometimes made me change subject prematurely. At times the respondent stopped following what could have been an interesting line of thought to return to the question from the interview guide. Sara’s interview the day after felt easier, as I knew more about how the interview would progress. The useful experience from Tom’s interview helped me to feel safer and more competent in the interview situations that followed. With Sara I still used the interview guide, but I was able to respond better to themes brought up by the informant. In subsequent interviews I stopped using the interview guide altogether.

2.2.3.2 The interaction door and stage changes

Respondents 5, 6, and 7/ 8 had all known about the project for some time and agreed to participate when either they or I brought up the research project in casual conversation. Small talk creates possibilities for recruitment. Henriksen and Tøndel (2017; Henriksen 2015) describe one such possibility, which they call the ‘interaction door.’⁶ The interaction door is the moment when a potential informant is open to contact, and the researcher can approach

⁶ In Norwegian, *interaksjonsdør*

the and ask about participation. The interaction door is a quite common-sense approach that most people use in their everyday social life. However, although Henriksen and Tøndel (2017) use this concept quite specifically in the context of spontaneous in-depth interviews in a public place (coffee houses and cafes), it has become a useful theoretical concept in this project as well – which I have used to determine who, where, and when I could bring up a question of research participation.

In all physical communication there are certain ‘breaks’ or pauses. These can be understood as germinal moments where contact can be initiated.⁷ In the context of their article where potential informants sit and work at cafes, Henriksen and Tøndel (2017) note that an interaction door can open for example when a (potential) informant takes a break, stretches, looks up and around (at nothing), yawns, and perhaps starts moving around. That is the point the researcher must identify. The researcher interprets the physical signals for ‘break’ and the opening of the interaction door. Then, the researcher can enter and make contact.

Similar strategies became important for me when recruiting informants. I was more than pleased when I found the concept of the interaction door, which explains what I have been doing in face-to-face recruitment all along. When recruiting I used breaks, pauses, and openings, but in contexts somewhat different to those described by Tøndel and Henriksen (2017). In yoga contexts, stage changes (ibid.) such as break times or waiting for a class to start have been important as they are casual and informal moments for small talk. When talking to a particular person I looked for a small break or pause in the conversation when it felt ‘natural’ to bring up my research. If the potential informant seemed attentive, I would ask if they were interested in participating in an interview.

Examples of how I have used the interaction door often comes with the featuring of an actual door. To recruit informant 6, for example, I walked in the door to a *shala* to attend a

⁷ The interaction door concept is related to Erving Goffman’s (1963) term ‘interaction shield’, where bodily signifiers/ body language determines an unwillingness to be in contact with/ talk to other people. Most people are intimately familiar with interactions shields. Some are physical objects and thus immediately obvious, such as a newspaper, a book, or most commonly, the cell phone. Earphones and sunglasses can also be effective interaction shields. However, what Goffman (1963) specifically refers to is rather subtle body language, which we as social actors nevertheless are well equipped to read (albeit often in a sub-conscious manner). Averted gaze or a refusal to look ‘your way’, or something as simple as not maintaining eye contact, are effective interactions shields. Likewise, closed off body language or a body that is turned away quite clearly communicates unwillingness to interact.

workshop talk on yoga philosophy. When I entered, I immediately met “Nadia” and started talking to her as I removed my shoes and put away my jacket. We chatted about how the workshop was progressing, and if we found the group discussions interesting and helpful. Nadia then talked about an experience that was relevant for my dissertation, and I decided immediately to ask her to elaborate on her thoughts in an interview. The informant (with almost no hesitation) agreed.

The recruitment process of informant 7 (“Therese”) (and, inadvertently, informant 8, “Linda”) took place during a workshop tea break. In this case, the potential respondent opened the interaction door herself, and her interest in my research made it easy to ask for an interview. This interview turned out to be special. I had agreed to meet the informant at a café after the workshop had ended for the day. When I arrived, I saw that she had brought another friend who also participated in the workshop. After I explained my research project and my thoughts on the interview process, I turned on my phone recorder and asked my introductory question – and let the conversation progress naturally from there.

2.2.3.3 Discussion

Where does the meaning-making process begin? It would seem to start with us, with how we, as researchers, choose to orient the interview process (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, 19).

The research project is theoretically saturated to some degree, in the sense of its use in qualitative research as a “[...] criterion for discontinuing data collection and/or analysis” (Saunders et al. 2018, 1894). In its original meaning the concept stems from grounded theory, for the instance where respondents no longer bring ‘new’ data to the table and thus nothing new to the categories under question/ development. In the data collection and respondent recruitment process I did not think explicitly about saturation. Rather I let the process be more implicit and organic, and when I felt that the combination between interviews and the questionnaire had offered me enough data, I stopped the interviews. The questionnaire was open longer, but due to time and geographical limitations I capped the respondent number at 170.

An important part of the interview process is locating and recruiting participants. I tried to ensure that the participants were reasonably representative and came with knowledge that is

relevant for the theme of the study. However, in opposition to representativeness in the traditional sense where informants are expected to speak for their segment of the population, and where their answers ideally should be objective and generalizable, the active interview method adds importance to individuality, competence, and co-creation of knowledge (Marander-Eklund 2004, Holsten and Gubrium 1995).

Ideally, the interviewer and interviewee are co-creators and co-organizers of meaning. During the interviews, I have done my best to be a competent asker of questions and an attentive listener, with a flexible approach to the interview process. The respondent in kind have offered not only experiential facts and data to the best of their knowledge and have fashioned these into narratives. The ability to create, share and understand narratives requires high competence, both culturally and interpersonally, and luckily for social science researchers, this competence is something most people have. In the active interview, shared *personhood/ people-ness* is the foundation of respondent selection, in that everybody has a story to share. “The premise that interviewing aims to incite narrative production suggests a general orientation to respondent selection, one that precedes the traditional concern for the representativeness of a sample” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, 25). In other words, in addition to (and more than) choosing respondents as representative of a specific cohort/ sample, respondents are first selected based on their ‘people-ness’. Moreover, by selecting *people* as respondents instead of solely as representatives of a particular population, I as an interviewer actively confer value to their individual differences.

Competence is an important term. From a research ethics perspective, competence is a key concept – as it is the researcher’s responsibility to ensure participants’ informed consent. NESH guidelines (2016) clearly state the problems of relying on informants who are vulnerable, and whose self-determination (which is, one could argue, an important aspect of competence) is somehow impaired or not yet fully formed; be it regarding for example people suffering from serious mental illness or dementia, or children. For this project, however, participants are all adults, have received information about the projects and its goals, and have consented to participate in the research – with the knowledge that they can withdraw at any time. This means that I, as the recruiter and interviewer for this project, have assigned competence to the participants based on their status regarding meaning making, visibility and availability, ethics, and agency. In other words, informants a) are narrative subjects with the ability to tell their story, b) belong to a pool/ cohort of yoga practitioners in a particular

location, and c) are informed and consenting adults. In the context of this dissertation these premises are, in a sense, silent ones, and part of a pre-narrowing of the pool of potential respondents. As the theme of the dissertation is yoga, it is logically following from the method that the respondents would have to be yoga practitioners, and that they would have to be adults with all that entails. However, in addition to the silent selection, there are also several active, loud processes of respondent selection happening simultaneously. These processes have to do with *whom* I have chosen (or who have chosen this project), and *how* they have come to participate. These active processes are the theme of the next section.

In the recruitment process I made sure to select respondents who I was not particularly familiar with. However, except for the Skype respondent, I knew who most of them were before recruiting them. “Familiar, but not too much” was an important balance to strike in this project, both in terms of research ethics and for the value of the collected data. Had I recruited close friends as informants, as it would have been difficult to maintain analytical distance. Such material would not have been less valuable, perhaps even the opposite, as a situation of previously established familiarity and trust would have brought out rich information. However, with familiarity comes confidentiality issues, and a situation of being *too familiar* would have made it easier to draw on my previous knowledge, and (unwittingly) share too much of their personal data. Ethical boundaries are easier to maintain when there is a little bit of distance between the interview participant and the researcher and engaging a professional role instead of a friend role has helped in maintaining proper boundaries.

The choice of venue, especially whether it is a public place or not, may have influenced the content of the interviews – as some themes can be difficult to discuss in a public place. A benefit of doing an interview in a public place can be related to personal information and privacy. If a respondent is willing to say what they say in a public location where they potentially can be overheard by strangers, and in addition lets the interview be recorded, I as a researcher feels quite confident that I can freely use the information they provide for my (within the bounds of anonymity and privacy protection). I have been somewhat more careful with the interviews conducted at the university and in a more private setting – as these did provide data that is a little more personal.

2.2.4 The open-ended, thematic interview

The interviews in this project are classically qualitative and as Geertz (1973) would say, relatively “thick.” The interviews are not descriptive in the sense Geertz originally intended, but they generate detailed and many-faceted data. The interviews are relatively few. However, an approach with fewer but longer and more detailed interviews is useful because the foci and analyses I have chosen to do require less material than a one-dimensional analysis (Marander-Eklund 2004, 105). The accompanying data set emerging from the Yoga Questionnaire has given me material that is very broad, but in a traditionally qualitative sense quite shallow. The different data sets are complementary and consider both generalized structures and individual experience.

In qualitative methods different types of interviews with varying degrees of structure are used. Marander-Eklund (2004, 96-97) lists several types, ranging from very structured questionnaires (somewhat uncommon in qualitative research, more common in mixed-methods research) to the other end of the scale with so-called open or free interviews. The latter type happens fully on the informants’ premises, with very little interference from the interviewer. After discarding the structured interview guide after the first two interviews, I ended up on the middle of the scale with what Marander-Eklund (2004) calls a thematic interview. I have aspired, however, towards openness rather than structure.

A thematic interview is half-structured, focusing on a theme (or, in this case a broad, overarching theme, and a few sub-themes), but with no fixed questions. I have usually started the interviews by asking the participants “What does yoga mean to you?” and (as much as possible) let respondents control the conversation. I have asked follow-up questions based primarily on themes the participants have brought up, although at times I have changed themes completely, if there was a question (for example concerning gender) I wanted an answer to. Tova Olsson (2018) notes that in her interviews with yoga teachers she used a strategy of “[...] conscious naiveté, focus, and delicacy [...] and sought, without overlooking the foundational presumptions of the conversation, a freshness in the meeting, that I hoped was made possible through an openness and denuded listening” (2018, 39⁸). Olsson also started her interviews with a question (in her case, “talk about how you first came into contact with yoga?”) but used a stricter interview guide and more specific questions. In the interview

⁸ My translation. Here, Olsson also refers to Brinkmann and Kvale 2014.

process(es) for this dissertation I attempted much the same as Olsson (2018) – a form of epoché or bracketing where I tried to keep in mind the aims of the interview, while at the same time temporarily suspend my pre-conceived notions and listen very actively to the interviewees. Some core concepts here are flexibility and dialogue.

In some interviews I have been a passive interviewer and almost absent in the conversation (interview 5, two participants), and in others I have been very present and involved (interview 4). An ideal eventually emerged, where I aimed to let the conversation progress as seamlessly as possible and feel less like a structured and guided interview. This means that I have had broader themes and topics in mind that I have steered the conversation towards, while at the same time playing by ear.

I have attempted to be present and engaged in the interview-conversations. Being ‘in’ the conversation and explaining (and negotiating) my research aims has helped me clarify important areas and themes. I have consciously tried to be open to new thoughts and ideas emerging in conversation, and to be an active listener. One of the methods I used to stay engaged and natural in the conversation was to leave the recorder running (as unobtrusively as possible), and otherwise talk normally and not take notes. The aim was that participants could be open, feel comfortable, and partake freely in the conversation. Choosing a method where I allowed my interviewees to take charge of the conversation has come very naturally to me. Marander-Eklund (2004) highlights this as a useful technique. “In the interview situation it is important to let the interviewee speak, and not unnecessarily interrupt. Do not outtalk him/her. Do not be afraid of long breaks, but rather let the interviewee think” (Marander-Eklund 2004, 98-99).

How an interview is structured is dependent on what kind of knowledge the investigator is looking for. I have not looked for a uniting narrative, as one may find in a chronological *life history* interview, although the interviews for this dissertation have strong aspects of the *life story* – wherein respondents present themselves and talk about their lives (Marander-Eklund 2004). I do not see interviews only (or mainly) as a way of mining for information, it is rather a social situation where knowledge is co-created. An interview is processual, dialogical, and often a negotiation. Apart from the standard opening question and a few themes (like spirituality and gender) I decided that flexibility is key.

This flexible approach can be criticized. Instead of being unfocused I could have gathered viable data in a more limited amount of time with a very strict interview guide. A structured approach means I could have interviewed more people who would have answered the same questions and made the work of categorizing, comparing, and contrasting answers easier. Another possible critique of this project (and against interview methods as such) is the unreliability of interview data. Henriksen and Tøndel (2016) note this in their article on spontaneous in-depth interviews, where they problematize the inflated “interview society” (Silverman 2005; Ryen 2012). The style of interviewing (especially in mass media) tends towards the rote and devoid of meaning (the authors use post-race interviews of sports people as an example). Therefore, instead of just jumping at the interview trend, researchers should rather consider whether interview data would answer the questions we ask.

Marander-Eklund (2004, 94) stresses that the dialogue between two (or more) people is never unbiased or without prejudice. It is guided by knowledge and expectations of participants’ cultural, social, and historical preconceptions, and of the context they find themselves in. I have not primarily been after whatever historical, lexical, or theoretical knowledge my informants possess (although that is interesting too), but rather their subjective and embodied beliefs and experiences of their own practice as people that do yoga, as teachers, and as part of a wider yoga community. Through an interview, it is possible to glimpse how these experiences are personified in a narrative, and the meanings informants ascribe to these events (Marander-Eklund 2004, 95).

Has the interview data answered the questions I ask? Yes, and even more it has opened new avenues of thinking and analysis. I tend to look at both methods and theory as a form of toolbox (Martin 2017), where I choose the proper tool for the task. In this dissertation the empirical material has largely been the generator of theoretical reflections and analysis, rather than the other way around. My interviewees have given their narratives, and it has been my task to facilitate their telling, transcribe the interviews, and through the analytical process locate and highlight relevant topics.

2.3 The Yoga Questionnaire: notes on method

The first part of the data collection in this project was the construction and dissemination of the online Yoga Questionnaire. To recruit informants, I located the email addresses of every yoga studio I could find in Norway, as well as some in Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. I sent out the link to the questionnaire, along with some information about the research project. In addition, I emailed some yoga studios in France and Germany. In addition to the email dissemination method, I snowballed the survey to friends and acquaintances in the academic world, people I knew personally on Facebook, and to several Facebook yoga groups. Email proved to be the most successful way of sharing the survey.

Although I sent the questionnaire much wider than the Nordic countries, I decided to use only the Nordic residency respondents for this dissertation (N=170). Partially this is because most responses come from this area. In addition, this choice narrowed the focus of the dissertation slightly, and permitted me to attend to some themes that may be particular to the Nordic cultural situation.

The questionnaire is long (63 questions) and quite detailed, with a mix of forced option/ 'tick the appropriate box' questions (with an option to comment) and open-ended items. The survey is obviously not one of a representative sample of practitioners, and it can at best give certain indications towards the make-up of a yoga scene or yoga community. However, because most respondents have invested a lot of time and effort in completing the questionnaire, a fair amount of qualitative data can be found. This is particularly visible in the open-ended questions. This type of question is good way for respondents to voice their own concerns and opinions, which many respondents have done.

The questionnaire language is English, although I gave the respondents the option to respond in any Scandinavian language. Allowances have been made for certain items (such as income, education, and political leanings/ voting) to function cross-culturally. In the questionnaire introduction, I have noted that respondents might find a few of the questions odd. This is in part because the questionnaire builds on studies of other spiritual milieus and smaller New Religious Movements (NRMs). Professor James R. Lewis has kindly provided help with the survey design.

Most items are sourced from various other questionnaires. Overall, the questionnaire design is similar to the New Age studies conducted by Stuart Rose in 1994-95 and Liselotte Frisk in 1995 (Rose 2005, Frisk 2000, 2003, 2007). While yoga is the focus of the Yoga Questionnaire, many of the same New Age topics are touched upon, ranging from demographics to conversion, engagement items (beliefs and practices), attitudes and consumption.⁹ Other items are drawn (in somewhat modified versions) from the US General Social Survey and from the Baylor Religion Survey.¹⁰ These items can also permit certain comparisons at a later point or for other researchers.

Specific questions have also been sourced from various other questionnaires. Here are some examples of 'New Age'-related items. No. 52, designed to measure interest in divinatory systems ("Which of the following have you found to really be of help to you?"), were phrased by Helen Berger in Berger and Lewis' 2009-2011 Pagan Census Revisited study (Berger 2010; 2011). Other items that aim to measure holistic healing and therapy activities, and items such as "Which of the following groups, activities, or therapies have you tried?" are from a slightly modified version of the 'holistic questionnaire' known from the Kendal study (Heelas *et al.* 2005). The questionnaire also contains a set of five items from the US General Social Survey (GSS), with a sixth item added by Bainbridge (2002) (Lewis and Utaaker 2017), all of which measure parapsychological experiences.

Measuring religion from questionnaire material is notoriously difficult. Peter Berger (2007, vi) notes that

[B]y their very nature surveys force respondents to make choices between categories designed by researchers who very commonly are remote from the social milieus of respondents and consequently are prone to misinterpret the responses. For example, scales of "orthodoxy" often leave respondents baffled as to where they should place themselves. Also, people who fill out questionnaires have been known to fiddle with the facts. Thus it has been shown that in

⁹ Frisk (2003, 2007) also touched upon lifestyle (vegetarianism, tobacco/alcohol/drug use) in her questionnaire, as well as items on politics and society. I have data on vegetarianism and other lifestyle/ conscious consumption choices as well as political participation and attitudes in the Yoga Questionnaire as well, but other than brief mentions in the demographics chapter, I have chosen not to engage with these items at length at this time.

¹⁰ <https://www.baylor.edu/baylorreligionsurvey/> (accessed 26.04.21)

regions of America where churchgoing has a positive status, people exaggerate their own church attendance. Conversely, in highly secularized Europe, people may understate their religious beliefs and practices. Survey data about a phenomenon as complex as religion give a very abstract picture – that is, a picture remote from the actual reality of people’s lives.

This is of course also a problem in this dissertation, and in the following chapters, it becomes clear that the parameters I have used for measuring religion and spirituality are not always very functional. However, what they do is to give an indication as to the religious landscape respondents inhabit, and what their attitudes are. For a questionnaire, the YQ has a high amount of qualitative data, and this feature to some extent qualifies Berger’s (2007) words of caution. Respondents may “fiddle with the facts” – but by offering some level of self-narration I have attempted to move the data input closer to the actual reality of respondents’ religious lives.

The design of the questionnaire permits some criticism. Some (potential) respondents have noted in email correspondence that the questionnaire is too long, and that they could not find the time to participate. The length, plus the English language and the rather demanding nature of the questionnaire has been a deterrent for potential respondents. Participating respondents have been critical as well, either for not being provided answer options that suited them, or for what they perceive as a “spirituality bias” in the questionnaire. Working with the questionnaire I have many times been surprised by the level of commitment and critical reasoning among respondents.

The data collection method has to some extent biased exactly this type of respondent. As the demographics chapter shows, YQ respondents are remarkably well-educated, and many work as yoga teachers or in sectors that demand long, specialized educations. It is easier to persuade people who have studied for some time and who have good language comprehension to fill in this type of questionnaire. Not only are they more motivated, but they also understand what academic research entails and what the researcher can or cannot find. By sending out the questionnaire to yoga studios, yoga teachers and studio owners have become a (disproportionally) high part of the sample. I also asked respondents to snowball the questionnaire to their networks, which can account for some bias towards respondents with long personal practices or who are teachers.

2.4 Research ethics

Any researcher is obligated to comply with the ethical demands in her field and aim to develop research ethical reflection and good scientific practice. The Norwegian NESH guidelines define research ethics in this way:

The term research ethics refer to a multitude of values, norms, and institutional arrangements that contribute to constitute and regulate scientific enterprise. Research ethics is a summary or codification of practical scientific morality. Research ethics guidelines are concretizations of the research community's foundational norms and values. They are founded in general scientific morality, in the same way that common ethics have its foundations in general public morality (2016, 5).

Practical scientific morality is, as such, one of the pillars of sound scientific enterprise. The primary way to ensure compliance to research ethics regulations is to gain approval by NSD – Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig Database (Norwegian Center for Research Ethics). This project was granted approval for interviews and the online Yoga Questionnaire in 2016. Research ethics in the humanities and social sciences, especially when the material and data are sourced from respondents and interviewees, include several aspects such as information flow and storage, consent, confidentiality, and usefulness (Marander-Eklund 2004, 98; NESH 2016). I will not delve deep into general research ethics in this section, but rather highlight the aspects that were relevant for me in this project.

2.4.1 The Yoga Questionnaire

The Yoga Questionnaire was constructed and disseminated from 2016 onwards and hosted on the online survey platform SurveyMonkey. A front page provides respondents with information about the questionnaire, about me, and about how I treat and store the data. The data is stored in SurveyMonkey, and on Excel sheets, both passwords protected. Only the candidate and thesis advisers have access to the YQ data. The questionnaire does not collect IP addresses, and the participants are impossible to identify directly. However, in some cases participants may be indirectly identifiable. In the latter case I have ensured extra privacy if respondent data is used in-text.

2.4.2 The interviews: voluntary consent and privacy protection

The process of recruiting participants has been described above. However, an important part of this process was information dissemination where I ensured that potential informants had an idea of what type of project I asked them to participate in, the general aims of the research, what the interview situation would be like, and what happens with the material they have contributed to after the interview was over. I also offered participants additional information about who I am (and my position in the yoga scene), my interest in Religious Studies, and why I have chosen to pursue a PhD focusing on yoga.

Interview participants were given information both orally and in a consent form. This means that interview participation is both voluntary and informed (NESH guidelines 2016). The consent form shortly and succinctly explains the project and its aims and explains what happens to the interview data – including privacy protection and anonymization, data storage, and access. The form also details the nature of the research, its purpose, the methods I use in the research project, and brief details about dissemination. The consent form also informs participants that they can withdraw from the research project at any time, without having to provide any reason for their withdrawal. The form also states that the project is approved by NSD. I sent the document to some of the participants before the interview, and other times I brought it to the interview. If participants did not receive the form in advance, I gave them time to read the information and ask questions, and then asked them to sign and thereby giving consent to participate in the interview and research project.

I attempted to tailor the form to make it readable and understandable for the participants (NESH guidelines 2006, 12). The informants all have a high level of both formal and common-sense knowledge (in addition, many of them are educated at university level), and have a basic knowledge of privacy protection and informed consent. That, however, does not absolve me from ensuring that all participants have knowledge of, and have consented to participate in, this project.

Two aspects the consent form miss is information about possible consequences of informants' participation and the project's usefulness. In the former case I have considered possible consequences of respondents' project participation and come to the conclusion that respondents are not at risk, neither with regard to community sanctions nor the privacy of their personal information. The latter case, namely the project's usefulness/ public value, is less significant for the humanities and social sciences than, for example, in medical research.

This project, however, is useful in that it generates new knowledge about a human activity that is increasingly popular in the Nordic countries. As such, there is an idea of usefulness (or at least interest) that motivates the respondents – and which they have expressed both orally and in writing.

2.4.3 Handling personal information and dealing with sensitive issues

In this project, particularly in interviews, I have received quite a lot of sensitive information. Some respondents have touched upon issues that are highly personal and emotional, and that contain information that can make them both directly and indirectly identifiable.

Respondents' yoga practice and their thoughts and ideas about yoga are the core themes of the interviews. However, yoga is an integrated part of their daily lives. Accordingly, when respondents speak about yoga, they also speak about themselves -- and that is why I to the best of my ability have considered research ethics throughout this study.

Interviews can be understood as informants' self-presentations (Fangen 2010). These self-presentations invariably will contain sensitive information and must be treated and stored with concern. In the process of analysis and dissemination, I have attempted to treat the interview data with even more concern for informants' privacy and security than I would with less personal and individualized data (quantitative and/ or observational).

2.4.4 Data storage

Both during and after the research project, interview data is stored securely. However, the mediums of storage have changed during the project. The interviews were recorded on my cell phone, transferred to my computer, and then transcribed. The interviews and interview transcriptions (coded with pseudonyms) are 1) stored on a separate password protected non-network hard drive, and 2) two-phase password protected in my own domain in OneDrive, UiT's cloud storage. I am the only one who can access the data. After the research project is over both questionnaire – and interview data will be stored in a secure facility at a central agency (NSD). The data cannot be open access as is the new norm for research data because I in the questionnaire front page and in the interview consent form have specified that the data will only be accessible to my Ph.D. adviser(s) and myself.

3 A brief history of yoga in the west

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will in a concise fashion look at definitions and delineation of the term yoga, the invention of modern, transnational postural yoga, and the religio-philosophical, institutional and historical trends that have influenced its formation (De Michelis 2007). This means, primarily, a focus on yoga's Hindu roots and on the later import-export dialectic with the west. Merged with the history is also a brief research history, as I refer to authors who have written on the development and various incarnations of modern yoga.

After a brief overview of yoga in its pre-modern formations, I pay particular interest to certain important personalities who had a massive influence on postural yoga in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Swami Vivekananda, T. Krishnamacharya, and his student Indra Devi. The development of modern postural yoga has been a winding path, rather than a linear development, and the latter part of this chapter looks at the formation of modern yoga from counterculture(s) to an intrinsic part of female-dominated popular commercial culture.

3.2 Early texts

Historically, yoga (/ˈjoʊgə/; Sanskrit, योग) is a conglomerate of spiritual, mental, and physical practices, ideas, and schools originating on the Indian sub-continent. Varieties of yoga are present in all major Indian religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The word yoga has many connotations, but its literal Sanskrit root is from the word *yuj*; to yoke, or to bind/unite (Jain 2015, Lucia 2014). Indian textual traditions show that the term *yoga* has a wide variety of meaning dependent on specific contexts. David Gordon White (2012, 2) lists several of these meanings, referring to the yoking of an animal (and the yoke itself); to astronomical constellations and conjunctions; to the 'alchemical' mixing (uniting) of substances; and several other words and terms (from a method to words like discipline and contact) that the term yoga has been used to denote.

In popular thought, yoga is an ancient tradition which has been thought to date back to the Indus Valley civilization and its archaeological artefacts¹¹ (although this is highly

¹¹ Such as the Pashupati (*lord of the beasts*) seal found in the ancient city of Mohenjo-Daro, depicting a man sitting in a lotus position. The earliest archaeologists, such as John Marshall, identified this persona with a 'prototype' of the Hindu god Shiva (known to be a yogi). This interpretation is popular also today, especially among non-scholars, as it 'proves', as such, the ancient origins of yoga practice in India (Singleton 2010).

speculative), or to pre-Vedic Indian traditions, due to its mention in the Rig Veda (ca. fifteenth century B.C.E). However, while the Rig Veda uses the word *yoga*, the authors do not describe what it is. While some descriptions are found in the Buddhist Pāli Canon (probably of third century BCE or later), according to Mark Singleton (2010) the first description of the word *yoga* can be found in the *Katha Upanishad*, from around the third century BCE. Yoga-like practices and methods are mentioned in several other Upanishads¹², where the importance of bodily practices become apparent.

Mentions of *yoga* is also found in the *smṛiti* (human authored) sections of Brahmanical literature, such as the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. In the *Mahabharata* epic (ca. 200 B.C.E to 400 C.E.) *yoga* has, according to White, certain martial/ wartime connotations, where “...dying heroic warriors are described as *yoga-yukta*, “yoked to *yoga*,” the chariot believed to deliver them to heaven” (White 2009, 73 in Jain 2015, 6). Here, ascetic ideals are aligned with Brahmanic ideals, such as *dharma* (duty, determined by *varna* or social class/ caste), and *ashramas* (stages of life; from student through householder onto renouncement in old age). The part of the *Mahabharata* known as ‘the Song of the Lord,’ *Bhagavad Gita*, in addition to setting out a range of yogic practices of that time, delineates three paths of *yoga* that can be used to connect with the divine (in this case Krishna); the path of action (*karma yoga*); the path of devotion (*bhakti yoga*); and the path of knowledge (*jñāna yoga*) (Singleton 2010, 26).¹³

3.2.1 Yoga Sutras

Another text, roughly coeval with the *Mahabharata*, is the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali (YS). This text has become the very ‘ur-text’ of contemporary *yoga* (Jain 2015). The *Yoga Sutra* dates from the first half of the first millennium CE and was commented upon (with Vyasa as the most important interpreter, ca. 500-600 CE) for centuries afterwards (Singleton 2010, 26). The text, however, was mostly forgotten during a long period in Indian history (from the 12th century) until it became immensely popular in modern *yoga* culture.

¹² The *Maitri Upanishad* is important, as it details a six-fold system of *yoga* that mirror five of the eight elements in the later, highly influential Patanjali (ashtanga) *yoga*; breath control (*pranayama*); withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*); meditation (*dhyana*); placing of the concentrated mind (*dharana*); philosophical inquiry (*tarka*); absorption (*samadhi*). (Singleton 2010, 26)

¹³ Just as the *Bhagavad Gita* is immensely popular still, these forms of *yoga* are well known and in use even today. Respondents in this project mention them, and both *bhakti*- and *karma yoga* are important parts of practice within several of the larger Indian-origin guru-oriented NRMs (see for example Tøllefsen 2017).

The YS is, according to Singleton (2010, 26), deeply inclined towards Samkhya philosophy,¹⁴ but also contains features of Buddhist thought and *sramana* (renunciate ascetic) culture. David Gordon White (2014¹⁵) asks why a work as ‘opaque’ as the YS has become “[...] required reading for yoga instructors in the twenty-first century? What could an archaic treatise on the attainment of release through true cognition possibly have to do with modern postural yoga, that is, the postures and the stretching and breathing exercises we call yoga today (about which the *Yoga Sutra* has virtually nothing to say)?” (2014, 1-2).

White quips that as its title contains the word yoga, what else could it be about? As I have noted above, the word yoga is most definitely a polysemic concept, with a long and diverse history. However, key to the modern revival and dissemination of the YS seems to be a period of ‘yoga revival’ in South India during the 16th – to 18th centuries, and a later creative period in the 1900s. Legends regarding the ‘mythic’ Patanjali may have “[...] motivated Iyengar’s guru, the great Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, to study the *Yoga Sutra* in the twentieth century” (White 2014, 38).

Mark Singleton (2010, 26-27) also notes the influence of European scholarship and the efforts of ‘practical yogis’ such as Vivekananda and Helena Blavatsky on the popularization of the YQ. These historical figures along with Krishnamacharya and his students’ helped the YS gain prominence in the West in the 20th century. In contemporary postural yoga, the YS is the closest one can come to a ‘philosophical cornerstone’. While the YS speaks very little on *asana* practice, the text is still revered as *the* source and authority due to the prestige and historical-textual legitimacy of association to the ‘great sage’ Patanjali (Singleton 2010, 26). That the YS has been widely translated, and particularly into English, has doubtlessly been an important part of the development of yoga as a transnational phenomenon. However, as Singleton notes, “[...] it is common for modern yoga teachers to confine their discussion of

¹⁴ Samkhya philosophy is one of the ‘orthodox’ schools of Indian philosophy and was leading in Hindu thought at the time the YS was written. In this metaphysical dualist tradition where what exists is either *prakriti* (nature) or *purusa* (persons). Nature, which can influence the otherwise metaphysically unchangeable person, is composed of three *gunas* or qualities; *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* (essence, dust, and darkness).

¹⁵ David Gordon White’s 2014 volume *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, A Biography* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), deals with the history and reception of the enormously popular *Yoga Sutra* (YS), presenting the collection of aphorisms and its various commentaries and placing the work in its historical context. This small volume (and its accompanying online resources) offers a nuanced view of YS’ meandering through Indian religious and political history and presents a number of historical figures who have contributed to the unrivaled position YS holds today.

the text to the *aṣṭāṅgayoga* section (II.29-III.8) as if this were the sum of Patañjali's message" (2010, 27).

3.3 Śramana traditions

Early forms and schools of yoga were established in the fifth and sixth centuries BCE. These were connected to the ascetic *śramaṇa* movements developing at the time, who were both in conjunction with and in opposition to the prevailing Vedic culture. Andrea Jain (2015) explains that yoga as a set of systematic practices/ techniques can be traced back to the development of a non-Vedic religious culture; the *śramana* culture mostly composed of Aijivika, Jain, and Buddhist renunciators. The propagators of the *śramana* culture were those who "[...] rejected Brahmanical orthodoxy and whose axiological focus was salvation from the conventional and ordinary world, a goal that required ascetic practices" (2015, 6).

The *śramana* culture in turn influenced Brahmanical culture, and slowly came to bring forth a wide variety of ideal yogic 'personas' common in modern Indian traditions. These range from the ideal male warrior, to the *brahmacarin* (male celibate renouncer – often married but still semi-ascetic and operating within society), and the *sannyasin* (fully renouncing, operating beyond caste society, or on its margins) (Jain 2015, 7). Historically, the *śramana* traditions regardless of their differences shared the idea of rebirth as undesirable. The world, full of suffering and violence, was something to be saved from. Therefore these traditions were organized around soteriological (salvation-oriented) goals, focused on karmic retribution and the cessation of suffering and rebirth (Jain 2015).

Jain and Buddhist orientations were respectively concerned with abstention and termination of desire, as means towards the end of karmic rebirth. A third path, more 'non-denominational', was formed upon the idea that "[...] knowledge of the nonactive nature of the self prevents karmic retribution and thus rebirth. Brahmanical orthodoxy slowly came to appropriate shramana ideas, especially from the last current. [...] the most widely cited Brahmanical sources on soteriological systems of yoga [for example the *Katha Upanishad*, my note] emphasize meditative or devotional techniques" (Jain 2015, 7-8).

Yoga, in this account, mirrors much of what has later become characteristic for modern yoga practices. For example, the use of mantras; an idea of yoga physiology; a non-dualist ontology (where the individual self (*atman*) is identical to the cosmic essence (*Brahman*)); a hierarchy of mind-body constituents (such as the intellect, the mind, and the senses); and the

idea that the achievement of elated states of consciousness requires a scaling through these very mind-body constituents (White 2012, 4 in Jain 2015, 8).

3.4 Hatha yoga

Moving into more asana-based traditions and closer to modern times, hatha yoga appears. According to Singleton the term hatha “[...] means “forceful” or “violent,” but it is also interpreted to indicate the union of the internal sun (ha) and moon (tha), which symbolically indicates the goal of the system” (2010, 27). Hatha yoga texts emerged around the eleventh century CE with origins in tantra, and the textually and practically diverse hatha systems flourished from the thirteenth century until a gradual decline in the eighteenth century CE. Yogi groups of many varieties overlapped in their practice of hatha, most famous of these are perhaps the Śaiva (Shaivite) Nāth tradition, which also (up until the eighteenth century) included Muslim yogis in its ranks.

Among the most famous hatha yoga texts are the fifteenth century *Shiva Samhita*, the *Hathayogapradipika* dating from the fifteenth / sixteenth century, and the *Yogapradipika* from the seventeenth century. Singleton notes that hatha yoga “[...] is concerned with the transmutation of the human body into a vessel immune from mortal decay” (2010, 28), and this immortality can be obtained through practices like asana and pranayama (breath control). The *Hathayogapradipika*, for example, describes fifteen asanas, some with healing powers. The pranayama also influences the ‘subtle body’ or meta-physiological system in the hatha tradition, which roughly described focuses on cultivating prana (vital air) in channels in the body (nadis, susumna) towards raising the kundalini energy – generally imagined as an energetical snake resting at the lower end of the human spine. In the hatha system the kundalini snake rises up through the chakras in the susumna nadi, until the prana becomes “[...] absorbed in voidness (śūnya) and the practitioner attains the condition of samādhi (HYP IV.9-10), which in turn leads to mokṣa, or liberation” (Singleton 2010, 29).

From the fifteenth - to the early nineteenth century, western travelers and colonial powers encountered yogis of many varieties throughout the Indian subcontinent. Fakirs and yogis shocked European Christian sensibilities, and the popular image of the yogi was born; seen as

[...] dissolute licentious, and profane, these groups were greeted with puzzlement and hostility by early European observers. The performance of yogic postural austerities was the most visible and vaunted emblem of Indian religious folly, and as yogins increasingly took to

exhibitionism as a means of livelihood, this association became consolidated in popular imagination. (Singleton 2010, 39)

Here the trope of the ‘sinister yogis’ (White 2009) was manufactured: a human with magical and supernatural powers (siddhis), able to enter and influence the bodies of other people. Yogis were not only dangerous on a personal magical level – but on a societal level as well. Highly organized, militarized groups of yogis ascended to power in the eighteenth century, controlling trade routes and making life difficult for the East India Company. Singleton (2010) notes that the Nāth yogi groups (who practiced Hatha yoga) were the first to organize in this fashion. Militarized yogi groups became such a nuisance to the British colonial powers that they were banned in the late eighteenth century, and wandering yogis were increasingly forced to settle in hostile rural and urban environments.

Thus, the hatha yogi became the common pariah of colonial India (Singleton 2010, 40), and the image of the yoga ascetic became ubiquitous in the popular imagination. Moving into the nineteenth century, hatha yogis made a living from begging and what Singleton (2010) calls “ascetic busking,” performing acrobatic, balancing, and contortionist tricks. Tricks like these became the trademark of Indian yogis in the early modern period, and the growth of mass media brought images of hatha yoga asana to an international audience that was already primed for this imagery through exposure to early modern homegrown systems of contortionism, exercise, and body culture.

The first “[...] public demonstration by an Indian in Britain of postural manipulation conceived as yoga” (Singleton 2010, 56) was by Yogi Bava Lachmann Dass in London in 1897. This performance was photo documented in the journal *The Strand*, and through media exposure hatha yoga became associated with both ‘cheap’ entertainment and eastern exoticism. The physicality and showmanship of hatha yoga, albeit exotic, was understood as ‘licentious and profane,’ and thus heavily criticized. Few people were more central to the critique of hatha yoga as an “unacceptable facet of modern Hinduism” (Singleton 2010, 79), but also to the development of transnational, modern yoga, than Swami Vivekananda.

Vivekananda, a disciple of the Indian mystic and bhakti yogi Ramakrishna, represented India at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, where he presented his own interpretation of Hinduism emphasizing its universality and tolerance. Vivekananda traveled and lectured extensively, met notable figures such as the Indologist Max Müller, and founded the Vedanta Society in New York in 1894.

In 1895, Vivekananda started an intensive study of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, along with earlier works such as the *Shiva Samhita* and *Hathayogapradipika*. Influenced by these (and the YS in particular), Vivekananda published his seminal volume *Raja Yoga* in 1896. Here he emphasizes the distinction between the inferior goals and practices of hatha yoga (asana for longevity, health, magical powers, etc.) against the goals of 'true spirituality' in raja yoga (the attainment of samadhi, meditative orientations, knowledge, etc.). Hatha yoga, at best, was selectively reformulated as a simple health tool or as a methodological precursor to the real work of the mind.

As a result of this tendency in the early stages of transnational modern yoga, there was little interest in the postural practices that would later come to dominate its popular form. Even as late as the 1930s – in many respects the heyday of the asana revival – postural yoga “was ridiculed so much that only a few select people were practicing it” (Iyengar 2000: 60). The pioneers of modern hatha yoga had to contend with a deep-seated, inherited attitude of scorn and fear towards these physical practices. (Singleton 2010, 80). Nevertheless, despite derision and ridicule, an asana revival emerged in colonial India.

In late colonial India an international, experimental physical culture movement met anti-colonialist sentiments and burgeoning nationalism in a crossbred creation that eventually became modern postural yoga. Textual-historical legitimization efforts (through older texts) helped in making asana yoga something profoundly 'Indian' and a form of Hindu physical culture. As such, the “[...] forms of physical practice that predominate in popular international yoga today were developed in a climate of intense experimentation and research around a suitable regimen for Indian bodies and minds” (Singleton 2010, 81). Figures like Kuvalyananda and Yogendra were popular, as well as international bodybuilding and gymnastics celebrity K.V. Iyer. In addition, Indian-born international yoga gurus such as Paramahansa Yogananda, author of the bestselling *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) became famous at this time.

These men “[...] purveyed a combination of New Thought (a popular reformulation of American Transcendentalism and Christian Science), naturopathy, adapted Swedish gymnastics, and “muscle control” techniques in a range of teachings specially adapted for their Western audience” (Singleton 2010, 114). The draw of early postural yoga in India, presented by gurus such as Yogendra and Kuvalyananda, was as an alternative to the abovementioned western-derived gymnastic systems that had been popular in Indian physical

education. For these gurus, the western systems did not have the necessary level of spirituality and holism – unlike the Indian way of doing asana yoga. In an interesting dialogical mixture of cultural assimilation and anti-colonial resistance a nationalist, muscular, twentieth century Hindu ‘yoga body’ was created, perceived to be superior to anything from the west.

Like European body- and gymnastic culture the Indian equivalent had moralistic, nationalistic, religious, and gendered overtones. Both English and Scandinavian training systems were martially oriented, and the male and muscular body became a unifying symbol where the state and strength of the body in a sense equaled the state and strength of the society. British body culture in the nineteenth – and twentieth centuries tended towards the ‘muscular Christianity’ variant, propped by the public school system and organizations such as the Salvation Army and YMCA. A YMCA member coined the term ‘bodybuilding,’ and bodybuilding became extremely important for the development of Indian nationalist yoga. Eugene Sandow, for example, through his physical culture magazine and lecture tours became somewhat of a ‘cultural hero’ in India (Singleton 2010, 89). The Scandinavian gymnastic systems, prominent among them the Bukh’s gymnastics (popular in the British Army and in YMCA) and the Ling system, were performed without the need of apparatuses. Focused on therapeutic, curative, and scientific methods, the Ling system has enormous influence on postural yoga. Singleton (2010) notes that from the very beginning, modern asana was identified as a system of health and hygiene system centered on posture(s) and so-called “free” movement to positively influence both the body and mind. As such asana became assumed to have therapeutic properties.

As Singleton (2010) points out, there was innovation both in the Indian and in an international context in the first four decades of the twentieth century. A variety of schemes for physical, moral, and spiritual betterment became popular, and gymnastics increasingly became a female-participation activity as well. In this period, systems of exercise by and for western women gained popularity. Led by figures such as Genevieve Stebbins, what Singleton calls “harmonial gymnastics” became popular. Harmonial gymnastics and similar systems catered to similar demographics and worked with the deep breathing and ‘spiritual stretching’ that today is associated with asana yoga, although this link had not yet been made explicit by the 1930s (ibid.).

3.5 Krishnamacharya and his students

This link, however, was to be made within a relatively short time. At this point I move the narrative towards the Indian physical yoga revival centered on Mysore and the important yoga innovator Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888-1989) and several of his students. I have mentioned Krishnamacharya above in connection to the ‘re-discovery’ of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*. He is often denoted as the father of modern yoga, especially in circles that practice some form of hatha or physical asana yoga.

Krishnamacharya was raised in a Vaishnavite Brahmin family in the state of Karnataka and was taught religion and yoga for many years (Singleton and Fraser 2014). In 1931, after having married and travelled the country teaching yoga, Krishnamacharya was invited to Mysore, Karnataka by the Maharaja himself, Krishnaraja Wodiyar IV. The Maharaja, an avid follower of the burgeoning Indian physical culture instructed Krishnamacharya to open his *yogashala* in a wing of the palace and entrusted him with “[...] popularizing the practice of yoga, and the system he developed was the product of this mandate, [...] a synthesis of several extant methods of physical training that (prior to this period) would have fallen well outside the definition of yoga. The unique form of yoga practice developed during these years has become a mainstay of modern postural yoga” (Singleton 2010, 177).

With his new method Krishnamacharya introduced several aspects that are commonplace in modern postural practice. In addition to a wide variety of poses, he emphasized *surya namaskaras* (sun salutations) used as *vinyasas* (transitions between poses), now pervasive in almost all forms of modern yoga. In addition, Krishnamacharya had “[...] concern for the health of the physical body (both of men and women), and emphasis on the correct use of *bandha* (physical locks) and *prāṇāyāma* (breathing practices), and a firm belief in the value of faith [...], the necessity of the teacher, and “devotion to the guru” [...]” (Singleton and Fraser 2014, 87).

Despite his Brahmin upbringing and personal devotion, an important aspect of Krishnamacharya’s teaching was the notion of yoga and religious universalism. Focus on the individual and his/ her needs and prior inclinations became a cornerstone in the transmission of yoga. This also extended to matters of culture (and religion). Krishnamacharya did not demand that his students should follow a particular form of faith, Hindu or otherwise. Rather, he encouraged them to tailor the religio-cultural aspects of the yoga practice to their own cultural heritage. In this sense, to universalize yoga Krishnamacharya was clear that the

practice also had to be de-Indianized. This notion contrasts with earlier notions of ‘nationalist body building’. However, they are in line with (for example) Vivekananda’s ideas of religious perennialism and *sanatana dharma*. “[...] Krishnamacharya presented a form of yoga that could be open and accessible to all, beyond religious sectarianism, gender, caste, or nationality” (Singleton and Fraser 2014, 95).

Krishnamacharya’s yoga innovations focused on physical health and de-religionization¹⁶ has been central to his success as a yoga guru. He taught not only the Maharaja’s ‘circus’ children at the Mysore Palace, but a number of students at his *shala* in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

Singleton and Fraser (2014) note that a large part of Krishnamacharya’s fame is due to the high profile of his students, such as B.K.S. Iyengar, K. Pattabhi Jois, Indra Devi, and T.K.V. Desikachar. These teachers have, more than Krishnamacharya himself, influenced postural yoga on a global level. Although Krishnamacharya’s personal influence undoubtedly is large, it is as much the constant recreation and reassertion of his story as a founding father that makes his lineage a core aspect of belonging to an ‘imagined community’ of yoga practitioners. The two most famous and popular proponents of (and re-developers of) the Krishnamacharya method are two of his direct students, K. Pattabhi Jois and B.K.S. Iyengar, creators of Ashtanga Vinyasa and Iyengar yoga, respectively.

An ‘imagined community’ (see also Langøien 2013) and the enactment of *parampara* (lineage) is highly important in the transmission of contemporary Ashtanga yoga. Ashtanga is a form of yoga created by Krishnamacharya’s student K. Pattabhi Jois (1915-2009), now continued by his daughter Saraswati and his grandson Sharath (*nee* Rangaswamy, now Jois). “Jois’ Ashtanga is characterized by using *vinyāsa*, the dynamic linking of postures and the synchronization of the breath. Many practitioners believe that Ashtanga Yoga originated in a text named the *Yoga Kurunta*, imparted to Jois by his guru Krishnamacharya, to whom it was imparted by his own guru, Rammohan Brahmachari. [T]he existence of the *Yoga Kurunta*, however, is hotly debated in a variety of camps” (Byrne 2014, 109). Whether the *Yoga Kurunta* existed (and, as the story goes, was eaten by ants) or if the ‘imagined’ text is an

¹⁶ Albeit mixed with a certain form of Indian masculinity and with ties to Indian national liberation movements, with figures such as Sri Aurobindo and his Integral Yoga (Gleig and Flores 2014)

element in a chain of legitimization strategies on Jois' part¹⁷ Ashtanga yoga revolves around the Krishnamacharya lineage, and a direct teacher-student relationship.

It seems that the importance of the teacher-student relationship was established early in K. Pattabhi Jois' (1915-2009) case. Born a Brahmin, Jois studied with Krishnamacharya as an adolescent, from as early as 1927, and joined his teacher when Krishnamacharya was appointed with the Maharaja. Jois was Krishnamacharya's student for many years to follow. Jois established his own *yogashala* (the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute) in Mysore in 1948, just a few years before he started his professorate in Sanskrit at Mysore University. The Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute started taking on western students in 1964. Ashtanga yoga has in recent years become one of the most popular postural yoga systems globally, perhaps due to its required levels of acrobatic skill, and its 'aesthetic character' (DeMichelis 2008).

If K. Pattabhi Jois' Ashtanga yoga was one 'limb' of postural practice that sprang from Krishnamacharya's Mysore years, it can be argued that B.K.S. Iyengar (1918-2014) was the other. Like Jois (and Krishnamacharya before him), Iyengar came from a Vaishnava Brahmin family. He moved to Mysore in 1934 to live with his sister who was married to none other than Krishnamacharya himself. Iyengar soon became a student of the guru, often traveling with him to demonstrate the 'power' of the new form of postural yoga. Frederick M. Smith and Joan White (2014, 126-127) note that although Iyengar studied with Krishnamacharya for only a year and a half, he constantly referred to him as his guru, and admired Krishnamacharya's athleticism and his masculinity (which was connected to a distinct form of Hindu-ness in the face of colonialism and struggle for independence). At his guru's bidding Iyengar relocated to Pune already in 1937, and the city became his base of operations for the next seven decades. In the early 1950s Iyengar increasingly started to receive people looking for cures to various physical illnesses, and in the same period he first travelled to the United States, bringing his 'movement cure' to an international audience. "Many early yoga enthusiasts from Europe studied under him in the mid-1960s; the Americans followed in the early 1970s. It was, however, *Light on Yoga* that brought him major international acclaim and quickly made him the most celebrated teacher of postural yoga in the world" (Smith and White 2014, 131).¹⁸ Where Jois had gone for a personal and decentralized system of

¹⁷ For more on the *Yoga Kurunta*, see Singleton 2010, 184-186

¹⁸ *Light on Yoga*, first published in 1966, offers a systematic presentation of *asana* practice clearly hearkening back to Krishnamacharya's contortionist teachings. The book is a 'yoga bestseller' to this day and is used as one

knowledge transmission, Iyengar chose a more centralized system as his style became more popular. The curriculum in Iyengar yoga is according to Byrne (2014) structured and standardized, and teaching Iyengar-style comes with several restrictions and responsibilities. An aspiring teacher would not have to travel to Pune or have contact with the guru himself; rather, they could (and can) train in one of the many local Iyengar organizations.

Classical yoga literature became important for both Jois and Iyengar. Unlike Jois, Iyengar never became proficient in Sanskrit. He still read and aligned with classic yoga literature, such as the (relatively newly ‘rediscovered’) *Yoga Sutras*, the *Hathayogapradipika*, and even the Upanishads. These texts (and *Yoga Kurunta*, in Jois’ case) is still frequently used in international yoga circles. They function as the core philosophical curriculum for practitioners. In addition, these texts imply an ‘unbroken lineage’ in yoga reaching from Krishnamacharya, Jois, and Iyengar back into medieval hatha yoga, and for some even further into the mythical distance of a thousand-year tradition. However, as Smith and White (2014) note, no one

[...] today claims to belong to an unbroken guru-disciple lineage dating to Patañjali or Vyāsa, the earliest and most important commentator on the *YS*, probably dating from the third to fifth centuries CE. But Mr. Iyengar and many others have positioned themselves in this lineage through the classicization and narrativization processes that have served the purposes of legitimization for at least a thousand years. [...] This is entirely in keeping with the standards of Indian religious culture” (2014, 130).

What worked well in Indian religious culture also works well for westerners. Iyengar and Jois’ systems based on Krishnamacharya’s idiosyncratic *asana* innovation rose to prominence in the international yoga scene after the 1960s. Iyengar – and Ashtanga yoga moved into the mainstream in the 1980s, and the systems have become central to the popularization of postural yoga in the west.

of the core reference works in modern postural yoga. Iyengar, unlike Jois, would offer students the opportunity to heavily modify *asana* with the help of props (such as bolsters, straps, and chairs), thus, to emphasize alignment and healing properties, avoid injury, and make yoga practice accessible to everyone.

3.6 Indra Devi – yoga for women

Many authors have written at length about both Iyengar and Jois, while other disciples of Krishnamacharya have remained (relatively) unknown. One of Krishnamacharya's early students who can take credit for much of yoga's popularization (and gendering) in the west is Indra Devi.

Born in the (now Latvian, then Russian) city Riga in 1899, Eugenia Vasilievna was the daughter of a Russian aristocrat and a Swedish-origin banker. She grew up in wealth in her grandparents' house, and quite early encountered spiritual and occult themes. According to Michelle Goldberg (2015) yogic ideas were part of a 'general mystic ferment' in the last period of the Russian empire, and even Eugenia started dreaming of the exotic India that was so in vogue. When the Russian revolution happened Eugenia and her family fell on hard times, and the young woman moved around Eastern Europe and Russia before she eventually ended up as an actor in Berlin and Riga in the 1920s.

Eugenia's interest in oriental spirituality grew. She came to hear about a meeting called by an organization called the Order of the Star in the East, which was "[...] devoted to heralding the teachings of a young Indian man named Jiddu Krishnamurti, believed by a group of leading Theosophists to be a new messiah" (Goldberg 2015, 54). In this group was Annie Besant, who by then had been the leader of the Theosophical Society for several decades. Eugenia was very taken with the Krishnamurti figure, and in her writings, she describes their meeting as a 'turning point' and as her 'first step on the path towards Yoga.' (Goldberg 2015, 65). Bolstered by her new encounters, Eugenia joined some leading theosophists on a journey to Ceylon and India in 1927 and followed Krishnamurti on speaking tours throughout the continent.

A few years later Krishnamurti broke with the Theosophical Society, leaving Eugenia in a limbo. She remained in India, and her acting career picked up as she started getting roles in the burgeoning Indian film industry. She took the screen name Indra Devi and became a darling of the upper levels of Indian society in the 1930s. Eugenia eventually married a Czech diplomatic attaché and settled in Bombay, but soon becoming unsatisfied with the predictable life as a diplomat's wife. Eugenia became interested in India's struggle for independence, and at one point, she met INC leader and future Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru praised the mental and physical benefits of hatha yoga, which had helped him greatly through his many stints in prison. Nehru later wrote on Patanjali yoga, and he "[...] was particularly

interested in the physical side of yoga, which had only recently emerged from long obscurity and disrepute. Like many of his contemporaries, he saw it in the context of Indian nationalism, as a superior indigenous type of physical culture” (Goldberg 2015, 90).

In addition to her previous interest in Indian mysticism and Nehru’s glowing recommendations of yoga, Eugenia experienced an energetic faith healing after a period of illness. These together set her on the path of serious studies of yoga, and encounters with several sadhus, gurus, and hatha yogis – among them Swami Kuvalyananda¹⁹. Another turning point came when Indra Devi received an invitation to the wedding of the nephew of the Maharaja in Mysore – in the same palace where Krishnamacharya ran his *yogashala*. Eugenia, despite being both a woman and a westerner, managed (not without difficulty, and with intervention from the Maharaja) to convince Krishnamacharya to teach her his yoga system. The regime was strict, but Eugenia took her training very seriously, and persevered. Eugenia was taught *pranayama* and *asana*. However, because she was a grown woman,

[...] and not a wiry, hyperactive boy, the yoga that Krishnamacharya taught her was less aerobic than the system he imparted to Iyengar or K. Pattabhi Jois [...]. Yet many of the poses were the same – a combination of seated postures from classical hatha yoga sources and standing lunges and twists adapted from traditional Indian gymnastics and wrestling exercise regimens as well as from Niels Bukh. She learned to sit in a lotus pose, to bend her back into a bow pose, to support herself with legs in the air in a shoulder stand. (Goldberg 2015, 122).

As mentioned above, Krishnamacharya believed that yoga should be de-Indianized and popularized worldwide. There is reason to believe that training Eugenia was part of reaching this decision, as the guru urged her to travel other countries of the world and teach yoga there. In the late 1930s, Eugenia followed her husband to his new post in Shanghai, China. She did indeed start teaching yoga, and it did not take long for the vibrant expat community (and particularly its women) to start attending classes. However, as the Second World War began along with the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, life became difficult for everyone. Eugenia did not give up on yoga, though, and stories say that even in the concentration camps erected by the Japanese to hold foreign citizens, classes were held by Eugenia’s yoga students (Goldberg 2015).

¹⁹ For information on Kuvalyananda’s life, see for example <https://kdham.com/swami-kuvalayananda/> (accessed 07.06.21)

The war and Eugenia's marriage came to an end, and in 1946 Eugenia sailed to Bombay to begin a new life in search of further spiritual enlightenment. She made her way to Rishikesh to study with one of the great yogis who resided there – who in all likelihood was Swami Sivananda who in 1936 had formed the Divine Life Society²⁰. Sivananda taught Eugenia Raja yoga, “[...] techniques of sensory withdrawal, concentration, and meditation” (Goldberg 2015, 151) deeply influenced by the tradition of Swami Vivekananda.

At this time Eugenia wrote her first book, *Yoga: The Technique of Health and Happiness*. However, civil unrest and war forced Eugenia to the safety of the United States, tempted by rumors of the opening of a yoga school in California where she could continue her teaching. On arrival in Hollywood, it became clear that the yoga center was nothing but rumor. But on the bright side Eugenia (now assuming her new name, Indra Devi) found herself in America's 'spiritual capital' on the cusp of a new era in American popular culture. Goldberg writes that

Everywhere in the emerging New Age culture was an assumed connection between health and salvation. That link, of course, is at the heart of modern hatha yoga's power. (It exists in evangelical Christianity, too, but the cause and effect are reversed: salvation can lead to health, rather than vice versa.) Yoga as it eventually came to be practiced in the United States elevates exercise into a sacrament, merging the contradictory quests for beauty and selflessness. It's a kind of secular magic, promising that by assuming certain physical positions, you can bring about specific changes in the body and soul – clearer skin and clearer thoughts. It's alchemy for a disenchanting age, rendered plausible to Westerners by translating esoteric tantric terms into the language of glands and hormones. Yet, until Devi arrived, no one in Los Angeles was teaching it (2015, 160-161).

While the obsession about the body was a long-standing concern in American culture, the popular culture craze for Eastern spirituality was just beginning. Indra Devi opened her first studio on Sunset Boulevard, and taught classes that were aligned towards scientific explanations of yoga's power while keeping religion and spirituality out of the picture.

1950 was a dramatic year for Devi. On the one hand she had immigration issues and was accused of being a Communist spy. She even had an arrest warrant issued, which Devi simply ignored. On the other hand, she continued popularizing yoga among the artists and well-heeled socialites while teaching yoga at the swanky Elizabeth Arden spa in Arizona. The fact

²⁰ For more information on Sivananda and the Divine Life Society, see Strauss 2005

that superstars such as Greta Garbo and Gloria Swanson were familiar with yoga undoubtedly helped its popularization, and the glamour of Hollywood easily transferred into Devi's next book: *Forever Young, Forever Healthy*, which quickly became a best seller. At the age of 54, Devi had become a successful yoga celebrity.

Devi was central in making yoga practice a respectable hobby for women. It is ironic, as Goldberg notes, that hatha yoga in America was popular among wealthy homemakers long before it developed as the 'avant-garde enthusiasm of beats and hippies' (2015, 167). At this time research started to show that yoga functioned much better as a reliever of stress than as an aerobic fitness regime, which Devi readily incorporated. Capitalizing on her success and the increasing demand for yoga, Devi wrote the practice manual *Yoga for Americans*, dedicated to Gloria Swanson and with a foreword by famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin (who had helped propel Iyengar into yoga fame). Wildly successful, the "First Lady of Yoga's" book was translated into several languages, and Devi even brought her vision of a health-promoting, scientific hatha yoga to Soviet Russia during a visit in 1960.

The mid-sixties saw another book released from Devi's hand. *Renew Your Life Through Yoga* promised relief from anxiety through yoga practice, yet another strand of benefits that is commonly cited even in contemporary yoga circles. She also traveled extensively, and at one point met and became a follower of Sathya Sai Baba. By the late 1960s Indra Devi has become the primary western evangelist of this guru and started lecturing about him to receptive audiences on the American west coast.

Sai Baba never came to the west, probably not wanting to compete with the numerous other gurus fishing for devotees among the countercultural youth. Rather, Devi "[...] began taking groups of Westerners to India to meet Sai Baba in 1968, and by 1975, nine years after her conversion, she'd made nineteen trips to see him. His followers often referred to her as Mataji, an honorific form of "Mother." For ashram novices, traveling with her was the easiest way to get close to the guru" (Goldberg 2015, 220). In 1975, Devi published *Sai Baba and Sai Yoga*, where she tried to seamlessly join her devotion to the guru with asana practice. Devi stayed with Sai Baba throughout the 1970s but broke with the organization in 1983. Afterwards Devi continued to travel and ended up relocating to Argentina in 1985 at the age of eighty-five. She started teaching yoga in Buenos Aires, and the Fundación Indra Devi would eventually contain six yoga studios (Goldberg 2015). Throughout the eighties she offered spiritual consolation to several powerful people, among them famous Noriega opponent Díaz Herrera in Panama. Indra Devi practiced yoga, trained teachers, traveled

widely, and continued her own highly disciplined yogic life almost until her death in 2002, just before her 103rd birthday.

“Devi planted the seeds for the yoga boom of the 1990s, training a host of teachers who would soon find themselves with throngs of new students. Yet the yoga that became globally popular in Devi’s last years was much more vigorous than the style she taught.

Krishnamacharya had trained her in a type of asana practice suited for middle age women” (Goldberg 2015, 271). Devi’s relaxed and gentle style of yoga eventually fell out of fashion in the face of the athleticism and image-friendliness of the new vigorous, athletic styles. In the nineties Ashtanga yoga in the K. Pattabhi Jois incarnation became in vogue. A number of teachers innovated on Jois’ system, creating new styles of physical yoga still popular in the contemporary scene, such as Power yoga, Jivamukti, and Bikram. Goldberg (2015) points out that

... Indra Devi’s spirit animates modern Western Yoga, even more so than Jois or Iyengar or Bikram Choudhry, the Rolls-Royce-collecting creator of hot yoga. Today in the West, yoga is an overwhelmingly female pursuit – the *Yoga Journal* survey found that 82.2 percent of practitioners are women. It’s part of the same cultural matrix as organic food, holistic spas, and biodynamic products – things that seem to go together so naturally that it’s easy to forget that they were not always linked. It was Indra Devi, more than anyone else, who turned a very male discipline into an uplifting ritual for cosmopolitan, spiritual-but-not-religious women (2015, 272-273).

Devi’s persona, teaching, and books are undoubtedly part of what made it possible for a wave of women to embrace techniques that were created by Indian males for ebullient Indian boys with a backdrop of martially oriented physical culture and change these to suit themselves in their cultural and societal context. Andrea Jain (2015) makes clear that the primary lesson that can be learned from the early history of modern yoga is its plasticity and its context dependence, in the hands of a wide variety of differently situated practitioners and proponents.

Up until the second half of the twentieth century the historical pattern of hatha yoga is bound up with a few countercultural strands. One side is scandalous or salacious, where the ‘dangerous yogi’ in the form of the Indian ascetic renouncer, or the free-spirited, esoterically inclined westerner is found. Yoga was also an elitist practice: the story of Indra Devi points out that yoga was part of a wider, esoteric counterculture. Those who could afford it were often part of the political or social elite – royals, the upper classes, scholars, artists and

actresses. It was not until the late 1960s that yoga “[...] no longer opposed the prevailing cultural norms of Americans and Western Europeans and became readily available to the masses in urban areas across the world. And so all of this begs the question: What changes made this possible?” (Jain 2015, 41).

3.7 Global yoga cultures

Yoga ‘celebrities’ such as Vivekananda, Krishnamacharya, Iyengar, Jois, and Indra Devi were part of what enabled a global yoga culture. One of the forces enabling this cultural innovation was increased travel, exchange, and goods consumption between India, Western Europe, and America. Large societal and cultural forces were at play, and it can be argued that more than anything else the power of market capitalism was the hub on which the wheel of yoga’s popularization turned. According to Jain (2015), postural yoga intersected with this growing global consumer culture. Instead of criticizing the dominant socio-economic forces (as is *de rigueur* in parts of the New Age/ alternative milieu) proponents of systems of modern postural yoga generally worked within the emerging consumer ideology, oftentimes explicitly looking outwards, aiming for popularization and globalization of their brand.

Another force that influenced the popularization of yoga was widespread disillusionment with institutionalized, traditional religions. On the one hand this took the form of secularization, on the other it led to the emergence of a wide variety of ‘alternative spiritualities’ in opposition to the mainstream religious cultures. Many in the counterculture eagerly looked to Indian gurus and their wares for cultural critique, religious insights, and techniques. Many countercultural participants experimented with yoga and meditation, including high-profile artists such as the beloved pop group The Beatles. Yoga became an increasingly visible product desired for its pop culture coolness, and for its perceived ability to improve everyday life. At times, yoga was also sought after for soteriological purposes (Jain 2015, 43)

When looking at the latter half of the twentieth century there is in a sense two distinct but interconnected strands of yoga. One strand which garnered massive media attention (and controversy) was modern soteriological/ denominational yoga (De Michelis 2005) with guru organizations such as Transcendental Meditation and Siddha Yoga, and colorful personas such as Bhagwan Rajneesh. These were in opposition to traditional, societal conventions and the growing consumer culture. Another strand is postural yoga systems based on

Krishnamacharya or one of the many other Indian yoga gurus' inventions, packaged for the western consumer. As it mainly is postural yoga that this dissertation revolves around, the historical overview continues in alignment with popular consumer culture – looking at how postural yoga became branded and increasingly commercialized throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

During this period, “[...] the postural yoga market became increasingly diversified and came to feature endless yoga brands constructed and marketed for immediate consumption” (Jain 2015, 73). The first-generation yoga brands such as Iyengar yoga and Ashtanga were still very much on offer. However, they were joined in the marketplace by numerous ‘new’ styles, mostly emerging from an entrepreneurial US context. Some I have mentioned above, such as hot/ Bikram yoga, power yoga, and Jivamukti. Anusara yoga also became popular (Jain 2015). In northern Europe all these brands and styles could (and still can) be found, in addition to variations of Kundalini yoga,²¹ Medical yoga,²² and several other types. Ashtanga yoga is particularly popular.

There are few yoga brands that have been founded in the Nordic countries, but a good example of a school that emerged quite early is the Scandinavian Yoga and Meditation School (founded 1970). The organization opened its retreat center in Håå, Sweden in 1973. It is the largest yoga school in the Nordic countries, with altogether twelve centers in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Germany, and France (Fibiger 2004). SYMS' style of yoga is based on the teachings of Danish yoga- and meditation teacher and writer Swami Janakananda Saraswati (Jørgen Dreiager, born 1939), a disciple of Indian yoga guru Swami Satyananda. Janakananda dabbled in yoga already as a child but started using *asana* and *pranayama* in earnest to benefit his work as an artist and pantomime actor from the late 1950s

²¹ Kundalini yoga is a form of yoga influenced by Hindu tantric and Shakti schools, and aims at awakening the energetic ‘kundalini snake’ in the subtle channels of the body, through a combination of *asana*, meditation, *pranayama* and the chanting of mantras. Swami Sivananda was one of the first proponents of Kundalini yoga, with a book published in 1935, but the most famous popularizer of Kundalini yoga was the Sikh Yogi Bhajan, who founded the American 3HO organization to further his teachings.

²² “Medical yoga is a type of yoga practice which combines traditional Hatha yoga with medical diagnosis and therapeutic techniques to address illness and disease. It is sometimes also referred to as Medical Yoga Therapy. Medical yoga may draw on modern scientific diagnostic tools, such as blood tests and MRI scans, in order to objectively assess a patient's underlying ailments and to help design an appropriate treatment plan. This is likely to include modified asanas and the use of yoga props.” (<https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/5131/medical-yoga>, accessed 01.06.18)

onwards. In 1968 he met Swami Satyananda in Copenhagen, and this meeting inspired him to pursue yoga and meditation full time. In Janakananda's own words:

I was fortunate to go to India in the 1960's. The ashram was small and Swamiji taught all the practices himself, taking time for personal training and guidance. At the end of my initial course there, I decided to stay on. The co-operation I now experienced with him – where each day I learnt anew to remain awake and aware – made me realize that yoga is not merely a set of exercises. He showed me yoga as a state of higher consciousness.²³

SYMS's teachings include classical yoga *asana*, breathing exercises, relaxation (*yoga nidra*), tantric meditation, and initiatory experiences. In comparison with 'straight-forward' MPY styles such as Ashtanga, the SYMS focuses more on esoteric knowledge and includes practices and philosophies that in the Nordic societies are socially coded as quite 'alternative.' Nevertheless, the Scandinavian Yoga and Meditation School with its over forty years of history is one of the oldest and most well-known postural yoga schools in the Nordic countries, and their courses and retreats are popular.

Part of any yoga school or style's success, independent of their location, is in their branding efforts. Branding requires marketers to uniquely package their products by "mythologizing" them (Einstein 2008: 12). As yoga generates somatic, semantic, and symbolic fields of meaning meant to appeal to consumer desires, brands seek to signify those meanings to anyone interested in doing yoga. In this way, branding mythologizes yoga products and services, ranging from mats and pants to styles and teachers. And one of the most common themes in yoga signifies self-development. In other words, it is a tool that will enable consumers to become improve themselves through physical and psychological transformations²⁴ (Jain 2015, 77-78).

This is not a strategy particular to recent or contemporary yoga brands. Early yoga celebrities such as Vivekananda and Krishnamacharya made the same mythologizing move using religious texts (especially the *Yoga Sutras* and the *Yoga Kurunta*). The second-generation yoga brands have referred to the ancient texts *and* their yoga guru predecessors for legitimacy, mythologizing their own lineage and placing themselves within the wider context

²³ <https://www.yogameditation.com/about-us/swami-janakananda/> (accessed 01.06.18)

²⁴ Here Jain (2015) refers to De Michelis 2004; Strauss 2005; Albanese 2007; Newcombe 2007; and Singleton 2010

of global, yet authentic yoga. Swami Janakananda's quote above is a good example of this structure, as he managed to brand his yoga school as authentic both in the lineage of Satyananda and one of the *sannyasin* orders allegedly founded by the legendary 8th century Hindu reformer Shankaracharya (Adi Shankara). The SYMS organization follows suit, saying about Janakananda that he "[...] is known to consistently observe the tradition, by preserving yoga and meditation in its original form, and not yield to the fads and modern trends that go under the name of yoga today. Through the years, this attitude has attracted many seekers of the authentic methods."²⁵

Despite denying that they are part of a modern trend, I would argue that SYMS and other modern yoga brands are just that. Being 'modern' and 'authentic' are not mutually exclusive. Hatha yoga is a relatively recent invention, and even more recent is the focus on *asana* yoga as a fulfillment of a cultural imperative of good health and good looks. However, the strife for authenticity by whichever methods available will remain for yoga brands both old and new. The legitimation processes in modern yoga are part of what keeps new 'customers' coming, and old practitioners faithful. From being shrouded in the mystique of opaque, religious texts, MPY has come a long way. As Jain point out, "In fact, what distinctly marks the second half of the twentieth century as a new phase in modern yoga's history is that yoga became a part of pop culture. Modern yogis no longer engaged – at least not primarily or exclusively – in esoteric, marginal, elite, or countercultural techniques. Rather, proponents engaged in the popular dissemination of yoga as an exoteric body-maintenance regime for the masses" (Jain 2015, 46).

3.8 Summary

Modern yoga, in Elizabeth De Michelis' definition, is "[...] those disciplines and schools which are, to a greater or lesser extent, rooted in South Asian cultural contexts, and which more specifically draw inspiration from certain philosophies, teachings and practices of Hinduism" (2008, 2). While Buddhist and Jain philosophies and practices²⁶ have been very important for the formation of modern yoga traditions (see for example Jain 2014), and Christian influences are notable throughout this history (Singleton 2010), most of what is commonly known as 'yoga' in everyday contexts derives from a Hindu background and the

²⁵ <https://www.yogameditation.com/about-us/swami-janakananda/> (accessed 01.06.18)

²⁶ Some newer Sikh traditions (such as the 3HO movement) can also be seen as part of a modern yoga tradition

classical texts. As the brief historical overview also shows, neo-Hindu, elite western esoteric, and New Age cultural phenomena have influenced modern postural yoga.

Even though postural yoga in general is (more or less) de-religionized its ‘ancient’ and Eastern origins are positively valued (Partridge 2005, 5). Not only yoga but *t'ai chi* and less physically oriented techniques and therapies (like mindfulness) draw legitimacy and appeal from their exotic eastern, supposedly ancient origins (Altglas 2014). However, Singleton (2010) is clear that contemporary *asana* yoga with its focus on health and fitness finds little purchase in Indian pre-modern tradition. Far from being a thousand-year-old sacred and unchanged practice, contemporary yoga owes its existence to several other factors. Indian religious developments, both (long) pre- and post-colonialism go hand in hand with political developments (such as nationalism) and a constant dialogue with the west. Euroamerican ideas and ideals, whether they be Romantic or of the Enlightenment kind, have profoundly influenced this dialogue.

It could be argued that the 19th – and 20th century revival, reinvention, and popularization of *asana* yoga has taken on religious aspects of its own. The early modern yoga was strikingly countercultural and rather esoteric in its flavor. However, in the latter part of the twentieth century, the public came to embrace the exoteric “[...] dimensions of “classical” yoga and tantra, such as postures, breathing exercises, and ethical guidelines, rather than the esoteric dimensions that required the practitioner to renounce or deliberately transgress normative standards” (Jain 2015, 90). It may seem like the body in the west is about to become holy in a new way. The strong and supple ‘yoga body’ has become a transnational, pop cultural, and capitalist phenomenon -- and functional way to construct self-identity.

PART 2: DEMOGRAPHICS, 'CONVERSION' AND MOTIVATION PROCESSES IN THE NORDIC YOGA MILIEU

4 Who are the participants in the Yoga project?

In this chapter I introduce the YQ respondents and presents some of the extensive data from the questionnaire. I begin by delineating the material, through country of residence and country of birth. Basic demographic patterns are discussed briefly, such as age and gender, followed by data on marital status and children. The last segment of this chapter looks at education levels, political and social activism, parents' primary occupations, and respondents' primary occupation. In the education - and occupation data a class perspective becomes visible, and the YQ responses supports data showing that yoga in the Nordic countries is an activity that engages a particular segment of the population. The 'archetypical' yoga practitioner in the Nordic countries is a well-educated, (upper) middle-class woman who works in white-collar profession, and who has high social and cultural capital.

4.1 Country of current residence and birth

The Yoga Questionnaire has a total of 228 respondents. However, for the purpose of this dissertation, I have selected only those whose current residence is a Nordic country. The 170 Nordic residency respondents are most of the total response count. In addition, the Nordic countries have a relatively similar historical development trajectory. The culture and attitudes towards religion is similar, which simplifies comparison. Of the Nordic residency respondents, 11 reside in Denmark, 20 in Finland, 13 in Sweden, and the majority (126) in Norway. The picture is not particularly diversified by looking at respondents' country of birth; the majority is born in one of the Nordic countries. Those who are born abroad mostly hail from another European country, such as Germany, France, Spain, Poland, or the UK.²⁷

4.2 Gender and year of birth

The median respondent of the Yoga Questionnaire was born in 1976, making the mean age (by 2018) 43 years. Out of the 170 Nordic resident respondents, 148 are female, and 22 are male (about 13 percent). The age brackets and the gender distribution tally well with both observational data and previous research on yoga.

In her 2016 Master's thesis on postural yoga, Sigrid Steen Haugen notes that her survey answers support observations from her own teaching experience. Haugen's respondents are

²⁷ I did not ask how long the foreign-born respondents have resided in the Nordic countries, or how old they were when they moved here. However, looking at respondents' education levels and occupations, educational – and/ or work migration is likely a common denominator for many of the foreign-born respondents.

Norwegian yoga practitioners (N=225²⁸), 90 % women, and almost half in the 30–44-year age bracket. I have observed similar age and gender distribution in classes, workshops, and yoga festivals. In their 2014 report, Henriette Bjerrum and Maja Pilgaard present a similar distribution in Danish survey and questionnaire material.

In a 2011 Danish exercise – and sports habits survey, they note that the average age of yoga practitioners is 45 years old (the same as in 1993). 11 percent of women (16 years and over) practice yoga on a regular basis, while only 2 percent of grown men practice. That means that 87 percent of all yoga practitioners in Denmark are women. Bjerrum and Pilgaard compare the Danish numbers with other countries as well; in Switzerland 7 percent of the population practice yoga, tai chi, or qi gong (as a common category), with an 88 percent female predominance, and an average age of 52 years old. The authors also cite numbers from Belgium, Holland, and Norway. Here, respectively 1.4 percent, 3 per cent, and 6 per cent practice yoga. In the Norwegian context. Gunnar Breivik (2013) estimates that 12 per cent of grown women and two per cent of grown men practice yoga – at least once a month.

In their own 2014 report Bjerrum and Pilgaard note that nine out of ten Danish yoga practitioners are women, and nine out of ten teachers are women too. In North America the situation is slightly different, although the 2016 Yoga in America study conducted by Yoga Journal and Yoga Alliance²⁹ also support Nordic numbers. In America, 30- to 49-year-olds are 43 percent of the practicing public, followed by 50+ (38 percent) and 18-29 (19 percent), which means that American yoga practitioners are older than ever before. One thing that has changed over the recent years in the American context (which has yet to change in the Nordic countries) is that there are more male practitioners than before. 28 per cent of the Yoga in America participants are now male. Still the vast majority, 72 per cent, are women.

²⁸ Women N=151/ 52 incomplete // Men N=22/ 4 incomplete

²⁹ <https://www.yogaalliance.org/Portals/0/2016%20Yoga%20in%20America%20Study%20RESULTS.pdf> (accessed 02.05.18).

4.3 Current marital status and number of children

Apart from the 35 respondents who are single and have never been married, the majority of the YQ respondents either are or have been in a relationship with a significant other. 51 respondents are legally married, 39 live with their life partner, and 31 are in a committed relationship. Seven are divorced and remarried, and the remaining 17 are either divorced or separated (N=170).

Looking at age, gender, and marital status it seems that most YQ respondents follow the average life ‘script’ in a Nordic country. Being in a committed dyadic relationship and raising a family is the societal norm. The average number of children is one,³⁰ which is relatively low but concordant with the falling birth rate in the West since the late 19th century. On average, Norwegian women have one child less than in the 1960s, and the assembled fertility rate in Norway was 1.85 by the year 2000. A minute from Statistics Norway (Lappegård 2018) offer some political explanations and nuances the fertility rate in comparison to European data.

The transition is often connected to the development of more individualistic attitudes, increased gender equality, higher educational levels, increased income potential, and simple and efficient contraceptive methods. In a European context Norway, together with the other Nordic countries, have a relatively high fertility rate [...]. Like in the rest of Western Europe fertility decreased from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. At that time the trend turned in the Nordic region, but levels continued to decrease in most other European countries. There are no unambiguous answers to why the Nordic countries have a higher fertility rate than countries further south and west in Europe. In the Nordic region the norm of an independent breadwinner role for women is strong, which implies the expectation that women continue working after giving birth, and that everyday life consists of a combination of childcare and labor force participation. For Nordic women this is made possible because society to a large extent is organized for this combination, for example through family policy actions such as maternity- and compassionate leave, kindergartens, family allowance and cash benefits, and good opportunities for part-time work.³¹

Political guidelines such as a strong welfare system, an affluent society, and cultural norms have ensured that the Nordic countries are relatively gender equal. A public education system, and corresponding high levels of education in the general population may also influence when

³⁰ Maximum 7.00, mean 1.14, standard deviation 1.14, n=169

³¹ <https://www.ssb.no/a/samfunnsspeilet/utg/200201/04/> (accessed 03.05.18). My translation.

and how to start a family. Although the YQ did not ask for the age of the respondents' children, it is likely that the formula high education, few children, and 'middle age' parents apply in this context as well.

4.4 Education

In the Nordic countries, higher education is free and thus available to the general population. About one third of the Norwegian population has university or university college education.³² However, compared to the general population, the education levels of YQ respondents are remarkably high. Of the 169 respondents to the education item, 139 respondents have 3 + years of higher education. Of these 13 hold a Doctoral or Law degree, 74 have a master's degree as their highest level of completed education, and 52 hold a bachelor's degree. 19 respondents have between one and three years of higher education. Among these, 13 respondents are not currently students. The remaining six are among the 30 respondents who are still pursuing higher education. Among these, 17 are in an advanced program (MA or PhD), 9 are pursuing a BA or BS at university or university college, two respondents are in seminary, and two are in technical training. Of the 169 responses to the education item, there is also an 'outlier' group of seven respondents who hold a high school diploma or less.³³

Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014, 35) find similar education levels among their Danish questionnaire respondents. Although their questionnaire is worded differently, their study also shows that their Danish yoga practitioners are amongst the most well-educated segments of the population. About two thirds of their respondents have at least a mid-level higher

³² According to Statistics Norway, using numbers from 2016, 32, 9 % of the population have university – or university college education. There is a gender difference regarding short and long educations. For example, for 3-year bachelor degrees (23, 4 % of the sample), 19 % are male, and 27, 8 % are female. This trend inverts when looking at longer degrees (Master and Doctoral Degree), of the 9, 5 % total population, 10, 2 % are male, and 8, 7 % female. To break the longer degree sample down further, the gender difference for Doctoral degrees per 2016 (which comprises of 1 % of the population) 1, 2 % is male and 0, 9 % female (see <https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/statistikker/utniv> accessed 05.06.18)

³³ None of these respondents is currently pursuing further education. Apart from being female, they are a dissimilar group. They live in different Nordic countries, some are married and have children, and others are not. However, an age component seems to matter. Apart from the two respondents who are born in the 1990s, the rest of the low-education respondents are born between the late 1950s and mid-1970s. The low-education respondents practice diverse styles of yoga, and five of seven teach. All of them see yoga as either part of their personal spiritual path (N=2), or as a combination of a personal spiritual path, a mind-body practice/ therapy, or physical exercise ('all of these' N=5). Regarding their involvement in 'alternative spirituality', (whatever that means to them) they spread out on the scale: two are minimally or casually involved, three are involved on a regular basis, and two are deeply involved.

education.³⁴ The most well-educated in the Danish report are those who practice at private yoga studios – the so-called ‘lifestyle yogis.’

4.5 Primary occupations

In the yoga material class issues becomes visible not only in the connection between yoga practice, gender, and education levels, but also through looking at respondents’ primary occupations and the occupations of their primary income-earning parent. Examining the occupation of the respondents’ primary-earning parent or guardian I find that the four most significant labels comprise of ‘white-collar’ jobs; teacher/ professor, administrator/ manager, engineer, self-employed/ business owner, and health professional.³⁵ Some respondents even specify the job that their primary earning parent/ guardian held, such as priest, business owner, CEO, headmaster, journalist, and film producer/ director. Interestingly, a few respondents report that they are children of yoga teachers.

A problem with the forced-list occupation selection, however, is that the relatively comprehensive list used in the YQ lacks a certain working-class flavor. Using myself as an example: when I was a child, my parents worked as primary school teacher and farmer. ‘Farmer’ (along with several other professions) does not feature in the forced selection of occupations, which is a methodical point that can be criticized. Many respondents have used the comments field to specify parental occupations that are not necessarily listed, such as farmer, fire fighter, carpenter, undertaker, electrician, machine operator, industry worker/ working in factory, or bus driver. It is interesting to note that while the children of people with a high level of education and ‘white-collar’ jobs do not comment on their relative privilege, there seems to be a stronger sense of class awareness within the working-class parents group. One respondent, for example, notes regarding their primary income-earning parent’s occupation, that he or she thinks “[...] *you just might call it unskilled worker/proletarian*”.

Moving on to look at respondents’ own primary occupations; I find that 132 respondents answered this item. The most common jobs fall into five sectors. 24 respondents work as teachers or professors (some of these are yoga teachers), 18 are self-employed/ business

³⁴ “Mellemlang videregående uddannelse”

³⁵ Including medical doctors, assistants, dentists, physiotherapists, etc.

owners, 13 are administrators or managers and 17 are students. Medical professions are also well represented with 18 respondents. The rest work in a variety of professions, and the comments field function as a clarification/ elaboration for those whose line of work do not fit neatly into the forced selection.³⁶

Despite a wide variety of occupations, the respondents who have grown up in academically inclined homes have by and large stayed within their social class. However, the respondents whose parents held ‘blue-collar’ jobs have generally undergone a ‘class journey.’ Compared to their parents’ generation, the YQ respondents hold comparatively few ‘working class’ professions: no farmers, industry workers, or unskilled laborers are featured. This development may point to trends of change in professions and labor patterns rooted in higher education levels than in previous generations. While some occupations seem to be hereditary such as teaching, business ownership, or (to some extent) the medical professions, other lines of work are not. In this questionnaire, ‘unskilled’ work has almost completely disappeared from one generation to the next. Rather, respondents’ own primary occupations are oriented towards creative professions, and occupations (often computer-based) that simply did not exist in previous generations.

The Nordic societies are comparatively quite egalitarian, and class may as such be difficult to measure – or at least to self-define within. In the questionnaire, I have not asked whether informants self-define as members of a particular class in society, nor have I asked their average salary.³⁷ However, I would argue (based on education levels, parents’ primary occupation, and respondents’ own primary occupation) that participants in the yoga

³⁶ Some respondents are on maternity leave, currently unemployed, or retired, the rest work in academia as researchers and research administrators, as communication- and media professionals, managers of marketing and laboratories, and as (serial) entrepreneurs. Some are acupuncturists or nutritionists. A number of respondents work for the government, and some are in creative professions as writers, artists, designers, or curators.

³⁷ Another point where the questionnaire can be criticized is regarding income. I have asked all kinds of other questions, but I did not include an item about average personal income per year. However, in a recent Australian survey looking at participants in yoga, pilates, and aerobics (<https://www.roymorgan.com/findings/7544-yoga-pilates-participation-december-2017-201803290641> (accessed 11.04.18)), investigators find that not only are these activities dominated by women (80 % for yoga participation), but that “*The activities are also dominated by Australians in the top two socio-economic quintiles. Over 50% of participants in all three activities are in either the AB or C Quintiles – the two most affluent quintiles comprising the top 40% of the population in a socio-economic sense.*” It is not given that the Australian data is directly transferable to the Nordic situation, but due to the (often quite high) cost of attending yoga classes regularly, and the demographics of the YQ respondents, a ‘out-of-home’ practice requires some level of economic surplus.

questionnaire are predominately middle class (average or slightly above average wage earners), and that many of the respondents have done an equivalent of a class journey.

A high proportion of respondents (about half) work as yoga teachers, either full – or part time. A few have either taught before, or plan to start teaching soon. That so many teachers have answered the questionnaire has to do with my choice of method and data collection -- like what Steen Haugen (2016) notes where 88 (39 %) of her respondents are or are becoming yoga teachers. In a sense the yoga teacher subset can be seen as an ‘elite within the elite’ that is the YQ respondents.

4.6 Politics, activism, diet, and consumption

The majority of YQ respondents place themselves to the left on the political scale. They very frequently vote in elections, and occasionally sign petitions. However, fewer participate in higher-demand political activities. A little over 80 respondents never participate in marches, rallies, town meetings or public hearings. Direct, personal involvement in politics (serving as a spokesperson, communicating with authorities and legislators, or membership in/ donations to a political party) engage even fewer. However, respondents largely agree on the benefits of a strong welfare state, where the government should cover expenses (fully or mostly) for health care, education, and unemployment benefits. A similar distribution is seen in the item on social activism, where the majority (well over one hundred respondents) self-define as environmentalists (also, almost everyone regularly recycles), feminists, pro-gay rights, and pro animal rights.

Political leanings and social activism seem to relate to attitudes towards diet and consumption. Most respondents (N=98) are not vegetarian, or they used to be vegetarian but not at present (N=11). 49 respondents are vegetarian, seven are vegan, and one respondent eats raw food (total N=166). This level of vegetarianism is extremely high compared to the general population.³⁸ Respondents also prefer to buy organic foods when available (N=99) or

³⁸ A 2002 report from the National Institute of Consumer Research (Berg 2002) notes that about 4 percent of the study sample are ‘fully or partially vegetarian’ and gender (young women) is the only significant determining factor for vegetarianism. The number of vegetarians in the general population has likely grown since 2002, along with vegetarianism becoming a popular and accepted position in society. See http://www.hioa.no/extension/hioa/design/hioa/images/sifo/files/file48496_oppdagsrapport_2002-10.pdf (accessed 16.11.18)

will buy organic only for some items (N=48). While one respondent purchases only organic food, 16 respondents note that this is not an issue one way or another.

Although I have not asked how much respondents earn in a year, based on their occupation patterns I infer they earn according to the Nordic average. As such they are predominately middle- or upper middle class and have high buying power. In the YQ I do not ask for general consumption patterns. However, a few sectors where respondents spend money stand out: explicitly yoga-related purchases, travel, and books/ literature. The latter is unsurprising seen in relation to respondents' education levels and fields of interest. Some respondents read and subscribe to yoga magazines (either online or in print), but the majority does not. Rather, respondents engage with a variety of websites and blogs on yoga-related and 'alternative' themes. Many also engage with books in the spiritual/ self-help genre.

With few exceptions, respondents do yoga-related consumption. Most respondents have purchased a special yoga mat and have purchased clothing specifically for doing yoga. One YQ item asks respondents to approximate how much money (in their local currency) they spend on yoga-related activities and products in a year (retreats, classes, workshops, gear etc.). The answers vary widely depending on whether in the last year respondents have practiced at home, or traveled, attended courses/ workshops with international teachers, or done teacher training. Spending ranges from none for those who do only home practice, and already own and use whatever gear they need, to the other end of the scale. One practitioner note is illuminating: "*Depending if traveling to India or not. If traveling - ab. 50 000 NOK a year. If not - ab. 10 000 a year.*" On years when she does not travel to India, this respondent falls well within the average for the YQ participants, which is between 10.000 and 15.000 NOK per year.³⁹

³⁹ Here I have roughly converted Swedish and Danish kroner and Finnish euro to Norwegian kroner, finding no big differences in nationality when it comes to yoga spending.

4.7 Length and frequency of practice

YQ respondents have on average been aware of and interested in yoga for 25 years, since they were (on average) 39 years old. Despite a long-standing familiarity with yoga, few respondents have practiced for such an amount of time (even though one respondent notes she has practiced on and off for almost thirty years).

Over a third of the respondents (N=57) who answered this item (N=167) have practiced over ten years. 34 respondents have practiced between five and ten years, 54 respondents have practiced between two and five years, 17 less than two years, and 5 respondents have recently started a yoga practice. Postural yoga is relatively recently mass popularized in the Nordic countries, and the supply of yoga studios have grown in response to popular demand. In that sense, it is not surprising that many respondents have practiced for a comparatively short amount of time (less than five years). However, that most respondents have practiced five years or more points to two things: that postural yoga has been an available activity for decades, and that the YQ respondents are a particular segment not only the general population, but of the yoga practicing population.

Compared to the Danish study (Bjerrum and Pilgaard 2014), I did not ask how often respondents practice yoga. Generally, Danish practitioners attend one class per week and often supplement that with practicing on their own once per week.⁴⁰ People who practice at yoga studios and fitness centers practice more often than those who do yoga at an evening school. However, as a part of the consumption pattern data I have some indication towards levels of attendance in yoga activities. 40 out of 167 YQ respondents have never visited a yoga center (or ashram). 18 have visited once or twice, 61 go sometimes, and 37 respondents visit a few times a week. 11 respondents go to a yoga center every day.

In addition, another sub-item shows that 64 respondents never have attended a yoga retreat, while the majority have gone either once or twice (N=39) or attend sometimes (N=56). Four respondents note they attend retreats frequently. My data is not directly comparable to the

⁴⁰ There is a gender component to practice frequency as well. Bjerrum and Pilgaard note that “Male practitioners in private studios practice on their own more frequently than women and participate less in classes at the yoga studio. This could indicate a looser connection to the classes at the yoga studio, which possibly work as an inspiration for self-practice. Women more often show up to particular classes when they wish to practice yoga. In evening school – and fitness directed yoga, men and women spend an equal amount of time” (2014, 38).

Danish data in this case, but since Bjerrum and Pilgaard's (2014) demographics overlap with mine on so many levels it may indicate that the Nordic yoga respondents have a similar practice frequency. However, for long-time (and high-involvement) practitioners – and especially yoga teachers – it is the norm (and ideal) to practice every day.

4.8 Styles of yoga

YQ respondents represent a cross-section of the variety of yoga styles and 'brands' one can find in the Nordic countries. Some of these will be familiar from the historical overview. Modern yoga with its many facets is a global phenomenon, and while most of the styles mentioned can be found in Tromsø, Zanzibar, or India, there are a few styles/ lineages that are more popular and more 'accessible' than others.

I separated the answers to the questionnaire into ten categories, most of them with significant overlap. 169 respondents answered the yoga style item, and among them Ashtanga is the most popular style (N=67). Ashtanga is closely followed by hatha⁴¹ (N=55) and a compound category (N=55) which includes modern brands such as Virya, Anusara, and others.⁴² 43 respondents practice Yin/ Restorative yoga, 31 practice Kundalini/ Medi-yoga, 27 do Vinyasa, 15 practice Classical yoga/ Bihar, and seven respondents practice Iyengar yoga. In addition, 21 respondents write that they engage with 'complementary' or non-postural yoga practices such as meditation, pranayama, or chanting. Four respondents practice a yoga style of their own making, and one respondent practices all kinds of yoga.

A portion of the respondents practice in only one school/ lineage. These yogis often belong in the Krishnamacharya tradition (for example practicing Ashtanga in the Pattabhi Jois lineage), or in the Bihar school of classical yoga. Most respondents, however, practice several styles of yoga, often combining a physically demanding practice (Ashtanga, Vinyasa etc.) with a less physically demanding, meditative, or restorative form (such as Yin or Medical yoga).

⁴¹ Hatha is generally a collective term for several types of yoga (Bjerrum and Pilgaard 2014, 39).

⁴² In this 'other' category (N=52) I have placed; Virya yoga, Anusara yoga, Bikram and hot yoga, power yoga, vinyasa krama, aero- and acro-yoga, flow and embodied flow, yin/ yang, Tibetan 5, esoteric Buddhist yoga and mindfulness, yoga rhythm, yoga nidra, and bhakti- and karma yoga. This is just a small cross-section of the styles and practices that exist in the contemporary yoga field, and there are probably many other styles and forms practiced around the Nordic countries that have not been brought up by respondents in the YQ.

Bjerrum and Pilgaard's (2014) respondents practice equally varied styles of yoga. Besides Hatha-yoga, most Danish yogis engage with Vinyasa/ flow, Ashtanga, and meditation. Which style one practices depends on where the respondent practices. Most respondents who go to fitness centers practice vinyasa/ flow, while Ashtanga and meditation is most popular among the yoga center practitioners. This pattern is comparable to the YQ data, where going to (or even owning/ working at) a private yoga studio is quite common. What is different in the Danish data is that the evening school practitioners are quite often not sure of which style of yoga they practice, a perspective that is almost absent in the YQ material.

Bjerrum and Pilgaard find a gender difference in this part of their material as well. Female yoga practitioners engage in Vinyasa/ flow yoga and Hot yoga more than men do (F/M = 32/ 20 and 14/ 8 per cent), while a relatively large percentage of male respondents have participated in Kundalini yoga and meditation (F/ M = 2/ 8 and 20/ 30 per cent) (2014, 39-40). I do not have sufficient data to corroborate Bjerrum and Pilgaard's (2014) observations. However, in comparison, the male respondents from the YQ (Q3, N=22) mostly practice Ashtanga or Vinyasa yoga (N=13), and some combine the physically vigorous styles with other, calmer forms such as Yin or restorative yoga. A couple of male respondents mention Kundalini yoga, meditation, and Bhakti yoga. Looking at the latter as well as footnote 20, shows that the non-physically strenuous, traditional forms of yoga exist in the material (Wiel 2020) but primarily as complementary practices.

4.9 Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to give an overview of who the YQ respondents are and draw some very tentative parallels to the wider yoga scene and general population in the Nordic countries. In one of the interviews, "Ella"⁴³ says that about the yoga scene that

[...] It is a mix of trendy, and the trendy people are also usually going to university. And yes, middle to upper class women I would say. But I would generally say it was quite well-educated people.

Ella summarizes my respondent pool well: the majority are highly educated middle- to upper class women who have practiced yoga for quite some time, and many of them teach. They are

⁴³ Ella is a bit of an outlier in the yoga material, as she is the only interview participant who does not reside in the Nordic countries. She is German and works and teaches in one of the major cities in Germany. Ella functions as 'validity' in the study, reminding me that postural yoga is not very different throughout western Europe.

not particularly politically active, but generally have left-leaning, urban, pro-social value sets. In her interview Ella connects higher education with being able to think for oneself. As an extension of that she connects it to having the self-motivation to practice and the intellectual capacity to understand and incorporate intricate aspects of yogic philosophy – and to relate these ideas to positive social values. This pattern, according to the respondent, also coincides with a certain urbane ‘trendiness.’

Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014) and Steen Haugen (2016) finds similar patterns among their respondents concerning gender, class, and economy. Steen Haugen describes her respondents belonging to a “[...] kind of ‘leisure class’ that has the possibilities (time, money and a reflexive framework) to reflect upon their experiences” (2016, 38). Whether a high level of education is characteristic for yoga practitioners, or if yoga practice is characteristic for those with higher education, I cannot say. There is, however, a correlation. One reason may simply be the combination of available public higher education in the Nordic countries and popularization of yoga. On the other hand, it can be argued that the various systems of yoga encourage a certain level of self-awareness, performance, and motivation from practitioners. These traits are useful in a professional setting, and roughly correspond to the skill sets needed to succeed in higher education.

The most reasonable explanatory model is a combination of a class perspective and a supply-and-demand situation. Sports researchers Kari Steen-Johnsen and Kasper Lund Kirkegaard (2010) argue in a paper that traces the development of fitness in the Scandinavian countries that for-profit fitness is connected to economic growth and changing societal demands. “[...] For-profit fitness is a phenomenon that foremost tends to be introduced in societies in connection with economic growth. Moreover, this development must be understood in the light of the transition from an industrial-based economy, to one with a flourishing service sector. This is often accompanied by increased needs for, and consciousness of, health and physical activity” (Steen-Johnsen and Kirkegaard 2010, 620). This transition is visible in the data on professions. About half of the respondents who either work or will work as yoga teachers are service providers in the ‘health and physical activity’ sector. The other half (and many more) are presumably their clients.

I argue, with support from Bjerrum and Pilgaard, that there is a clear class perspective in yoga practice – especially if one considers yoga as exercise and sports/ fitness. “[V]isible ‘class differences’ manifest in this sphere. Well off and highly educated segments of the population

generally have a stronger inclination to pursue sports and exercise” (Bjerrum and Pilgaard 2014, 35). Female, urbane, highly educated, ‘modern idealist’ yoga practitioners share values with people who practice certain other sports, such as kayak paddling, Telemark skiing, mountaineering, or gymnastics (Breivik 2013).⁴⁴ These are sports activities that require a relatively high level of practical knowledge, time, specialization, and risk. Yoga practice connotes similar positive values – with the added benefit of being perceived as a mind-body practice.

Generalizing from the YQ with input from Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014) and Steen Haugen (2016) the ‘new normative’ yoga practitioner is a woman approaching middle age, who is heterosexual, married or in a committed relationship, and has one child. She is a well-educated urban idealist who works in a ‘white-collar,’ highly specialized, skill-based profession - as an academic, entrepreneur, artist, or yoga teacher. She practices one of the most common brands of postural yoga, such as Ashtanga or Hatha, complements her practice by meditation and /or other styles of yoga, and engages in other sports or physical activities. Bjerrum and Pilgaard’s (2014) yogis practice about twice per week. In comparison the majority of the YQ respondents visit a yoga center sometimes, or a few times a week. It is likely that many of them also (some exclusively) practice at home. They do spend money on yoga, but the amount depends on whether they practice at home with gear already purchased or if they attend yoga teacher training or workshops/ retreats locally or abroad.

The positive valuation of yoga is at the very core of its popularity. The chapter above has presented a very positive picture of respondents, as overall successful when looked at in terms of social (and economic) class and capital. Whether yoga practice is pre- or post-factum to capital and class is hard to answer (it is probably a combination of both social, economic, and individual factors). That is perhaps not so important. However, what is clear is that positive valuation of yoga also extends into the rationales behind why respondents have started and continued a yoga practice.

In the following chapters I will examine *why* respondents have started (and continued) a yoga practice. In the questionnaire – and interview material two of the core questions were “why

⁴⁴ Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014) also mention running, fitness, golf, and tennis as sports that tend to correlate with a higher level of class/ education. In addition, 89 per cent of their respondents combine yoga practice with other forms of exercise (2014, 35-36)

did you start doing yoga,” and the closely related “what does yoga mean to you?” Some of the data these questions generated is presented in the next chapters, with results are both expected and unexpected. An important observation from Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014) – which coincides with my data in the demographics chapter - is that yoga practitioners can be characterized as a

[...] relatively homogenous group in the population, who have many similarities when it comes to gender, age, education, geographical location, and thereby also core values and attitudes in common. This is also reflected in relatively homogenous replies to the question of motivations, which means that one cannot present yoga types that have very different reasons to practice yoga (2014, 59).

This is reflected in the data from the YQ and interviews. However, despite a relative homogeneity in respondents’ demographics, motivations, and attitudes it is nevertheless important to attempt to systematize and analyze respondents’ yoga encounters – whether it be in terms of fitness and health, social encounters or networks, or media and popular culture.

5 Yoga as fitness, as a mind-body practice, and as a health-promoting practice

5.1 Introduction

The title of this chapter is descriptive because health is a very important aspect of why respondents have started and continued a yoga practice. That the health nexus emerged as so important in the material was not a surprise. However, one of the interesting findings is that health is not a singular thing. Respondents emphasize different aspects of what health is and can be, and the chapter aims to reflect some of that complexity. In his 2010 volume *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation, Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices*, Henri Gooren lists five groups of factors that influence changes in an “individual level of religious activity” (p. 51). I would argue that these factors could be applied to other forms of activity as well – yoga among them. In respondent perspectives on health, I find that individual -, contingency - and to some extent institutional factors are useful.

The title also reflects the three main health-related aspects I present and analyze in this chapter. In Yoga as exercise, I devote space to the respondents who think of yoga with a fitness approach. They practice at gyms or use yoga as complementary exercise. Yoga as a mind-body practice takes up on yoga as an activity that is both physical and mental, and here I emphasize yoga’s more-than-somatic value for many respondents. As I will show below not everyone looks at yoga from a healing or a crisis perspective. This is perhaps the drawback of a contingency-focused analytical approach that is focused on existential issues. It is important to keep in mind that for many yoga has little to do with crises and health issues, but is geared towards fitness, physical achievement, and positive validation. The respondents in the first section primarily see yoga as a form of healthy exercise or fitness. They are oriented towards an individualized gym setting and physical achievement and tend to use yoga as complementary to other sports.

Yoga as a health-promoting practice is more ‘issue-focused,’ and details some of the challenges and illnesses respondents use yoga to mitigate. In the context of yoga as a health-seeking activity, the individual factor Gooren (2010) calls “a personal need to change one’s life situation” (p. 52) seems especially pertinent. So does an individual’s need to give “[...] a concrete expression to feelings of meaning (or meaninglessness)” and their personal “[...] need to seek meaning and/ or spirituality in a religious group” (ibid.). Institutional factors are also actualized in the yoga material. The group (or in this case, the practice) is present for

respondents (in social networks and popular culture outlets), and “[...] their leaders, organization, practices, rituals, ethics, values, and doctrine (cf. “interreligious competition”)” (p. 51) have appeal. In this context, the appeal of the practices and/ or rituals is important because yoga is understood as an activity that promotes health and well-being. However, when examining yoga and health, contingency factors are by far the most important.

Gooren’s (2010, 52) contingency factors revolve around crisis and crisis solutions. The impetus for conversion can be an individual’s “[...] acutely felt crisis or turning point (for example, illness, alcohol problems, joblessness, marriage, divorce, migration) [and a] religion-based or inspired solution to the crisis (for example, healing, finding a new job through a church member)” (p. 52). These factors are reminiscent of earlier ‘deprivation-style’ theories in conversion literature. These range from William James’ emotional and borderline pathological converting subject in need of healing (Gooren 2010, James 1958 [1902]) to Lofland and Stark’s (1965) process model of conversion where the subject experiences “[...] enduring, acutely felt tensions, [...] within a religious problem-solving perspective” (1965, 874 in Gooren 2010, 22). In short, whether it is in 1902, 1965, or 2020, people need something to turn to when life gets hard – and in my material that is yoga. In this context I can argue that the *function* of yoga is the same as, or similar to, religion. In a different culture or a different time, many of these respondents would probably have turned to religion as a solution for their crises – but here yoga takes over that role.

5.2 Yoga as exercise and fitness

For many of the respondents their yoga ‘journey’ started with a search for a form of exercise that is both gentle and challenging. The institutional factor of media presence (Gooren 2010, 52) makes yoga visible to these respondents. The portrayal of yoga in different forms of media creates and maintains a discourse where looks, wellbeing and health are the main selling points (Puustinen and Rautaniemi 2015).

Yoga as exercise is an important factor for YQ respondents. In Item 6 I asked respondents whether they saw yoga as physical exercise, as a mind-body practice, or as part of their own spiritual path. 170 respondents answered this item, and 41 of them selected yoga practice as physical exercise. In YQ Item 32 and 33 (primary and secondary factors for involvement) I did not enter ‘exercise’ as a separate factor/ alternative. Retrospectively I should have, because yoga as exercise and fitness is something respondents mention quite frequently in a following open-ended item (34).

In the Nordic countries going to the gym is both commonplace and affordable, and doing exercise tends to be associated with a gym setting. Many of the respondents in the exercise category have encountered yoga at a gym. Some respondents start yoga out of curiosity and are explicit in discounting any social factors involved in their choice. For others a random encounter gave a taste for more.

I attended the yoga classes at my local gym. No one influenced me. I chose myself because I was curious.

It was very random. I was just going to lift weights at the gym, but she who was working there that day thought I was going to yoga. She gave me an entrance token. I was tired, and thought why not...?

The gym seems to be a gateway to yoga practice for many of the respondents. This pattern is also visible in Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014). They note that there are three main types of yoga ‘bidders’ (who also divide the market between them): the fitness center, private yoga studios/centers, and evening school yoga. The fitness center primarily caters to young people, who are in an open and flexible phase of their life and for whom choice and adaptability to their needs in the moment are core concerns. The YQ respondents who have listed yoga as physical exercise do fit into Bjerrum and Pilgaard’s category – except when it comes to age. The average age for the 41 respondents is still 43 years old. However, a need for a relatively low-demand multi-sport offer may not decrease with age, and the gym or fitness center offer them flexible access to yoga (and other forms of exercise) when they want it. Steen Haugen (2016) calls this group ‘achievement yogis’ due to their focus on fitness and exercise. Bjerrum and Pilgaard note that this group “... often have a focus on health related and bodily aspects, and the participants often practice with the goal to become better at yoga, and to attain a body that is healthier and more fit” (2014, 8).⁴⁵

Some respondents use yoga to heal sports-induced strains or injuries, or to achieve forms of strength and flexibility that ‘ordinary’ exercise such as weightlifting and running does not target. Several respondents have a sports background but are dissatisfied with the output this has given them. “Karin,” an interviewee who practices Ashtanga yoga, started feeling strain in her back after heavy strength training. Her personal trainer recommended her to start with

⁴⁵ My translation

yoga to lengthen her hamstrings and open her hips, which also would help with her back issues.

I started weightlifting. And then I... I am the kind of person that really does things full on. There is no half-way. So I became quite strong. After a while, when you lift heavy, for example squats or deadlifts, you are likely to get hurt if your technique is not perfect. I started feeling it in my back and contacted a personal trainer so he could check it out. He told me my hamstrings were way too tight. So I thought, OK, so I will start stretching my hamstrings. I came into a yoga class, and realized that yoga makes you just as strong, only in a better way. So I stopped weight-lifting, and I have just grown with yoga instead. That was how it started.

A respondent to the YQ has a story that is like Karin's, where hard exercise led to a stiff and unwieldy body. This respondent had both a personal trainer and a chiropractor that recommended yoga. For the YQ respondent, yoga has become her favorite way of exercising. For Karin, meeting yoga has led to her giving up weightlifting to practice ashtanga yoga.

Another of the interviewees, "Nadia," has practiced yoga for a long time. Physical activity and exercise have been an important aspect of her life. However, being a serious long-distance runner over many years had a detrimental effect on Nadia's knees and muscles. In addition, she was having breathing issues and was recommended to try yoga to alleviate her physical problems.

I have been doing yoga since 1993. So, and I started at a time when I was in graduate school, I was finishing my PhD, and I was really stressed out. And I had been a runner for many years, a long-distance runner, I had done 10 Ks and up to marathons, 26-mile marathons, and my knees... I did that for a long, long time, and then my knees kind of gave out. And so, I needed to find something else that would keep me sane. And then eventually I came to yoga, because I was also having... not only was I not able to run and have that kind of impact on one set of muscles anymore, I also was having trouble breathing, I was hyperventilating, and somebody recommended yoga for the breathing. [...]

Of course, not all exercise-oriented respondents practice yoga at the gym. Some practice at home, and other go to (or even work at or own) a privately owned yoga studio or center. There seems to be a tendency for respondents to start practicing at a privately owned studio when their life situation changes, or when their motivation for/ commitment to yoga deepens. Several respondents indicate that after encountering yoga at the gym and liking it, they went in search for a yoga-only studio/ center. This venue shift in addition to a change in personal

motivation may indicate a respondent perspective where yoga at a fitness center is understood as less ‘authentic’ than yoga practiced at a privately owned studio. Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014, 8) make some relevant observations about this part of the yoga market.

Private yoga studios are primarily used by busy adults, predominately women in the age 30-45, many of whom juggle their family life and career. This phase of life often demands a high degree of planning and structure – but with a possibility for flexibility when other facets of everyday life demand it. Yoga can here be an important contrast to a busy everyday life, where there also is focus on the mental aspects of yoga in combination with a need and demand for exercising the body. Yoga studio practitioners can often be characterized as ‘lifestyle yogis/ – yoginis,’ who make yoga practice a part of their identity.

The ‘lifestyle yogis’ are the core of my respondent group. For this category, yoga entails more than just physical exercise and fitness. The importance of yoga’s mental aspects can be exemplified by looking at YQ Item 6 again, where 73 respondents see yoga as a compound practice,⁴⁶ and 76 respondents see yoga as a mind-body practice. For the ‘lifestyle yogis’ the mental aspects⁴⁷ have a higher priority, both in their conversion stories and in their current, everyday practice.

5.3 Yoga as a mind-body practice

Quite a few respondents came to yoga from other practices or exercise forms such as dance, rhythmic gymnastics, or martial arts. Like this respondent, they found yoga to be a form of exercise that either reminded them of what they had done earlier, or fit their mindset and physical boundaries:

I felt I needed to shape up and found a nice place to practice with good teachers. I felt Yoga was right for me as it fits my mindset and also since I previously had very good experiences through martial arts. Pushing physical boundaries, bodily awareness and mental calmness.

Strength, flexibility, and focus on both body and mind emerge as central issues in yoga practice. In addition, part of the goal of practicing *asana* yoga is to prepare the body for

⁴⁶ A combination of physical exercise, a mind-body practice, and their personal spiritual path.

⁴⁷ Yoga as complementary to, or in some cases as an alternative to other forms of exercise or to ‘eastern-inspired’ energetic practices is a pattern that appears among the exercise-oriented respondents. Several respondents note that they have practiced taijiquan and/ or qigong before starting yoga, and a couple of respondents have continued this alongside their yoga practice.

meditation. The aspect of mental calmness is something that many respondents bring up as important in their involvement with yoga. The YQ respondents quoted below capture what I think is the generalized idea about yoga as a mind-body practice among the respondents.

Yoga provides good training of both body and mind. Strength, flexibility and focus.

[...] I found the practice physically challenging and mentally relaxing.

Yoga discourse clearly states that by getting stronger and more flexible in the body, the same will happen in the mind. As such, the mind-body connection is as close to a universal one can come in postural yoga circles. There seems, however, to be an aspect of change inherent to the mind-body discourse. Respondents oscillate between emphasizing the physical and the meditative aspects of their yoga practice, or move from one to the other, at different times. As Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014) note, over time there is a tendency to shift focus from yoga as a hobby to yoga as a more holistic lifestyle choice.

The respondents quoted below are good examples of the development from 'achievement yogi' to 'lifestyle yogi.' The physical yoga practice may have pulled them in, but their interest in meditation and/ or the experienced meditative effect of yoga has taken their engagement to a deeper level.

I attended yoga at my local gym, got more and more fascinated about the "quiet" of my mind in shavasana. Then I did research online, and from there it was more and more yoga, and meditation.

I wanted [to] strengthen my back and hips to be able to sit longer in meditation. I started at the local gym (not yoga studio) and fell instantly in love. I see yoga as meditation in movement. [...]

The mind-body perspective on yoga can be understood on two levels: either as an integrated part of the postural practice or as a complement/ preparation for sitting-down meditation. What respondents emphasize and how much they practice each type (or if they even separate postural yoga, meditation, and pranayama) varies widely. However, a general pattern is that meditation becomes more important at a later stage in a respondent's yoga journey. A good example is found in a quote from an YQ respondent where she narrates her transition from a 'yoga as exercise' paradigm towards an emphasis on the mental aspects of yoga and a perspective on the practice as holistic.

Over many years, I have participated in yoga classes at health studios/ gyms, from about 10 years ago. Three years ago, I took part in an ashtanga yoga course, where I learnt some basic poses that enabled me to practice on my own. To begin with I went to yoga classes at the gym because it is a form of exercise that I enjoy, it challenges me on both strength, stability, and flexibility, and works wonders for a bad back and tense shoulders. After attending the course, I became more aware of the spiritual and mental parts of yoga – that yoga is not just about the body, but rather a balance between the body and the mind. I like that it is a form of exercise that takes account of the mental aspect – that we are not just individuals in a world, but that body and soul is connected and must be treated as such. Gaining a greater awareness about myself has become easier through yoga practice. I have learnt to become more aware of how my emotions influence the physical side of me.

The YQ respondent above does not use words that are particularly spiritually charged (other than the words ‘spiritual’ and ‘soul’), terms that stem from Sanskrit, or yoga terminology. Rather she uses relatively ‘mundane’ phrases that nevertheless implicate a mind-body connection, and a level of holistic (or at least psychosomatic) imagery. The respondent points to what she perceives as deeper connections between the body, the mind, and emotions – and notes that she uses yoga practice to enhance her self-awareness.

Yoga is as such not very different from alternative practices whose explicit goal is to enhance mental and physical wellbeing through a psychosomatic or holistic approach. Anne Kalvig (2013) notes that in the alternative milieu “[t]herapy is often about the body. Alternative, spiritually oriented therapy does not see the body isolated from other components such as soul, spirit, or energy, but closely related to these – as an example of holistic understanding” (2013, 42).⁴⁸ Among the respondents who see yoga as something more than physical exercise, a common perspective is that yoga to some extent belongs in a holistic category.

Some respondents explicitly allude to concepts such as soul, spirit, or energy (and I will write more about these later). Most, however, focus on a relatively secular understanding of the mind-body interaction. In her narrative the respondent above comes close to the ‘norm’ in the material, which approximates Kalvig’s (2013) definition of holism where her respondents says that “body and soul is connected and must be treated as such.” Both YQ respondents and

⁴⁸ My translation

Kalvig's (2013) interviewees understand a basic division between mind and body and wish to bring these closer together through healing and practice. A quote from Nadia is quite telling.

I think the short answer would be that [yoga is] a yoking of the mind and body and spirit, and that is very much how I have experienced it in my own life. It seems like my life story has been this process of trying to integrate these various parts of my life, and yoga does that.

The holistic aspect of the discourse explains how yoga connects the body and mind in an 'authentic' fashion. It is not difficult to understand why many respondents place much emphasis on the mind-body connection and use the mental aspects of yoga in a shift from being achievement yogis to lifestyle yogis.

However, for both categories the somatic body plays an important role. Not only is the body the medium for practice, but it is often when the body's functioning is decreased that respondents actualize yoga. Seeking healing or looking for relief from physical aches, injuries or illnesses is a central factor for starting and maintaining a yoga practice for several respondents. Also, with the more physically challenged respondents it becomes clear that the mind-body connection and the possibility of a meditative focus in or after the practice plays an important role.

5.4 Yoga as a health-promoting practice

In YQ Item 32 and 33 I found that 47 respondents had selected "seeking better health and/ or healing" as a primary factor for their involvement with yoga, and 25 respondents had chosen it as their secondary factor. In Item 34, many respondents have commented on their yoga-and-health connections, with various length and depth to their narratives. This is an example of the positive sides to the anonymous questionnaire method, where respondents answer in their own time and have control over the situation and what they include and not in their narratives.

Several respondents mention back pain as their primary (or one of several) reasons to start yoga, and shoulder- and neck pains and tensions are also quite common. Some respondents cite having been sick (but do not mention what their illness was) and have used yoga to '*...do something good for my body and mind,*' or to gently start training again as part of recovery. A holistic or psychosomatic way of addressing health is present here.

The respondent stories that explicitly revolve around somatic health and healing can be placed on a continuum from relatively 'mundane' muscular or skeletal issues (such as hip-, back-, or

shoulder pain due for example to previous over-exercise, to surgeries, too much office work, or stress) to serious and/ or chronic physical issues. Some respondents allude to mental illnesses, and many of the responses to Item 34 reveal that their health issues are tied to stress. Respondents' health issues tend to have compound reasons; it is often not only one thing that ails them.

5.4.1 Stress relief

Stress relief, and the influence of stress on the physical body, is something several respondents state as their primary reason to start a yoga practice. However, stress is so common that I assume it is sometimes understated or underreported in my material. Stress and stress-related problems are often presented as an 'epidemic' in contemporary society, and as such, stress relief is a key legitimating factor (and selling point) of yoga and meditation practices.

I felt really bad, lonely and stressed. Moved to Sweden, worked freelance, sat a lot by the computer and ate a lot of sweets. Had problems with my back. I saw an ad in the little town and went there to ask if this course is even for beginners...

I was ill, stressed and my body was in a really terrible shape. Overweight, always tired, back and shoulder problems and stiff. When I tried Yoga for a while, I started to get better, calmer, clear minded, more flexible and stronger. I have never been a huge fan of work out sessions but Yoga feels differently. I really love it. It changed my life for the better in so many ways.

These respondents' stories could be understood as a reframing of one of Gooren's (2010) institutional factors, where conversion happens due to dissatisfaction with religious inactivity. Here, however, respondents cite a dissatisfaction with *physical inactivity* (for various reasons) and a few other related social and emotional problems. This points to compound reasons to start a practice, and to the role of stress in the context of both mental and physical pain and discomfort.

A couple of respondents mention the effect of yoga as a stress-relieving practice.

I was struggling, both emotionally and physically while being pregnant and postpartum. I did prenatal yoga. [...] I have always revisited yoga thought my 20s and early 30s. I had to become emotionally mature to establish a somewhat regular practice. I came to yoga for healing and weight loss and the value of non-asana yoga has added significance to "my yoga."

Yoga is not only seen as beneficial for people with stress-related muscular or skeletal problems. Pre-natal yoga (and increasingly post-natal/ parent-and-baby yoga classes) has become popular in the last decades. Yoga in this context is thought to decrease stress in a high-pressure situation, to prepare the body for birth, and even to help with post-partum problems.

5.4.2 Chronic illness

Other respondents have serious and/ or chronic pre-existing conditions, and some have been prescribed yoga by a physician or physiotherapist. For those suffering from chronic illnesses yoga seems to be understood as a positive, active way to handle or minimize the symptoms. One respondent, for example, has had chronic inflammation in the arms over several years, and did not get enough help from conventional treatment. Another respondent turned to yoga because her doctor, due to her diagnosis of fibromyalgia, recommended it. The respondent quoted below has a similar story, where a diagnosis of ME/ burnout led to her being referred to a retreat center which, according to their own website, offers a therapy that is a combination of Eastern meditation with Indian roots, and Western psychotherapy, with weight on body-oriented humanistic psychology.⁴⁹

I got sick in sept 2012. ME/burned out. Laid in bed for two years. My doctor informed me about [a particular retreat center] after I begged her to give me some alternative for me to be able to improve my health. My doctor has never informed any patients about [this place] before. I did not know anything about what to expect when I came there. I was ready to try whatever they could offer. There I learned about Byron Katie and her work, and the work of the Indian mystic Osho. I learned active Meditation and learned to look inward and started to learn to feel my inner body, the value of letting feelings and emotion be welcomed as they are, and to be my own witness. Learned about awareness. When I got home again my friend told me about medi yoga [...] in January 2015 I started instructor education. Not to teach but to commit myself to learning and practice. Today after practicing every day since my health situation are amazingly improved. I am not to find in bed during daytime. The fatigue has been gone for a few weeks. I can have periods of low energy, but recently this period has lasted a day, not weeks as I am used to. I feel I am capable to live an active and beautiful life.

⁴⁹ I have redacted the name of this retreat center for privacy reasons.

After her stay at the retreat center, the respondent returned home and was introduced to medical yoga by a friend. She notes that due to dedicated practice her health has improved drastically, and that she now can have what can be thought of as a ‘normal life.’

What is particularly interesting about the chronically ill respondents is that they do not believe that yoga can ‘save’ them or be a cure for their illness. Yoga does not have a soteriological function. However, for respondents, yoga is comparable to other forms of exercise, diet, and medication in that it can help alleviate symptoms, prevent new flare-ups, and manage pain. Yoga has a meaningful function for the chronically ill respondents as they use the practice to work on (and with) their challenges and to improve their everyday life. Below I will discuss the notion of yoga as CAM (complementary and alternative therapy) in depth, but already here it is possible to note that these respondents are like those Newcombe (2012) terms ‘pragmatics’ who use yoga for its mental and physical health benefits and are less concerned with metaphysical implications.

5.4.3 Mental health

Yoga practice, particularly conceived as a mind-body (or holistic) therapy has an important function for respondents who deal with mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. One respondent writes that she was at “*one of the lowest points in my life and could not find any help.*” She read about yoga and thought it was possible that the practice could help, so she started going to a free yoga course with a friend.

Narratives relating to illness and healing fall in under Gooren’s *contingency factors* – “An acutely felt crisis or turning point (for example illness [...]); A religion-based solution to the crisis (for example, healing [...])” (2010, 139). A respondent finds him- or herself in a crisis or a turning point, and the solution or part of the recovery/ reframing process is yoga practice. However, it is deeply problematic that some respondents, particularly those who struggle with mental health issues, do not receive sufficient help from the public health services. The depressive episode of the respondents above is reiterated in other stories. In addition, many respondents who struggle or have struggled with mental illnesses or chronic disease find that conventional medicine cannot do enough.

On the other hand, some participants who have struggled with mental health such as the YQ respondent below have received help through the public health system. This respondent

turned to yoga *after* the crisis, as a form of self-help during the recovery and rehabilitation process.

I had a serious depressive episode and attempted suicide. I then had a long admittance to a psychiatric ward. When leaving care, I was strongly recommended to work with my breathing and relaxation, preferably through some kind of group activity. I sought information on the available options in my city and found a flyer from a local yoga/healing center. I started attending classes there to learn breathing and relaxation techniques and found that yoga practice (they had their own special brand related to kundalini, but more vigorous) did me good both physically and mentally.

Rehabilitation through breathing and relaxation in a group setting came “strongly recommended” by physicians when the respondent left the psychiatric ward, which points to yoga and meditation becoming increasingly normalized as complementary therapy. The practice (and the group setting) made the respondent feel improved both somatically and psychologically. It seems that respondents seek out yoga more in the aftermath of a personal crisis, rather than in an acute phase. However, the idea of a ‘kundalini awakening’⁵⁰ is interesting regarding how serious mental illness can be managed in the yoga milieu. One respondent notes that s/he

Had a kundalini awakening, and my friend is a teacher in yoga. She said that yoga would help me through the symptoms.

An internet search reveals that the concept is alluded to on several yoga websites where connections between a so-called kundalini awakening and acute mental illness is frequently discussed.⁵¹ The concept is often used as a euphemism for a psychotic or nervous breakdown. It is not a given that this respondent has experienced a breakdown, but the use of the word ‘symptoms’ indicate that this experience can be linked to illness (or, at least, an uncomfortable experience). The discourse around kundalini awakening is an example of

⁵⁰ The idea of kundalini awakening is predicated upon a notion of a ‘subtle body’ with *chakras* (energy centers) and *nadis* (energy channels) in the body. The kundalini energy is envisioned as a snake sleeping in the lowest chakra, and when it awakens it moves (energetically) upwards through the chakras and emerges out, which allegedly is when a yogi experiences a form of enlightenment.

⁵¹ I did a simple google search for ‘kundalini awakening’ and ‘kundalini awakening and mental illness’ (20.11.18)

structures within the yoga milieu where symptoms of severe mental illness can be reframed within a yoga paradigm.

5.4.4 Yoga and addiction

Yoga as a cure or a support in a journey towards sobriety is an issue that is brought up by two respondents: interviewee “Tom” and one YQ respondent.⁵² Tom started using as an adolescent and was addicted to drugs for almost twenty years. In a rehabilitation center, he encountered yoga (or yoga encountered him), and in Tom’s narrative he emphasizes that he knew right away yoga was the ‘right thing’ for him.

[...] Yoga in addiction treatment... that was the way I met yoga. It astonishes me every day, and I am grateful every day. For... whether it was I who found yoga, or it was yoga that found me, I am not sure. However, I am very grateful for yoga because it has helped me with so many things.

[...] I was like a tight steel coil when I became clean after twenty years. Really, the term inner turbulence is a weak term. Then it was extra satisfactory to discover that one really with the help of some easy things could change that condition.

[...] As soon as I got there [to the rehabilitation center], I said, “Yes all right, does anyone want to try yoga?” I had always thought and known that I would do meditation, but then I did not know that yoga and meditation went hand in hand. So, when I said yes to yoga it came like... without me thinking about it, into, up in a pose, and BANG, there it was (laughs). So, it is like... you get chills. It was really weird. But today I see that... you can say, or think, was that a coincidence, right? It can be understood that way, but I do not see it as coincidence.

Unlike most of the other narratives of respondents’ involvement with yoga, Tom’s quote mirrors a more immediate or spontaneous conversion experience familiar from early conversion literature (see for example James 1958 [1902]). For Tom, going to rehabilitation and starting with yoga became a catalyst for a long career as a yoga teacher.

However, Tom’s is not a conversion experience that is context-less. Rather, his story is full of individual, processual agency and has a dramatic narrative structure. Throughout the interview he emphasizes that in his perspective very little of what has happened in his life has been a coincidence. As such, Tom’s story can function as a variant of the ‘hero’s journey’

⁵² The YQ respondent claims that yoga has helped him or her to cure drug addiction – but the respondent unfortunately does not elaborate further on his/ her experiences.

(Campbell 2008 [1949]). This is a narrative structure intimately familiar in most cultures.⁵³ Variants of the hero's journey (or heroine's journey, which arguably is a little different, see Carriger 2020) is a motif many yoga practitioners consciously or unconsciously use to self-narrate their yoga journeys. However, in Tom's case the narrative motif is clearer than for most.

In conversion literature, a crisis can be described as a “[...] catalyst – either internal or external – stimulating an individual to seek change or become placed within a context of change” (Smith and Stewart 2011, 810, see also Rambo 1993 and Gooren 2010). The crisis as a catalyst is clear in Tom's case, as he had both the external stimuli of the rehabilitation center and the internal stimuli of seeking sobriety and change. For most respondents the crisis is not as clear, or it is more implicit and lower key. Where respondents like Tom (and other practitioners who have struggled with addiction⁵⁴) differ from other respondents in the YQ project is that yoga has an explicit soteriological (although a this-worldly sense) function. The practice literally becomes a lifesaver in a time of crisis.

5.5 Discussion

The health category can be understood as a continuum. Beginning with yoga-as-exercise on one end, it becomes clear that beyond (or beneath) the generally positive fitness narratives from respondents there are deep established cultural meanings concerning the body – and women's bodies especially. Yoga for health and healing is on the same spectrum, but here the aesthetic of the fitness discourse is downplayed in favor of a more medical (both a biomedical and complementary) discourse, which in its furthest reach becomes yoga-as-soteriology.

The discussion about yoga and health is placed in a context of contemporary Nordic /western postural yoga. Although there are historical and current connections to the Indian 'side' of the yoga-and-health sector I have chosen not to engage with experiences or aspects of yogic health interventions in a (primarily) Hindu nationalist context. However, Suzanne Newcombe (2020) has summarized the Indian development in her chapter “Yoga and Meditation as Health Intervention” in the newly published *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation*

⁵³ In short, the “mono-myth” chronicles the protagonist's travels where s/he overcomes a number of difficulties on the way S/he meets helpers in different forms, eventually conquers some antagonistic force, and then returns to society “with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell 2008 [1949]).

⁵⁴ See for example <http://backinthering.no/>, <http://yogaforlivet.no/>, or <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/therapy-treatment/yoga> (all accessed 04.12.18)

Studies – and the chapter presents some conclusions that are relevant for the global experience. Newcombe (2020, 164-165) writes that

Significantly, today’s world – including India – is characterised by medical pluralism [...]. ‘Yogic’ and meditative healthcare interventions are one of several possible approaches that an individual may try in hopes of alleviating a particular health issue. Patterns of engagement with this diversity of health care providers vary in distinctive ways between groups with particular cultures, caste, social class and income levels [...]. But despite these structure differences in access and engagement, yoga and meditation interventions are now part of the menu from which individuals may choose in seeking to improve their health and wellbeing.

This quote points to the universality of the yoga experience from a perspective of health improvement and at the same time to group – and individual differences in access and engagement with yoga as a health practice. In this project, health emerges as important aspects of respondents’ yoga conversion narratives in many different iterations.

This pattern is supported by findings from local and international studies and surveys (see for example Steen Haugen 2016, Yoga in America survey 2016, Bjerrum and Pilgaard 2014, Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013). The Yoga in America survey,⁵⁵ for example, presents aspects of health, fitness, and wellbeing as the most important reasons for starting (and continuing) a yoga practice. In their list, the top five reasons are flexibility (61 percent of respondents); stress relief (56 percent); general fitness (49 percent); improved overall health (49 percent) and physical fitness (44 percent). Additionally, yoga practitioners are much more involved in other forms of fitness and exercise (for example cycling, running, or weightlifting) than non-practitioners, and 73 percent of yoga practitioners in the YiA survey (2016) report that they feel physically strong.

In a similar vein, Steen Haugen (2016) reports mental and physical wellbeing as what motivates her respondents to practice, and that half her respondents report that physical activity is generally very important to them. Suzanne Newcombe also reports that “[...] about half of practitioners of Iyengar yoga do not imbue their practice with a spiritual meaning but persist primarily for perceived benefits in terms of health, fitness and flexibility” (2012, 206).

⁵⁵ https://www.yogaalliance.org/Learn/About_Yoga/2016_Yoga_in_America_Study/Highlights (accessed 04.12.18)

5.5.1 Exercise, fitness, and body aesthetics

Although the section above on respondent perspectives on exercise and fitness is relatively short, there is no doubt that fitness is important. I estimate that (to some extent) respondents underreport the exercise and fitness aspect. There could be many reasons for it – for example, that the fitness aspect is seen as a ‘given’ result of styles such as Ashtanga or other more physically challenging styles. Other styles or other individuals focus more on de-stressing or spiritual practice aspects chooses to discount the fitness aspects (perhaps as less ‘worthy’?).

One interviewee (Sara) speaks about how in popular culture yoga tends to be presented for comedic effect, with the ubiquitous chanting hippie women wearing loose-fitting multi-colored dresses. The way I read her statement Sara highlights that the gendering of yoga in popular understanding takes away from the exercise effect the practice can have.

A friend of mine was a yoga teacher in a prison in Oslo. There they thought that yoga is for women, which means that it is only light exercise and not strenuous enough for ‘us men’. But she is a hardcore yoga teacher, in a sense she gives them the worst of the worst. You become really exhausted after her classes. So, they had really struggled, and totally respected yoga after the classes, telling her that this was hard!

The more physically challenging a yoga class or style is, the more value or status it seems to get in a masculine milieu -- or with certain categories of yoga practitioners. As I have detailed in the chapter on yoga history physical yoga and fitness has a long-standing relationship. Without the cross-cultural fitness movement, modern postural yoga would not have developed one of many popular fitness practices in the contemporary world.

As Mark Singleton (2010) and Andrea Jain (2015) point out, modern postural yoga is a malleable tradition that responds and adapts to its social contexts, both historically and contemporarily. Yoga’s historical roots in Europe is in body cultivation, with the aims to create and enhance fitness and health both mentally and physically. In this context health and fitness is connected to a certain set of values such as individualism, freedom, and progress (Steen Haugen 2016, Strauss 2005). This means that fitness, health, and the values body-and-mind cultivation connote is something that can be ‘bought’ or cultivated through the practice of yoga. As such, I argue that the discourse on yoga as a health-promoting practice is fundamentally connected to the health paradigm in the modern west (and increasingly on a global scale). Sports researchers Gro Hjelmeland Grimsbø and Gunn Engelsrud note that

In recent national as well as international health strategies there is an increasing interest in physical activity and fitness practices. To achieve balance between activity and rest is regarded as important to maintain health and a good life (Grimsbø 2003). Today, fitness praxis and physical activity have achieved high status in Western societies especially, but also in other affluent, industrialized, urban modernities, and are regarded as tools for achieving better health and quality of life. (2005, 227).

Already in the demographics chapter I noted that yoga and other forms of physical activity is connoted with high status, societal change, and modern, urbanized living. This is visible as societal or cultural scripts (or for some social classes, an imperative), but is most explicit on an individual level in respondents' moods and motivations. Mental and physical development and performance seem to be key terms for the respondents who highlight exercise and fitness in their responses. Well-being is attached to optimization, and on the somatic continuum yoga-as-exercise is a popular theme with positive connotations.

Achievement and competition, primarily in the sense of performance improvement, is an aspect Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014) highlight related to their respondents on the fitness side of yoga. Many of their respondents are drawn to the achievement element of yoga practice (doing the poses in a correct fashion) – even though “[...] yoga participation seldom is connected with a traditional understanding of competition. But perhaps one can speak of a personal form of competition or achievement optic, where yoga appeals to a bodily sensation of performance improvement” (2014, 56-57). Seen through this lens performance optimization makes sense for YQ respondents as well, depending on which type of yoga they practice. Correct sequence and alignment are highly sought after in styles such as Iyengar yoga or the very popular and physical Ashtanga style, while other yoga forms approach *asana* with more adaptability and focus on personal functionality. Performance improvement is an important aspect, as yoga practice poses a challenge for the individual, aiming at both the body and the mind.

Although *achievement* is an important factor, competition is quite different. In the YQ and interviews respondents explicitly highlight that yoga should not be competitive. The consensus is that competition and achievement is personal rather than interpersonal. Interpersonal *non-competitiveness* in yoga practice is something that draws respondents in, and that keeps them practicing. As such, Bjerrum and Pilgaard's (2014) 'achievement optic' could in the context of yoga research be described as more interior-oriented and individualistic than in other forms of sport/ exercise. This characterization can partially be

predicated on the fact that although many of the achievement yogis view yoga as exercise and encounter yoga in a gym setting, even at the gym yoga has the ‘flavor’ of a holistic mind-body practice.

Achievement yogis (Bjerrum and Pilgaard 2014) practice at the gym and use yoga as exercise or as a complementary practice to other forms of exercise. In the Danish report respondents have been inspired to practice by seeing others do yoga at their fitness center (ibid., 49). They have scored high on statements such as “I like the feeling of becoming better at doing yoga poses the correct way,” “I do yoga because it is fun to challenge my body,” “I do yoga because it is healthy,” and “I do yoga to get a nice body” (ibid., 56). These motivations are reflected in the YQ as well – particularly in the statements that involve health, exercise, and yoga as a physical challenge.

However, statements like the latter (doing yoga to get a nice body) are not commonly (or explicitly) voiced among the Nordic yoga respondents. Very few YQ respondents or interviewees explicitly state that achieving a toned, slim, aesthetically pleasing body was a factor for starting, or a motivation for practice. Rather, respondents use words (or perhaps euphemisms) such as “strong” or “fit.” Other researchers find similar patterns. Lars Jørun Langøien (2013) notes that his informants (Ashtanga practitioners) tend to associate the ‘yoga ideal’ – the strong, skinny, and perceived healthy body -- with having both bodily and mental discipline along with that spiritual progress.

5.5.1.1 Body aesthetics

The combination of bodily and mental discipline, body aesthetics, and moral worth is long-standing in the female dominated history of yoga in the west. Suzanne Newcombe, in her 2019 book *Yoga in Britain: Stretching Spirituality and Educating Yogis*, devotes large parts of a chapter to an investigation of yoga and female physical culture. As mentioned in the historical overview, Singleton (2010) highlights the importance of line gymnastics and health-promoting exercises in the development and popularization of postural yoga. These were predominately female activities, and women played an important role in making postural yoga a household fitness practice.

From the late nineteenth century onwards, so-called Swedish gymnastics (particularly the very popular Ling system) were considered suitable for the female physique and after some time a suitable career path for women. During the first half of the twentieth century, several

other fitness systems gained popularity, and women's participation in exercise and fitness rose to new heights. They participated not only for health and beauty – but also for the 'betterment of the national population'. Most of the activities in the British female fitness movement were taught in an adult education evening class structure (like in Bjerrum and Pilgaard's (2014) report from the Danish contemporary yoga scene). Not only was yoga considered a suitable form of exercise with the added benefit of enhancing beauty, but there was also a social aspect to the practice. However, Newcombe (2019) notes, the fitness movement in the mid-twentieth century had certain implications – and directions.

Women attended keep-fit classes for a variety of reasons – not the least of which was likely to be personal enjoyment. However, keeping the individual body fit and healthy in the mid-twentieth century was also a goal associated with a greater social and moral good. Certain types of exercise became associated with class distinctions. Middle class women have a longer tradition of interest in physical exercise as part of gender and class identity. Women of other classes have only more recently acquired the leisure and education to devote to physical activity for health and enjoyment. (Newcombe 2019, 95)

The connection to gender and social class is visible also in the contemporary yoga scene. My material consists primarily of highly educated, middle class women who have the financial and social resources to be able to dedicate themselves to yoga practice. the combination of getting fit, learning something new, and meeting with new (or existing) friends is a very important motivational factor. The issue of morality, however, is less explicit but no less pertinent. Below I will discuss a possible interpretation of morality in connection with body image and body feeling in the context of fitness exercise.

Singleton (2010) notes that from the early days of yoga popularization there has been an extreme focus on yoga imagery. It is not only the various modern yoga gurus who have benefited from the power of the image – even in medieval yoga manuscripts and in other visual and material evidence depictions (miniature paintings, drawings, sculptures, temple carvings) of yogis in different positions proliferate (Powell 2018, Birch 2018). However, the connection to health and beauty is a recent construct. Newcombe (2019) notes that claims about yoga's effect on health and beauty were ubiquitous in popular yoga books for women in the 1960's. During the 1970's in Britain (and the rest of the Anglophone world), media portrayed yoga in a way that emphasized health and beauty. Women were portrayed as slim and toned in tight-fitting clothes and in a style that emulated the commercialism of glossy magazines and advertisements. The primary selling point was youth, glamour, and

mainstream ideals, and the consumer market “[...] emphasised and glorified a youthful rather than womanly body” (p. 96). Yoga for weight loss became important in this period, and Newcombe points out how common the conflation of body size and good health became in popular media.

A decrease in ideal body size with associated health benefits was also a motivation to begin a practice of yoga. The support for physical fitness and weight control was clearly an appeal to yoga. One article in *Yoga and Health* described an Iyengar yoga class in 1972:

Like most classes in the West, this one is heavily weighted towards the ladies – who also sometimes appear to be heavily weighted. Weight, however, would appear to be removed in direct ratio to attendance at Iyengar classes. (2019, 99)

Looking at physiological effects of yoga there is little evidence that yoga practice (unless it is extremely physically strenuous) leads to weight loss. However, the emphasis on body shape and weight has not changed dramatically since the 1970’s; the contemporary yoga scene is still preoccupied with body aesthetics. Liina Puustinen and Matti Rautaniemi (2015, 15) note that holistic activities⁵⁶ (yoga included) “[...] act to justify focusing on one’s own body, health, looks and experiences”. This focus is underpinned by how the ideal yoga body is presented in magazines and social media, and the commercial fitness ideology that is part of the modern yoga scene. Doing yoga to get a nice body is a selling point even in 2020 (perhaps more than ever), and the imagery of idealized female health and beauty is the same, whether in yoga magazines or in the contemporary social media yoga industry. It would be naive to think that respondents in this project were unaffected by the aesthetic imperative in yoga culture (and in general pop culture, for that sake).

In their 2005 article *Young Women’s Fitness Practices: A Critical View*, Gro H. Grimsbø and Gunn Engelsrud note how young Norwegian women’s fitness practices are enmeshed with cultural ideals about exercise and aesthetics. In this context the article is relevant because yoga to a large degree is a fitness practice – and because most practitioners are women. Even though respondents in this project have a wider age span than Grimsbø and Engelsrud’s young respondents they affected by the same fitness discourses as girls are. The difference, perhaps, is that my grown up (and approaching middle age) respondents (of whom about half

⁵⁶ The predominance of women in so-called holistic activities (yoga included) can be explained by arguing that they both challenge and affirm traditional feminine roles. For example, by taking better care of herself, a woman can take better care of others.

are providers of yoga) may have a clearer and more critical view of the body scripts and cultural ideals interwoven in their culture. However, a critical view does not mean immunity – and this is where a gendered perspective on fitness practices becomes interesting.

In their paper Grimsbø and Engelsrud (2005) maintain that society is determinative (sub-consciously perhaps more than consciously) for how people perceive their bodies.

[M]odernity requires people to process unpredictable and rapid changes in society. The body is regarded as a site where such changes are made manifest and expressed (Johansson 1996 and 2001). In order to meet such rapid social change, a strong and hardened body is seen as more resistant than a weak and soft body [...] (Grimsbø and Engelsrud 2005, 227).

This may seem a reductive and over-simplified explanation for a series of complex discourse negotiations. However, in societies like the contemporary Nordics that are predicated on *control* (both self-control and via the social order), not being *active* -- especially in the case of (young) women – represents a threat of losing control. There is danger in the uncontrolled (and uncontrollable) body, which is why examining fitness practices such as yoga where the explicit aim is control (over the breath, the mind, or physical achievements) is interesting. Yoga can be “[...] interpreted as a project that keeps established cultural meanings in order” (Grimsbø and Engelsrud 2005, 229).

What are these established cultural meanings? In my material, since I have not explicitly asked about the ‘deeper’ reasons behind why respondents practice, established cultural meanings emerge between the lines as a matter of course or an obviousness. Fitness and yoga practice is something that not only feels physically good but has a moral value. Physical activity, regular practice and performance achievement connotes *being good*. Grimsbø and Engelsrud (2005, 230-231) make some salient points based on the statements of their composite respondent Linda (not the same Linda as in this project). Linda contrasts positive and negative aspects of exercising and connects them to her self-image. Exercise does feel good – but to be allowed to rest and to not perceive herself as lazy and ashamed she must exercise first. It is a double, ambiguous perspective that explicitly connects physical activity and interior feeling with moral worth. Grimsbø and Engelsrud (2005) interpret her statements in a

[...] broader cultural context where the lazy and/ or tired person has low social status. Being a responsible and good person is connected to going to fitness practice. [...] Her statement is

influenced by the idea that to keep the body fit affords a high social value. Linda connects the motivational factor both to keeping her bodily appearance “in shape”, and to increased vitality and sensation (2005, 230).

Social value is, in my analysis, a key to understand meaning and motivation behind yoga practice. Respondents’ socio-cultural and economic contexts explain why they conform to established cultural meanings about fitness and exercise – and partially why yoga is a choice that makes sense within these contexts. Grimsbø and Engelsrud’s (2005) interpretation of Linda’s constant negotiation between activity and rest, and therefore between potential low and high social status, fit well with what I read ‘between the lines’ in my material.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas’ 1984 text *Purity and Danger* is considered a classic in literature which deals with symbolic theory and cultural value patterns. Cultural value patterns lie at the core of Grimsbø and Engelsrud’s (2005) analysis. Different societies enact different rituals to avoid or reduce disorder. Control over the body is a central aspect in these rituals, “[...] in differentiating between inclusion, exclusion, and the process of separation and creation of meaning. [...] Certain moral values are upheld through ideas of danger that can threaten the borders of the body. [...] What is ‘impure’ does not fit in the social pattern” (Douglas 1984, Grimsbø and Engelsrud 2005, 231-232). Differentiation between what is pure and impure (dangerous and not dangerous to the social order) is perhaps one of the few universal cultural patterns. In this context they also relate to gender – all the time contemporary Western culture is preoccupied with controlling the female body.

As I have noted above, body shape and appearance are seldom explicit themes respondents bring up. However, as they are subject to the same discourses as the rest of society, cultural values surrounding (the female) body are actualized. Fitness is presented as a solution to some of the ambiguities surrounding the body. As Grimsbø and Engelsrud (2005, 232) write: for the modern commercial fitness sector to work, there must be a market with problems the sector can solve. Women’s bodies, with their curves, weight, and shape are presented as a problem. Without the ideal of the toned, strong, and slender body in opposition the undesirability and potential danger of ‘softness and vagueness in body shape’ there would be no need for a commercial fitness sector, and fitness/ exercise as a coping tool. “To exercise thus represents a pure activity or a ritual to achieve purity” (Grimsbø and Engelsrud 2005, 232). Fitness and exercise represent being in control, and not practicing connotes the opposite. Young women connect much of their self-worth and self-valuation to their body

appearance and their exercise regimes. This points the analysis to a deeper cultural problem in contemporary society: “The subjective body is not regarded as valuable as it is: *the body has to be exercised to be valued*” (2005, 234). By engaging in commercial fitness young women ‘buy into’ a particular aesthetic that is narrow in more senses than one. The ideal body, which is a body that figures prominently in the yoga scene (in real life and online), confers both social status and moral worth.

There are of course many competing narratives in the global yoga scene, and the ‘ideal fitness body’ does not go unchallenged. Focusing on oneself through a holistic activity and engaging with it in a commercial fitness context does not necessarily mean uncritical engagement with the deep, cultural scripts concerning the body. Online I find several teachers, initiatives, and campaigns that aim to diversify, de-colonialize, and de-idealize the white, slim yoga body and the relatively narrow room for diversity in the yoga scene.⁵⁷ It can be argued that yoga practice as it is presented in this project is not the same as commercial fitness, in that it connotes ‘more’ than only exercise (healing, spirituality, exoticism, etc.). However, I would argue that yoga is part of the fitness sector and therefore subject to the same discourses. The established cultural meanings concerning (women’s) bodies and the ambiguities inherent in the definitions and practices of fitness (and rest) play out in the yoga scene as well. For respondents, engagement with (and awareness of) these discourses vary, as does the way they reflect upon and express the ‘ideal yoga body’.

To some extent I would argue that the contemporary situation, particularly for women who practice yoga, is not very different from how Newcombe (2019) describes the scene in mid-twentieth century Britain onwards. Practitioners and media

[...] reinforced middle-class ideas of femininity by claiming that yoga provided a woman with increased vitality, beauty, serenity, and implicitly better health. In a medicalised post-war society, these qualities were associated with an individual moral duty to the state, family and self to care for the body. [...] The] means by which to exercise self-control and fitness disciplines are more accessible to the middle and upper classes of society. The popularity of yoga amongst these middle-class British women supports an association between exercise and class. However, many women reported attending yoga courses simply to have an activity that

⁵⁷ See for example Yoga and Body Image Coalition on Facebook, decolonizingyoga.com, or jessamynstanley.com (accessed 17.11.20). Jessamyn Stanley gained recognition through her body positive and inclusive Instagram account @mynameisjessamyn

made them feel happier and provided social contact with other women” (Newcombe 2019, 100).

Certainly, both society and the yoga scene has changed and diversified in the last century. For women, basic human rights and opportunities for equal work and self-expression is no longer a novelty. However, it is interesting to note that even though society has changed quite rapidly, the established cultural meanings concerning the female body are slower to change. From early on in yoga’s popularization in the west the connection to female beauty has been strong. Newcombe (2013) notes that throughout the twentieth century yoga has been packaged as an ‘elixir of health and beauty.’ Personalities like Indra Devi (familiar from the chapter on yoga history) capitalized greatly on Hollywood glamour in marketing her books and classes. The ‘magic’ of a Hollywood transformation through yoga was (and I would argue, still is) an important part of the popularity of yoga among women (and increasingly among men) in the west. However, yoga practitioners (along with everyone else) still must contend with body ideals that for most are unreachable.

5.5.2 The health paradigm

However, when the promise of beauty is combined with a medicalized language that promises improved physiological and mental health/ relaxation, a particular synergy takes place. Health and healing are a central theme not only in contemporary religion but in contemporary western culture more broadly.

Cultural sociologist Eva Illouz (2008) is known for the term ‘therapeutic ethos’ as a form of cultural diagnosis. Ethos, in ordinary parlance, can be thought of as ‘society’s glue’.

However, in an increasingly individualized world a “[...] therapeutic ethos connotes a moral attitude where inner emotions and the self has authority, while ethos traditionally has been founded on external religious or humanistic rules of living.” (Madsen 2017, 12). Max Weber’s description of protestant ethics and ascetic self-denial has fallen behind against a soteriology where salvation can be found in this life through self-realization and the highest possible amount of physical and mental health (Lears 1983 in Madsen 2017). No gods or higher beings are responsible for salvation – the authority and responsibility rests with the individual herself.

The same individualized authority (or maxim) is visible in a health context. Therapeutic solutions to life’s problems no longer happens only in doctors’ or psychologists’ offices, or in

hospitals. For many respondents, yoga has become a way to take control of their own health through exercise, or in a context of therapy for somatic or psychiatric issues. Variation in opinion on effect and meaning is standard in respondents' engagement with yoga as health/healing. The health paradigms Nordic yoga practitioners operate within are influenced by discourses within the public health sector (biomedicine), in CAM (complementary and alternative medicine), and partially in un-organized alternative/ New Age milieus. The latter two are interconnected and function primarily as a supplement to western-scientific biomedicine.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”⁵⁸ I follow WHO's relatively broad definition in this project. It is clear that as a starting point, respondents agree that health is not just the absence of bodily or mental dysfunction but involves the individual's experience of wellbeing on a more encompassing (or holistic) level. Most narratives in this project deal with well-being, health, and healing either explicitly or implicitly. Experiences of good health and the effects of yoga range from ‘feeling good in both body and mind’, to using the practice to manage and mitigate serious and/ or chronic physical and/ or mental illness. Many YQ respondents are or have been in close contact with the public health sector and various forms of biomedicine, and use yoga to give themselves a better, more high-functioning life *with* their illness or pain. Some even refer to yoga in an almost soteriological fashion, as something that has ‘saved’ them from a life of chronic stress, addiction, or mental illness.

5.5.2.1 Yoga and a biomedical discourse

The biomedical discourse is without a doubt dominant in contemporary western culture – and in the yoga scene. Steen Haugen (2016) notes (with reference to Strauss 2005), that

The biomedical discourse has come to influence Modern Postural Yoga to a great degree, and the techniques practiced are often explained on anatomical and biomechanical levels. The idea and trend of validating yogic philosophy and practices through science was introduced early in the Western yoga tradition as a way to heighten the value of yoga, and is even more popular today (p. 43).

⁵⁸ <https://www.who.int/about/governance/constitution> (accessed 05.09.21)

Anatomy, biomechanics, and health benefits are core teachings in most popular postural yoga styles. In Ashtanga vinyasa yoga, a fast-flowing and athletic style, some mention is made of the perceived health benefits of the poses and sequences. However, the focus in Ashtanga is gymnastic compared to for example Iyengar yoga (despite their common progenitor Krishnamacharya). Iyengar founders were “[...] very interested in using yoga to address medical conditions and improve quality of life for those in pain (Iyengar, Path to Holistic Health)” (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 308). In Iyengar yoga (and in many other forms of physical yoga) there is much emphasis on the sequencing of postures to achieve the desired physical (or mental) effects. According to Newcombe (2013) all 200 yogic postures that are detailed in Iyengar’s seminal book *Light on Yoga* comes with detailed descriptions of their purported health benefits.

It is in a sense obvious why asana yoga became so popular among western people when they were met with claims of significant psycho-physical benefits from the practice – such as Hasselle-Newcombe (2005) explains here:

The physiological effects of the asana assist in this process – in certain positions, the blood pressure drops, in others, the nervous system is stimulated. By learning about alignment and sequencing, while paying attention to the inner somatic experience, students are encouraged to develop an increasing awareness of the physical body, breath, and mind. It is the intention in Iyengar yoga that muscles will be taught new ways of working that will heal past injuries and prevent future strain. [...] Those with remedial or medical conditions might be given a specific sequence to stimulate or rest particular areas of the body. In Iyengar yoga, the emphasis is always on the direct experience of personal asana practice – the nourishing of an increasing awareness and control of the body, breath, and mind” (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 308).

In a sense, this quote sums up the logic of physical yoga in a health perspective. Postures have physiological effects, teachers say, and learning postures and series of interlinked postures leads to an increased awareness of the inner life, both mentally and physically. The logic tells that the postures can strengthen and heal the physical body, while also influencing the breathing apparatus (and a practitioner’s relation to the breath) and the mind.

It is clear from the literature and from the respondents in this project that the biomedical discourse that surrounds yoga (and meditation and other Eastern-oriented healing practices) is a very important legitimizing and motivating factor for practitioners. Although those who Newcombe (2013, 77) calls ‘significant popularizers of yoga’ (such as B.K.S. Iyengar and his

daughter Geeta) use a biomedical language to describe the effects of yoga they do not claim the same efficacy as biomedicine. However, the early popularizers tended to attribute their own good health and longevity to yoga. In addition to their claims of biomedical benefits of yoga postures their own life stories become important legitimization strategies. The self-presentations of

[...] these influential teachers have created a kind of archetypal interaction with the yoga space as a type of profoundly healing space, separate from the typical healing expected in the offices of a biomedical physician. While the ability of modern yoga āsana to heal in biomedical terms is part of its (modern) foundational myth [...] some of the effects of yoga experienced as “miraculous healing” also involve a transformation of consciousness towards an experiential transcendence of suffering (Newcombe 2013, 77-78).

The progenitors and early popularizers of modern postural yoga have created new forms of healing (and healing spaces) that have actively drawn on biomedical discourse and claims of biomedical effects. At the same time, other legitimizing factors have been in play. Teachers’ own ‘charisma’ and truth/efficiency claims are important. So are students’ own experiences, with innumerable reports of “profoundly transforming effects on both body and mind” (ibid p. 78). These effects sometimes border on the ‘magical’ – which I will discuss further below.

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries claims of yoga’s biomedical effects have remained important. Jannicke Wiel (2020) notes that yoga in the west has had different emphases in different periods, in alignment with the major trends and concerns within the health and fitness field. “Yoga books from the 1950’s – and 1960’s reflects that the concerns at the time was how hormones affected health. In the 1990’s the yoga milieu was occupied by awarding yoga an effect on cardio and endurance, because one at that time was particularly interested in endurance as a factor for good health” (Wiel 2020, 15).

The connection between yoga and cardio/ endurance has never disappeared, although the emphasis has broadened. An interesting example of the discourse surrounding the biomedical efficacy of yoga can be found in Norwegian daily newspaper Aftenposten (12.11.2020), in an article called *When you don’t have much time to exercise: Should you really prioritize yoga?* The article examines the physical benefits of yoga as fitness. The experts interviewed in the article conclude that yoga has several positive effects, but that the effects vary depending on whether it is a ‘soft’ or physically strenuous form. Most forms of yoga will make the practitioner more flexible because the practitioner stretches muscles for several minutes at the

time. Yoga can also strengthen muscles, especially the core musculature, and therefore be particularly effective for back issues.

However, psychologist and professor of public health Silje Wangberg says, the effect on the practitioner's physical strength is less than with ordinary strength training such as weightlifting. The effect on back pain is comparable to physiotherapy and other forms of physical exercise. The cardio effects of yoga are also low, compared to running or other forms of traditional cardio exercise. The experts interviewed nevertheless emphasize yoga's possibilities as a complementary form of exercise, where the musculature around the joints is strengthened through dynamic stretching. This, Wangberg says, gives support and stability in the body and is very positive in the context of injury prevention in other sports. However, whereas yoga is only moderately effective as a form of physical fitness, the article interviewees agree that there are other effects of yoga that may be just as important. Running is not for everyone. "Some want a more varied weekday and seek quality of life in other ways [...] If you for example struggle with some form of injury, poor balance, or anxiety it could be wise to prioritize your time differently" (Wangberg in *Aftenposten* 12.11.20).⁵⁹

The yoga practitioner interviewed in the article emphasizes relaxation and well-being as an important effect of her yoga practice. The well-being and meaning-making aspect of yoga are mentioned in the article. Social anthropologist Lars Jørun Langøien notes that practicing yoga can seem more meaningful to people than other forms of exercise. In Langøien's yoga research projects his respondents come to yoga from a variety of backgrounds, and I see the same pattern in this project. Some respondents use yoga as fitness, others as restitution and stress relief. Some have addiction issues, and others have psychological issues such as anxiety. However, what brings them together is that "[...] yoga became something that gave meaning to their existence, and which they used to focus better physically and mentally. In the beginning yoga was something they had to make time for, but further on it became something they built their everyday life around" (Langøien in *Aftenposten* 12.11.20).⁶⁰ This perspective is especially important for respondents who use yoga in a context of health and healing.

⁵⁹ My translation

⁶⁰ My translation

In their 2014 volume, Jessica Moberg and Göran Ståhle write that the limits for what is included within the public health system always changes, and that knowledge about health and illness is a product of a particular social and cultural context. The same goes for which forms of healing are dominating and sanctioned. In the Nordic yoga context biomedicine is dominant. However, knowledge is subject to renegotiation over time, and it is interesting to see yoga (and other forms of eastern-oriented techniques and therapies) being discussed in various domains.⁶¹ A general point of agreement in contemporary yoga research from a biomedical standpoint, however, is that it is questionable how efficient the practice is as a standalone form of fitness or therapy. In Sweden, for example, yoga and mindfulness have been introduced recently as a method to treat posttraumatic stress. When CAM (complementary and alternative medicine) increasingly is included in biomedical discourse is not unexpected to see that yoga and other eastern-oriented techniques and therapies is disseminated more broadly.

5.5.2.2 Yoga as CAM

Meredith McGuire's (2008) writes that over the last few centuries there have been ongoing processes where religion and medicine have struggled for control over whose definitions and delineations count. In the modern world the 'holy' became the provenance of religion, while medicine dealt with the corporeal and profane. However, between these a space (sometimes called popular religion) opened for elements that did not fit in either category. Among them, "[t]ypical foci were material subjects such as health, security, and progress. McGuire writes that these subjects also are foundational in the contemporary new age-milieu. Today we have high expectations for health through a modern western understanding that the body and the emotions are controllable" (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013, 63).

Health, security, and progress are interconnected in the yoga material. As the analysis moves into yoga as complementary and alternative medicine perspectives on yoga also move from

⁶¹ Yoga and meditation are increasingly popular and mainstreamed practices that also gain headway in the public health sector (both in research and practice). Numerous studies on the benefits of Eastern-origin complementary therapies/ practices (mostly meditation, but also yoga and breathing exercises) have been published in the last decade or so. Some systematic reviews (Pascoe and Bauer 2015, Khanna and Greeson 2013, Balasubramaniam, Telles and Doraiswamy 2012, Da Silva, Ravindran and Ravindran 2009) at least cautiously support the use of yoga and meditation as CAM.

secular-pragmatic understandings of physiology, biomechanics, and biomedicine to perspectives that increasingly overlap with the domain of ‘religion’.

Moberg and Ståhle (2014) note that outside of the public health sector there is a massive supply (and demand) of healing methods building on private initiatives, where actors/providers do not necessarily comply with ‘orthodox’ medical perspectives. Many of these do not hold a biomedical or psychological perspective on people. Rather, their methods are based on ideas of energies, vitality or biopower – and how they influence a person (see also Kalvig 2013). These ideas are shared within alternative medical systems such as homeopathy, Chinese medicine, and Ayurveda – and to some extent in the context of yoga and meditative practices. In the yoga material, however, it is not uncommon for respondents to hold two different motivations at the same time. Respondents can have a holistic view of the human and speak of energies and spirituality, and still be convinced by the efficacy of biomedicine. An example from one of the interviews highlights the perceived therapeutic effects in Kundalini yoga, and the legitimizing function of biomedical research.

It is very specific. You can find kriyas for anger, for the kidneys, for stress, for the pineal gland... it is really aimed at physiology, and what is fun is that it is so specific, very detailed, physiologically written. They have tested it in Sweden and found that it really works. The teachers who educated me have been part of it, been there with different wires and stuff, and seen the effects and that the descriptions really are correct. That is very exciting.

It is interesting to see how seamless and apparently unproblematic and pragmatic the domain crossing between biomedicine and alternative therapy is in this example. Frisk and Åkerbäck (2013) note that in their material (popular religion in Dalarna, Sweden) healing is a common denominator for many of the practice categories, including yoga. In the Dalarna context, healing means using different methods often with a bodily/ somatic focus to “[...] attempt an actualization of several dimensions of human cooperation to achieve some form of ideal state” (p. 61-62). What yoga in the context of CAM seems to imply is that practitioners/clients immerse themselves in a wider well-being culture where the practice becomes one (or one of several) ways to achieve an ideal state of good health, harmony, and well-being.

Despite a tendency to speak from an individualized standpoint there is a distinct social aspect present in a well-being culture. Newcombe (2019), examining the British mid-twentieth century context, writes that “[t]his ‘well-being culture’ was supported by government encouragement towards individual responsibility for personal health. Encouraging personal

well-being was understood as a social good, not just an individual indulgence” (Newcombe 2019, 98). While the situation in contemporary Scandinavia is different (there is for example access to universal health care for citizens) the government still encourages its citizens to take responsibility for their personal health. Using CAM is one way the individual’s responsibility manifests. According to Norway’s National Research Center in Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NAFKAM),⁶² by 2018 37 per cent of the adult population has tried one or more forms of complementary or alternative medicine. They also note that more women than men report using CAM. The “[...] average user of CAM was female, over 40 years of age, with higher education and high income, living in or near a city in Eastern Norway.”⁶³ This demographic is close to identical to the YQ respondents.

When yoga is defined as CAM (complementary and alternative medicine), it is because respondents use yoga for health reasons even though yoga is not traditionally a part of western biomedicine. Suzanne Newcombe (2012) includes yoga in ‘Eastern-origin alternative therapies’ or ‘Eastern traditions of health and wellness.’ This means two things. Yoga as CAM are practices that are distinct from (but have significant overlap with) biomedicine. However, part of the allure (and purported effects) of Eastern practices is due to a perspective understood as a form of Romantic Orientalism (Newcombe 2012, 202).

Although western biomedicine is the dominant part in the relationship the CAM perspective can be used as a critique of western culture and the very biomedicine it is complementary to. Part of the legitimization and popularization of yoga as CAM (or indeed as exercise or spirituality) lies in what Newcombe terms an ‘asymmetrical translation.’ She says there is “[...] for some, an idealization of Eastern traditions of health and wellness as being ancient, pure and natural traditions which must – by definition – avoid the pitfalls of toxicity and side effects believed to be endemic to biomedicine [...]” (2012, 202). The use of CAM is relative to gender, empowerment, and a disillusionment with western biomedicine. For clients and practitioners (for the alternative therapists’ perspectives, see Kalvig 2013) CAM therapies offer “[...] a feeling of empowerment and individual control over their health and well-being

⁶² <https://nafkam.no/en/report-use-complementary-and-alternative-medicine-cam-norway-2018> (accessed 27.11.20)

⁶³ <https://nafkam.no/en/report-use-complementary-and-alternative-medicine-cam-norway-2018> (accessed 27.11.20)

[...]” (Newcombe 2012, 205) and a space where the ‘male gaze’ and hierarchy of western biomedicine is, for a while, put aside.

The ‘alternative’ in CAM is not only the techniques and therapies in themselves. “Continuing this idealistic gaze on the more ‘natural’ and ‘healing’ lifestyles of non-Western peoples, present-day CAM is often presented as offering an answer to problems created by a ‘Western’ focus on materialism and the perceived inherent Cartesian dualism of biomedicine [...]” (Newcombe 2012, 205). The historical development of postural yoga in the western world has ensured that yoga has a strong bond to physical culture, which also is visible in the ‘naturalness’ and ‘ancient traditions’ discourses among CAM users – and in this context among yoga practitioners.

Within the sub-set of respondents who focus on health and healing, there are different perspectives and approaches to yoga as CAM. Newcombe (2012) makes a useful distinction between three core (not exhaustive or mutually exclusive) groups: pragmatics, true believers, and holistics. The pragmatics are a group that is quite familiar from the YQ material, who are “[...] primarily interested in CAM to find relief for a chronic or acute problem. Often this problem is something that has a biomedical diagnosis but that does not respond effectively to biomedical treatment. [...] Their primary concern is whether or not the therapy ‘works’; any spiritual interests are only secondary” (Newcombe 2012, 206). Respondents use yoga to treat or find relief from everything from back pain to sports injuries or burnout. The pragmatics are also represented in other studies – the most famous perhaps Paul Heelas *et al.*’s Kendal study (2000), in which almost half of the people practicing yoga are in it for the health benefits and do not consider their practice to be spiritual.

A group that is underrepresented (or maybe not at all represented) in this project is those Newcombe (2012) calls true believers. Generally, these are sectarian Christians who reject biomedicine in favor of faith healing and prayer. Although there are Christians in the YQ material they are still yoga practitioners, and there are no indications in their responses that they belong to the true believer’s category. Rather, it seems like the Christian sub-set of YQ respondents either belong in the pragmatics category – or with the holistics.

The holistics category is well represented among yoga respondents. In the Yoga Questionnaire (item 6), 73 respondents see yoga as a compound practice,⁶⁴ 77 respondents see yoga as a mind-body practice, and 34 as their personal spiritual path. Most of these can be placed in the holistics category, or at least have aspects of holistic thought in the way they interact with yoga. Holistics hold a significant number of metaphysical beliefs regarding their activities in promoting health and well-being. These clients and practitioners are often active participants in romantic Orientalist ‘salvation’ activities which emphasizes the purity of an Eastern tradition in conceptual opposition to ‘modern’ scientific, secular biomedicine (Newcombe 2012, 207).

Yoga is particularly interesting in this context. Scholars of modern yoga (Alter 2004, Singleton 2010) recognize the profound influence of “[...] Western culture and biomedicine that is an integral part of what is practiced as ‘yoga’ in both India and the West in the late twentieth century” (Newcombe 2012, 208). However, part of the modern legitimization of yoga (as therapy) is an idea stemming directly from nineteenth-century idealization of the ‘mystic East’ and of yoga as an ancient spiritual tradition dating back thousands of years. Ancient (in the same way as natural or indigenous) is often equated with good, and brings with it a feeling of authenticity, purity, or mysticism that is hard to locate in western culture and clinical biomedicine.

Interviewee Tom, who clearly belongs to both the lifestyle yogi category and to Newcombe’s (2012) holistics was introduced to postural yoga practice at a rehabilitation center. In the interview Tom says that even though it is difficult to step onto the yoga mat when a person is mentally battered, there is also an opportunity to gather the will and courage to do it. That is the way help oneself.

I used to say I was a drug addict with alcohol problems. And I have not received even five minutes of traditional therapy, I have only practiced yoga. [...] Many people think it is a good way to get back into ... into society. The person right next to you can be a bank director, and you... yeah. Both Jørgen Hattemaker and King Salomo, in the same place. It is nice to see that one can be part of making an arena for this.

⁶⁴ A combination of physical exercise, a mind-body practice, and their personal spiritual path.

[...] In my eyes, there is nothing that cleanses, reinvigorates, and strengthens mental and physical health like yoga.

Tom's perspective is deeply rooted in yoga-as-soteriology, albeit in relation to healing and salvation in this world. His quote is summative for the respondents who use yoga to deal with chronic pain and suffering (somatic and/or psychological). Not all of them have experienced a change in their life situation that is quite as dramatic as Tom, and not all speak as explicitly about the transformative power of yoga. However, both in interviews and in the questionnaire that yoga has a function as something more than just a form of exercise. For some, yoga opens a space for magical thinking.

Similar perspectives can be found in some of the literature on yoga as CAM, where the domains of healing, spirituality, and ritual meet. In 2001 psychologist Catherine Garrett wrote an article in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* where she compared Transcendental Meditation, Reiki, and yoga in the context of suffering, ritual, and self-transformation. In her paper, Garrett acknowledges her personal experiences with the practices from a point of "[...] chronic pain and the suffering that accompanies it" (2001, 329). The scope of her article is broad, in that she examines the difference between 'magic' and 'sacred' practice, if this difference has an implication in the search for health, and whether the practices can be considered spiritual.

Introducing her material, Garrett makes some distinctions that are useful in this project as well. The core of her argument is that through various practices, people who deal with chronic pain (physical or psychological, often inescapable) look for ways to alleviate their suffering (the distress that is caused by pain, but possible to ease or transform). Some of the respondents allude to the difference between pain and suffering. Although their pain may be chronic, their suffering is something that can be worked with. Garrett (2001) says her "[...] experiences of Meditation, Yoga and Reiki are of moving back into my body and imagining that body, and consequently myself, in new ways. The new awareness in turn leads me to act differently in the world" (p. 330). For some respondents, particularly those who see yoga through a lens of spirituality and those who use yoga as healing/ salvation, the practice takes ritual form. Tom, for example, comments explicitly on the ritual side of yoga.

At some point, I realized that this is a ritual. Tantric yoga is very much a ritual. Sitting down on the yoga mat and starting a yoga practice is highly ritualistic if that is a word. So, I think yoga can cover that need as well. [...] Only through investing time in the practice can you

discover where yoga can lead you. What it can do to you. Going for asana yoga once a week... I do not really think that takes you anywhere, other than maybe feeling a bit better in your body. But that is not where... that is only where yoga begins.

In Tom's opinion repeated physical practice is what leads to a practitioner's altered experience of him or herself. It becomes a ritual. Garrett's (2001, 331) perspective on ritual is functional, in that ritual is the medium through which people change the way they live. She emphasizes the meaning-making ability of ritual – in this case yoga or meditative practices. If considered in a Durkheimian perspective (1976 [1915]), in a ritual the practitioner is not alone. It is a collective effort whose primary function is to create social bonds, coherence, and community. The community aspect is, I think, more important in this context than I previously believed. While the practice(s) themselves have physiological and/or psychological effects, the idea (and feeling) of a community contributes deeply to the meaning-making process:

[T]he bodily experience of each of the rituals gives new meaning to suffering: it is no longer an isolated and isolating experience, but one which is shared with all others who suffer. [...] TM, Yoga, and Reiki become the means of perceiving a connection with others that is carried into other parts of life. When that life includes chronic suffering, the ethical dimension is assimilated to the suffering – it gives the suffering a new and redemptive meaning. (Garrett 2001, 331)

In the practice of eastern mind-body-techniques such as yoga (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013, 59) it becomes clear through respondent narratives that body and mind are 'two sides of the same coin.' Health and wellbeing are contingent on more than the promised efficacy of the practice itself. That the practice works and meet respondents' expectations is of course important. However, as the practitioner becomes enmeshed in a (imagined) community of fellow practitioners (or fellow sufferers) I would argue that much of the healing that takes place is a social healing.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ In the next chapter, I will address a few more of the social aspects that relate to yoga conversion and practice motivation. These, however, relate more to respondents' everyday social connections, and the social-spiritual aspects of yoga and traveling.

Talking about yoga, the YQ respondent quoted below recognizes the presence of the ‘alternative’ and of diverse perspectives on healing in the yoga milieu.

This [alternative/ spirituality/ healing] is a factor present at most yoga studios whether one wants to engage or not. I recognize its impact on many people, but personally take away only what relates to the abandoning of self through breathing and movement. I have no spiritual relation to the parts that concern healing through eating/touch/prayer/whatever and stay away from such events. My education, upbringing and friends all put great emphasis on scientific verifiability, and the more alternative realms feel foreign to me. Meditation and breathing exercises are verified practices for better mental health, regardless of the religious context you put it in, and so I feel at home with that part.

The respondent emphasizes a difference between meditation and breathing exercises as scientifically proven and verifiable methods of health seeking, and the ‘alternative’ religio-spiritual aspects of the yoga milieu. Her quote point to a diversity of perspectives on what yoga is and (potentially) does. It also highlights that modern yoga is a practice that can as easily be connected to religion and/or spirituality as divorced from it. However, what this respondent (any many others) state clearly is that regardless of their state of health or illness, and regardless of their attitudes to religion and spirituality, yoga is about working on the self.

In CAM, practitioners (mostly women) can be seen to create a “[...] metaphysical understanding of healing that they find empowering and self-validating in opposition to a patriarchal society” (Newcombe 2012, 209). In the Nordic countries society is perhaps not explicitly patriarchal any longer. However, it is de-sacralized, and often scientific biomedicine is not fully able to help people with their problems. Newcombe (2012) notes that if any “[...] generalization can be made about the praxis of CAM in the West, it is that this area is characterized by pluralism, pragmatism and an emphasis on patient ‘empowerment’ *as well as* the continuing dominance of the secular biomedical model” (p. 213). For respondents it is important that the practice, whether it is fitness, healing, self-transformation, or (female) empowerment, works (or fulfills their expectations). However, behind pragmatism hides (perhaps) a form of implicit magical thinking.

5.5.3 Magical thinking?

Healing and ritual in yoga practice and in other techniques can be connected to perspectives on magic. Magical thinking is an aspect with which several writers engage (Garrett 2001, McGuire 2008, Newcombe 2013). Suzanne Newcombe (2013) highlights the overlap between yoga and ritual magic in the United Kingdom from the early twentieth century onwards,⁶⁶ but she notes that it is “[...] likely that the web of associations between magic and yoga, and the dialogue between yoga’s use in various subcultures, could be found in other national and transnational contexts” (p. 63). Although there is a ‘lag’ in the Nordic area, similar patterns in the historical and contemporary interrelation between yoga and magic can be probably found in my material as well. I have not asked specifically for perspectives on a yoga-and-magic connection in this project. However, magical thinking in the sense of a (secular or spiritual) belief that regular execution of the ‘yoga ritual’ will allow respondents to change and improve, and solve or mitigate their personal problems, is most definitely present.

Newcombe (2013) starts her historical overview in the early twentieth century, where she points out the overlapping networks between yoga and magic milieus. This overlap was particularly visible in several books, booksellers, and publishers that catered to the alternative scene. The same bookshops that sold books on yoga and Oriental philosophy were hubs for those interested in ‘esotericism, unusual religions, and “rejected knowledge”’ (p. 65). Gerald Yorke (1901-1983) was for example a significant influence on the popularization of yoga in Britain and had a long-standing connection to figures such as Aleister Crowley, whose interest in tantric yoga and sexual magick is well-known (Djurdjevic 2014). Yorke was central in the publication of several seminal books on yoga – among those Iyengar’s *Light on Yoga*. He corresponded with (and even visited) Iyengar and Iyengar’s guru Krishnamacharya, and over many years he worked with the aims to bring together modern scientific thinking and eastern kundalini techniques (and perhaps downplay the sexual magic connotation occult figures like Crowley had pushed) (Newcombe 2013). About the effects of this historical development, Newcombe concludes that

⁶⁶ The interest in yoga and Indian mysticism among groups such as the Theosophical Society is a given. However, ‘hard-core’ occultists such as Aleister Crowley were interested too. Crowley, for example, published his *Eight Lectures on Yoga* in 1939. In addition to the normative practices of *asana*, meditation, and pranayama occult 20th century figures took an interest in tantric, sexual imagery and practices (a connotation familiar to this day). For more information, see for example Djurdjevic 2014.

[...] the cultural distinctions between yoga as magic and yoga as physical culture did not become clear until much later than is popularly assumed given the respectable place of yoga practice in the early twenty-first century. The practices of occult magic and modern yoga were clearly distinct in some circles by the 1960s in Britain – so much so that yoga was an acceptable leisure activity for middle-class housewives to participate in at local authority, subsidized, adult education evening classes. But what housewives were actually doing with their yoga practice might be closer to contemporary magic practice than they or their husbands imagined (2013b, 71).

As Newcombe highlights, the distinct overlap between magic occulture and yoga weakened in the middle of the twentieth century as yoga became more mainstream and popularized. The distinction is present even today. Few if any respondents explicitly self-identify with magic as their ‘chosen discipline’ -- even though some of them quote pagan or esoteric influences in their worldviews. However, as Newcombe alludes to, there are aspects that are similar between the practice of magic and of contemporary postural yoga.

Magic is a concept that is notoriously hard to define. A fitting explanation on magic in connection with yoga, however, is one Newcombe (2013b) has found in Dave Evans’ (2007, 17) volume *History of British Magic After Crowley*. Like the ‘traditional’ pagan (as well as Thelemic) understandings that focus on the practitioner’s will (and the maxim of doing no harm), this definition also emphasizes volition. Through a ritual act the practitioner aims to change “[...] the perceived universe and/or the internal consciousness of the operator [or witness(es) or “target(s)”] through means not entirely understood by modern science, and acts not performed primarily to an audience for entertainment and/or financial reward” (Newcombe 2013b, 73). In this context, magic is far from the ‘stage magic’ or fantastical operations familiar from popular culture – or even from David Gordon White’s (2009) sinister yogis in historical India who would practice their magic on the streets for monetary rewards (and sometimes shock value). Rather, the focus is on the ritual element in modern postural yoga with its systemic arrangement of postures and the idea of effecting individual elevation towards a ‘higher self’ or a change in ‘internal consciousness.’ Newcombe (2013) highlights that for “[...] some this might be articulated within a spiritual framework, while others would be more likely to describe the change of consciousness more simply as “relaxation” or a reduction in “stress”” (p. 73). In the context of this project, all the above-mentioned are common approaches, and especially visible in the work of managing and mitigating illness and suffering.

Garrett (2001) says that when people “[...] undertake rituals like these, there is often an element of magical thinking in their motivation: a belief, however ‘secular’, that regular performance of this ritual will somehow change them and solve their personal problems” (p. 334). Life change as a motivating factor is close to universal in yoga circles. Garrett (2001) refers to the transformative power of ritual as a key. Magic is a way of thinking (and acting) in metaphor -- as “[...] the art of creating effects thought to be beyond natural human power” (p. 335).

For some respondents, the practice of physical yoga becomes imbued with a form of magic. In the context of health and healing, this is not necessarily the ‘ultimate goal of unity with the divine’ (although this goal is very much present in yoga philosophy both historically and contemporarily). Rather, it is the application of a practitioner’s will to affect some form of change through the physical ritual of yoga. It is clear from the material that yoga can have a positive effect on an individual’s life, such as a feeling of purpose and meaning, or cessation or mitigation of suffering. The latter is prominent in Stuart Sarbacker’s (2005 and 2008) work, where he delineates between different logics in contemporary yoga practice. In this context his concept of the ‘cessative’ is useful. Yoga thought of as cessative encompasses the removal or mitigation of everything from physiological problems (which in this project is everything from muscular pains to burnout syndrome) to almost metaphysical (or at least existential) illness or suffering where yoga can take on teleological (purpose-giving) or soteriological (salvific) meanings.

In the context of yoga as CAM the biomedical effects are, it seems, only part of a broader story. Newcombe (2013) notes that already in the 1960s many of the people who were attracted to yoga used it when ‘conventional biomedical doctors’ could not really help, and what was left was for people to find a way to live with pain. “For those experiencing release from pain where biomedical authority had prophesized a lifetime of suffering, many perceived a ‘magical’ quality to yoga’s efficacy” (p. 78). Modern yoga classes can be thought of as a ritual space and through thinking of yoga as a magic ritual, or a ritual with magical qualities, the practitioner can (as Garrett 2001 highlights) transform the self. In this perspective, when pain is impossible to avoid, the suffering that pain causes can be transcended.

5.5.4 Summary

No matter how illness and health is framed by the respondents, the body and the mind-body connection in various contexts and actualizations is at the core of many respondents' yoga 'conversion' narratives. When respondents write or speak about health, illness, and well-being, they do so in a way that reflects Gooren's (2010) conversion factors – especially those dealing with contingency. Respondents primarily focus on themselves (the individual practitioner), their need to change their life situation and give concrete expression to feelings of meaning (or meaninglessness) (Gooren 2010, 52). Respondents may experience a level of dissatisfaction with their situation and turn to yoga as a calm and non-competitive form of exercise. The reasoning for starting yoga can also be more serious (mental and physical health, addiction), and sometimes involve a crisis or dramatic turning point.

The perspectives on health that have emerged in this chapter are complex. On the one hand, in a micro perspective, respondents understand their practice as beneficial and as a positive force of health and healing in their lives. Some use yoga for fitness, other to manage physical and mental issues, and some use yoga as a release or transformation of suffering of some kind. On the other hand, in a macro perspective, the yoga scene can be understood within a larger discourse on health (and fitness/beauty) as an individualized moral performance. The practice can be connected to a pervading healthism and a neo-liberal political economy that preys on the very health seekers and health providers hoping to improve their lives through yoga teaching and –practice.

The following chapter continues to examine the individual, but this time it is the individual that encounters yoga in a web of social relations -- and the individual 'out in the world' who becomes acquainted with yoga in social settings (far) away from home. However, it is important to keep in mind that many of the perspectives that have come to light in this chapter on fitness, health, and healing are still valid for social-conversion respondents. There is seldom only one reason to get involved in yoga practice.

6 Social factors in yoga involvement and motivation

6.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an expected social factor: respondents who have encountered yoga ‘at home’ and whose friends and family are important in respondents’ yoga involvement. Social factors of conversion to yoga are discussed considering relevant literature from studies on New Religious Movements. This part of the chapter is relatively short, which has to do with how commonplace this involvement factor is. Social relations are a fundamental part of any activity, which in turn can make them seem unimportant. In addition, yoga at home is not often very exciting or exotic but part of the everyday routine at the studio or gym.

The second part of the chapter addresses an unexpected social involvement factor, namely traveling and yoga ‘out there.’ Travel usually has a social aspect. Concretely, respondents travel with a friend or meet or observe people along the way. Less concrete, perhaps, is the social capital traveling connotes. Traveling respondents have encountered yoga in settings that are exciting or exotic, which in turn have given their conversion narratives a different flavor from the homebodies.

Whether at home or out there, yoga as a social activity has everything to do with forging and maintaining social relationships. However, personal qualifying factors are present in most of the narratives, such as an aspiration towards wellbeing and meaningfulness, self-development, or health-related issues.

6.2 Friends, family, and work

Based on the empirical material the social factor is present for almost all respondents. 77 of the respondents (N=170) listed introduction to yoga through a friend, family member, or other acquaintance as a primary factor of involvement. 45 respondents listed it as a secondary factor. In addition to ticking boxes respondents have commented on social involvement factors, and an important find is that respondents already had an idea of what yoga is and how the practice could improve their lives even before they joined a class with a friend, family member, or co-worker. Many practitioners see yoga as something that can aid in forging and maintaining social relationships with family (often a mother, which points to the gender component in the yoga scene) and friends. One respondent writes that

Initially I attended classes as a favor to my mum; it was her good friend teaching. Later I continued because the ashtanga system suited me, both physically and mentally.

The respondent's yoga involvement began as a social favor but turned into a choice and a beneficial individual psychosomatic practice. This is a common pattern throughout the material: a combination of social factors and a respondent's desire for life change. Yoga involvement can even be part of beginning a new relationship. One respondent notes that

My boyfriend at the time introduced himself as a yoga teacher. I was impressed and started following yoga courses (more Body Balance - the sporty type of courses). I mainly thought it was healthy for myself and it would reduce stress from studying.

Her initial entry into yoga was to be closer to her boyfriend, and that a significant other, friends, or a peer group participates in yoga both actualizes and legitimizes the activity. However, the respondent qualifies her boyfriend-driven participation by noting conjunctive factors such as health reasons and stress reduction. Several respondents mention the boyfriend motif and starting yoga as a shared interest/ activity. However, like the respondent above they qualify their statements by referring to qualifying/ conjunctive factors as well, such as health, life-change, and/or personal development. In an example from the open-ended YQ Item 34, one respondent notes how her friend told her that yoga had deeply influenced her life.

My friend was very convincing in how yoga influenced her life. It was during a time where I was looking for something in life. I didn't know what really. The night before that day we planned to [go] together, I had a huge fight with my boyfriend from back then. I joined that class feeling vulnerable, I set my first intention and at the end of practice the teacher read something which all of a sudden hit home. It set something in motion in my life and it was the start of some life changing decisions.

In a few sentences this respondent describes a micro-journey where that first yoga class set in motion some "life changing decisions." It seems reasonable to assume that the friend's testimony validated or legitimized yoga as an expedient activity, and that the respondent's own life situation and the encouragement from her friend affected her decision to engage in yoga. Another respondent also notes how her friend had "turned her life around" with the help of yoga practice:

I wanted something more out of my life and I had a friend who really loved yoga. She had a great experience and had turned her life around after she started practicing so I thought I would give it a try and see if it was something for me.

By setting good examples and making positive changes to their life, friends, boyfriends, and family introduce and/ or socialize respondents into yoga. The practice functions as a bonding activity and way to become closer through shared interests. Similar patterns are found among respondents who mention yoga in the context of work. The workplace is a social arena and a place where bonding experiences are meant to foster a better work environment. YQ involvement items indicate that only a few respondents have encountered yoga in a work setting, for example during a meeting or in management training.

I was in a meeting placed in a yogic environment, afterwards went for a yoga class and the peaceful feeling left me wanting more.

Part of an International management Executive training, yoga was mandatory every day in the morning and in the evening. The company doing this was [...] a global Construction company.

For these few respondents the practice of yoga and mindfulness began as professional development, rather than being the provenance of the ‘leisure’ section of their lives (as is the common pattern among YQ respondents). However, yoga managed or bought by companies as part of employee benefits is a developing market, and a sector where the potential for growth is high (Bjerrum and Pilgaard 2014).

6.2.1 Discussion: social networks and a processual model of conversion

The fact that social networks (including work environments) are important for yoga conversion is not a particularly surprising find. Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014) find a similar pattern among their respondents, where friends emerge as an important inspiration for starting a yoga practice. Whether respondents’ practice is at an evening schools, yoga center, or fitness center, in the Danish material between 32 and 35 per cent note that friends inspired their yoga involvement. Proximity to yoga is also important: 49 per cent of Danish fitness studio practitioners were inspired to start by seeing others practice at the gym (2014, 49).

Dawson (2003) notes that “[...] studies of conversion and of specific groups have found that recruitment to NRMs happens primarily through preexisting social networks and interpersonal bonds. Friends recruit friends, family members each other and neighbours recruit neighbours” (p. 119). With modern postural yoga, the social factor of conversion can perhaps be described as a form of ‘contagion’ which takes place in respondents’ families, networks, or communities. When one person starts, it is easy for others to follow. Another

way of looking at this process could be that yoga functions as a memetic incursion,⁶⁷ as something that takes on narrative weight in a relationship. The meme model is particularly visible in friends/ peer relationships, where several respondents feel that their friends have ‘validated’ yoga for them either through statements or through visible positive effect on their friend’s life. The yoga meme creates a form of ripple effect (also bolstered by popular culture, social media, etc.), and in the end yoga becomes a social reality that feels completely natural for respondents to engage with. As such, there is a distinct interplay between self-development and sociability in the yoga conversion process.

6.2.1.1 The social yogi?

In the material for this project, I have already located categories that are like Bjerrum and Pilgaard’s (2014). Above I have presented the competitive fitness yogis, and the lifestyle yogis (most respondents in my project) will continue emerge as a distinct group.⁶⁸ In both respondent groups practitioners will likely have had (one or more) social reasons to start a practice. Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014) present another category, namely the ‘social yogi’. This group tends to be evening school practitioners, whose primary involvement- and motivating factor to do yoga is to spend time with friends. This category is recognizable from Newcombe’s (2019) material on female yogis in Britain from the mid-twentieth century onwards, where yoga became a socially acceptable form of fitness and a social outlet for homemakers (and increasingly, professional women). A good example highlighting social aspect of yoga practice is the below, where Newcombe (2019) quotes from an interview with yoga teacher Claire Buckingham, who said about her evening school practitioners that

“Quite often I felt that ... they didn’t come to class so much to practise yoga. It was their time out to just be still... that was part of the attraction to women I think.” Many middle-class women found their lives stressful and experienced the exercise and relaxation of yoga classes beneficial for ‘well-being’. Attendees did not need to define exactly what was efficacious about a yoga class, but modest improvements in fitness and mood, a place of calmness, as well as an extended social network were all important elements to how yoga was considered to improve ‘well-being’. Well-being was part of a social duty for the general health of the

⁶⁷ A term I have borrowed from urban fantasy author Seanan McGuire, who uses this concept in her «Indexing» series.

⁶⁸ Practitioners in this category view yoga as an important part of their life and identity and describe themselves as dedicated yoga practitioners. Many have a health (if not a fitness) focus, imbue the practice with a deeper meaning. Many are also yoga teachers themselves.

individual. As well as providing some time for themselves, women perceived yoga as enabling them to better fulfil their duties as wives, employees and perhaps most importantly, mothers. (Newcombe 2019, 101).

The extended social network Newcombe mentions is clearly important. So is the combination of a social outlet with relaxation and health benefits, which together helps women to cope with their demanding everyday lives.

The social yogi is not present in my material to any significant degree. That I hardly find the social yogi category in my material, however, does not mean that the category is absent in the Nordic yoga scene. Rather, the methodology and type of questions in the survey and interviews means I have not been able to reach these respondents. Generally, a social conversion factor is combined with an inner motivation to practice because respondents believe yoga has positive benefits as exercise, stress relief, healing, or self-development. An interesting component of sociability in yoga is that social factors are important in yoga *conversion*. However, friends and family seem to matter less for YQ respondents' motivation to continue their practice once they have started.

6.2.1.2 A social model of conversion?

John Lofland and Rodney Stark (1965) were among the earliest theorists to highlight the importance of social networks (encounters and affective bonds) for conversion, but certainly not the last. Lofland and Stark's (1965) processual model of conversion has been criticized for being too specific, static, and individualistic, as well as for overlooking convert pre-socialization (Gooren 2010, 23). However, the importance of *social networks* in conversion has held up well when examined by other scholars, such as Gooren (2010), Dawson (2003), and Snow and Phillips (1980). Snow and Phillips' study on conversion to Nichiren Buddhism is interesting in this context. Upon examining Lofland and Stark's model, the only aspect they could find that fit with the data from this Buddhist group (and particular type of converts) was social networks.

The process-model of conversion was based on fieldwork from the early sixties (on what turned out to be the Unification Church). The model, in brief, is a logically ordered series of stages that draws the (potential) convert deeper into the group:

For conversion, a person must (1) experience enduring, acutely felt tensions, (2) within a religious problem solving perspective, (3) which leads him to define himself as a religious

seeker, (4) encountering the (cult) at a turning point in his life, (5) wherein an affective bond is formed (or preexists) with one or more converts, (6) where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized, and (7) where if he is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to intensive interaction (Lofland and Stark 1965:874).

In his edited reader on cults and new religious movements, Lorne L. Dawson (2003) notes about the processual model that

the steps outlined by Lofland and Stark do not represent so much an integrated and cumulative model of the actual process of conversion as a fairly adequate statement of some of the key ‘conditions’ of conversion (with the understanding that these conditions may vary independently and that their significance may vary for different religions and in different circumstances). (Dawson 2003, 118)

In this sense, Lofland and Starks’s model is quite useful. I will briefly examine the model in light of the yoga data, but rather than looking at the model as processual in a strict sense I will apply some of the conditions ‘on their own,’ as one or more of the social conversion aspects are present in almost all respondent narratives. This short analysis does not always engage with the individual respondent (although that would be both useful and interesting), but rather with groups or categories in a more generalized sense.

The group that is most difficult to fit in the model is Bjerrum and Pilgaard’s (2014) ‘achievement yogi’ category. The achievement yogis are typically found in fitness, where yoga has a pragmatic and sometimes almost competitive aim, and where respondents often use the practice as complementary to other sports or exercise activities. Some of the ‘fitness yogis’ have experienced “enduring, acutely felt tensions” like Lofland and Stark (1965) describe. However, the fitness/ achievement yogis tend to have experienced tensions in a *physical* sense (injuries, decreased performance, a need for performance optimization) instead of the existential sense to which (in my interpretation) Lofland and Stark (1965) alludes to. Seeing how prevalent the social involvement factor is, I would be surprised if none of the fitness yogis had a pre-existing bond (or formed affective bonds) with other yoga practitioners.

The first stages of the processual model fit well with another group from the health chapter, namely those who engage with yoga for health reasons or for mitigation of illness. Gooren’s (2010) contingency aspect is familiar here, similar as it is to Lofland and Stark’s (1965) tension stage. Illness or mental/ physical pain and suffering is a contingency factor seen in

many respondents, who often believe that yoga can solve or mitigate some of their problems. It is not a given that these respondents define themselves as seekers (at least not in a religious sense), but for some reason they look for a solution in yoga (or in other related, often Indian-oriented complementary or alternative techniques and therapies). Several respondents mention a ‘low point’ in their life that is reminiscent of the turning point in the process model of conversion.

Respondents who have engaged with yoga for health reasons tend to have social networks as an important conjunctive factor. An affective bond (either pre-existing or forming) appears and leads the respondent towards yoga practice. This could be friends or family, co-workers, or sometimes even medical professionals or therapists. Dawson (2003) notes that affective ties and intensive interaction with members of the group are pivotal to successful conversion and membership maintenance.

6.2.1.3 Deprivation?

An interesting aspect of Lofland and Stark’s (1965) model is that their analysis emphasizes an at the time prominent deprivation-style thinking about so-called ‘cult members’. In the mid-1960s, young people were seeking alternative lifestyles and philosophies. Those who joined new religious movements or organizations were primarily, in this type of analysis, ‘youthful delinquents’ who were non-conforming, had weak social ties, and did not perform the expected social roles (that is, deprived of socialization factors). This is not the case for yoga respondents more than 50 years later.

The ‘youthful delinquent’ trope previously associated with occulture no longer fits the wider yoga scene. Socio-economically speaking, the respondents in this project are generally well-to-do, approaching middle age, and have very little of the anti-sociality that previous theorists have pointed to. Furthermore, the counter-cultural stigma has largely disappeared from the now fundamentally popularized and mainstream yoga milieu. Remnants of exoticism is, in a sense, more a veneer or an aesthetic than a sign of a radical departure from mainstream societal standards.

Although the deprivation model is largely discredited (or, at least, fit in only a small number of actual cases) the idea of *some sort* of deprivation is interesting. In the previous chapter, I emphasized a lack of health or well-being as an important aspect of involvement, and how

contingency factors play into using yoga as a healing tool. Searching for community and social connection (or even authority) can be reasons why respondents turn to yoga.

If I compare the yoga scene to the wider “New Age” movement (based on family resemblance or at least some overlap), some aspects of deprivation theory are present in both. In his 1996 volume *The New Age Movement*, Paul Heelas notes that one of the defining characteristics of members of the alternative cultural movement is that ‘their lives do not work’ – and that a solution can be found through alternative techniques and therapies (and communities). In this sense, if deprivation is perceived as a lack of *connection*, or as being deprived of good health and well-being, a contingency-factor turn to yoga is highly understandable.

6.3 Encountering yoga ‘on the road’

6.3.1 Introduction: the spatial element

I have already established the usefulness of physical proximity and social exposure for yoga conversion -- an effect that is well known from literature on religious conversion (see overview in Gooren 2010). Most respondents have first encountered yoga in their *local space* (home environment). Travel as a conversion factor was not listed in any of the forced-selection questions in the YQ. However, in open-ended items and in interviews travelling emerged with high frequency.⁶⁹

At the time I created the questionnaire I was primarily concerned with the localized/ home-oriented aspects of yoga conversion. Thus, the relatively substantial section of respondents who thematizes travel in their yoga conversion stories is not visible if I, for example, were to look only at YQ items 32 and 33, which are forced-question items. However, *tourism*, *travelling and pilgrimage* made themselves unavoidable in the open-ended item 34 where I asked respondents to describe in their own words how and why they had become involved in yoga practice. This occurrence emphasizes the methodical point of not only using forced-

⁶⁹ For the many respondents who write about travel as an initial involvement factor, conjunctive factors are usually present. Friends, family, and acquaintances are important, and respondents also emphasize fitness, health promotion, or healing aspects of yoga. Respondents generally have previous knowledge of yoga or meditation (and the promised effect of the practices), or a little bit of practical experience, before encountering yoga while traveling.

response questions in a questionnaire but offering respondents the means to self-narrate their experiences through open-ended items.

The respondents who have answered something travel-related in Item 34 are divided into three rough groups that some extent overlap with Alex Norman's (2012) typology/ definition of spiritual tourism:

It is defined as tourism characterized by a self-conscious project of spiritual betterment. [...] roughly grouped into five varietal categories – healing, experimental, quest, retreat, and collective – that often overlap, and which serve to illuminate broader social currents in Western societies. [...] 'spiritual tourists' can be found throughout the contemporary world engaged in a variety of practices or behaviours that are self-consciously seen as contributory to meaning and identity, and/or beneficial for the individual's health and wellbeing (2012, 20-21).

In my material I find those who have participated in a retreat (or a group), those who have encountered yoga during ordinary travels or holidays (often with friends), and those who have undertaken a more explicitly spiritual journey (to India or other exotic locations). The latter respondents are those who most closely aligns to a core trope in alternative culture, namely travelling in the search of self. They are lifestyle yogis (Bjerrum and Pilgaard 2014) who become spiritual travelers (and accumulators of social and spiritual capital through traveling). The categories overlap to a certain extent, and what (spiritual) tourists have in common is that they consume (or engage with) activities that are perceived as healthy (in this case yoga, and meditation), that makes them feel good, that contribute positively to their self-image – and in turn how they are viewed by others.

In the first part of this section, I examine the casual travelers group. Much like the conversion-via-family-and-friends respondents above (who either have not commented or have commented very briefly) these respondents have not said much about their traveling. Their comments are brief and matter of fact. In comparison, the spiritual travelers are more numerous and verbose. Their quotes lay the foundation for a discussion of spiritual traveling and spiritual hubs, that is, significant locations in contemporary pilgrimage-like situations. Pilgrimage is also a facet of a discussion of Mysore, India as a significant place for yoga travel. As I have pointed out in the demographics chapter many respondents practice Ashtanga yoga. For the most dedicated, Mysore holds particular importance. After the Mysore discussion I look at retreats and analyze them as liminal and liminoid spaces.

6.3.2 The casual traveler

Casual yoga-and-travel experiences such as vacations and school exchange programs are something respondents write about in a short and succinct way. For the relevant respondents their travel encounters were low-threshold introductions to yoga, and respondents generally experienced the practice as something positive.

Tried yoga during some vacations in Singapore, just to see what people were talking about.

I went to India as an exchange student for a year in high school and had yoga classes in school. They were mandatory.

These are not respondents who have searched for yoga as such. Rather yoga has been mandatory, or respondents have wanted to find out “what people were talking about.” The casual encounter with yoga while traveling does not mean that the respondents are not committed yoga practitioners now. However, unlike the respondents I will present below they have not come to yoga from a position of spiritual – or self-searching. A good example of this is the quote below, which also is humorous. The casual traveler here is not focused on spiritual experiences - quite the opposite.

My first ever class was in London with a friend. However, we were in our early twenties and quite hung over. By mistake, we ended up in the advanced Mysore style Ashtanga class instead of the beginner’s yoga, and got kicked out for laughing. (But friendly and gently escorted to the beginners class). A few years later, Yoga popped up on the schedule at [my local gym], and I went to weekly classes there for a while, before moving to [a different country] and starting regularly practicing Hatha yoga, before starting Mysore.

This respondent’s yoga journey follows a common pattern of trying something new with friends and ending up as a regular practitioner several years later. The casual yoga-and travel respondents have quite varied approaches to starting yoga – another example is this quote from another YQ respondent.

Was coincidentally on a yoga vacation and experienced it as positive. Looked for classes where I live, and after a while I found the world’s best yoga teacher.

Casual travelers’ matter-of-fact stories differ considerably in length and detail from more explicitly spiritual travel-type stories. They have not had strong intentions or motivations to change their lives or develop themselves before encountering yoga. Rather, they happened upon the practice and found something enjoyable there. This highlights that there is a

difference in not only intention and motivation for travel, but also in intensity and scope. In the context of health and travel both, respondents can be placed on a continuum (or in a concentric circle model) ranging from low- to high-level intensity and –involvement. While YQ items on conversion say very little about respondents' later engagement with and motivation for yoga, at the point of involvement these are low-intensity respondents can be placed at the outer edge of the circle of proximity to a spiritual milieu.

6.3.3 The spiritual traveler

Travelling to gain exotic experiences, personal – and spiritual development, and social capital is visible in the following responses from YQ item 34. Destinations are increasingly exotic, which sets these respondents apart from those I have analyzed above. The spiritual travelers visit locations such as India, Bali, Fiji, or California -- destinations that in popular culture are known for their 'spiritual qualities.'

The respondent below tells a story of having gone on two round-the-world trips which included visits to Asian countries, to Fiji, and later to India. A key point in this respondent's narrative is an encounter with a person who had some qualities or dispositions the respondent was drawn to, and who sparked her interest in yoga.

I was travelling around the world for one year in 2002. In Asia I visited temples and met monks and nuns and I sort of sensed a kind of peace and tranquility that I liked. I got interested in meditation first, and I started to learn meditation 2 years later. Some months into this travel year and after Asia I visited Fiji, and here I met one person who practiced meditation and yoga. He radiated a confidence and peace of mind that I noticed. I saw him practice yoga in the morning and also meditation, and I had one conversation with him. My interest in meditation was already there after my travels in Asia, but at the time I did not think yoga was for me until I met this man telling me about how yoga and meditation was connected and that anybody could do yoga. That was the first time I met someone practicing yoga, and some years later I took my first yoga class in India. That was in 2006 when I was on my second around the world trip (also one year). On this journey I went for ayurvedic treatment for the first time. It was in this place that I also took my first real yoga class (I had only taken a short yoga-breathing course before I went to India) and it transformed my life.

This respondent's narrative encompasses most aspects that are common among spiritual travelers. She became inspired to learn meditation and yoga during her travels to special locations where she was able to observe the practices and their effects. In this situation,

sociability would have played a major role as her encounters with enlightened people provided her with role models having “tranquility, confidence and peace of mind” that she wanted to emulate. One can also wonder if the liminoid aspects (Eddy 2012) of traveling can further increase receptivity to other people and new experiences. Another respondent is very clear about how her motivation to travel and pursue yoga is connected to self-discovery and spirituality.

I was on a quest to find out what I was feeling inside me and this brought me to India, where I met a man involved in yoga practice and spirituality.

Based on Alex Norman’s taxonomy of spiritual travel, this respondent fits perfectly into the ‘quest’ category. The traveler “[...] sees the experience conceived as a quest for personal discovery or knowledge; the act of finding in and of itself as a spiritual experience” (2012, 30). It is possible that this respondent also could be categorized as a spiritual seeker (Sutcliffe 2017). Sutcliffe describes seekership as a *habitus* and as a “wider mode of behaviour.” For a “receptive demographic” such as the spiritual travelers from the YQ, seekership goes beyond religion and into so-called lifestyle consumption. The lifestyle consumption aspect is particularly relevant for yoga respondents.

The seekership notion and the trope of traveling to India to ‘find oneself’ has mainly positive connotations in the yoga material. The social factor is important too, as respondents on their personal quests almost always met someone who had the knowledge and vibe they were looking for. Gooren’s (2010) social factors of conversion implies that friends or family is integral in introducing yoga practice to the respondents. However, the material suggests that this category could be expanded to include chance encounters with spiritual people.

Traveling, in this context, can be understood as a turning point in life (Lofland and Stark 1965).⁷⁰

The respondents below are good examples of the chance-encounter pattern. During their travels, these respondents visited religious places or met people who practiced and became inspired to start their own practice.

⁷⁰ “(4) encountering the (cult) at a turning point in his life”, p. 874

I went to India, the first visit to an ashram and I heard 100s of people chanting OM, something happened to make me want to know more. I began to practice.

On my travels, I met people who practiced. Then I got Bhagavad Gita in my hand and it helped me understand that yoga could be a way to find answers

Rather than exhibiting the quest motif the previous respondent show, these respondents could be categorized as more implicit or coincidental spiritual seekers where social interactions open new experiential avenues.

In most quotes in this section, a key point is that the introduction to yoga and meditation (as well as motivation for a sustained practice) is both an individual and a collective effort. It is individual in that respondents mostly have traveled alone to actively look for new, subjective experiences. Individuality is also visible in the language these respondents use. In comparison to the casual travelers the spiritual travelers use more words, a more emotional point of view, and a very strong “I” perspective. They connect their experiences to an explicit self-development perspective, and it seems (unlike the casual travelers) that spiritual travelers already were (somewhat) familiar with yoga, meditation, and/ or an alternative milieu before their travels. However, the social factor – ranging from seeing others practice to meeting special individuals – is what sparks an interest in *engaging* with yoga practices.

6.3.4 Spiritual hubs and collective imaginations

Respondent travel experiences are connected to particular people and to a particular place or country. For the respondents below this connection is particularly strong.

I followed a friend to a yoga class in Bali. The teacher talked about higher self, etc. and that made me feel something that I started to want more of.

I was working as a dancer, dance student, involved in artistic life and people, had a boyfriend some years older who lived partly in Hawaii and California, who introduced me to the physical part of yoga, started with that, ashtanga etc. The spirituality, meditation etc. came easy and felt naturally because of my other friends and meetings with a people all over the world.

I was traveling in Australia and spent a couple of weeks in Byron Bay, a very spiritual place. There I met many people who were spiritual seekers of some kind. One day I went to a yoga class by the beach. I absolutely loved that class, it left me with such peace and was a revelation of what yoga can do to you. Since I was traveling I never went back to the same

place, but for years after that I kept going to different yoga classes/teachers in order to find the same experience that I had had that day in Byron Bay. It wasn't until much later that I understood that I have the capacity to find that peace within myself.

Although respondents' motivations for travel vary, the language they use is similar. Respondents all emphasize place, connection to others, and their own subjective experiences. This section looks at a few of the places that respondents mention and discusses them as representations of collective imaginations of place.

In writing about their traveling experiences respondents highlight that yoga is a globalized idea and practice. However, some places are more significant than others and have through popular- and travel culture become what Norman (2012) calls spiritual hubs. India is, of course, thought of as the motherland in the context of modern postural yoga. However, respondents have mentioned several other significant places, such as Bali, Byron Bay, or California.

Bali, for example, has gained new fame after the multimillion-dollar novel and movie phenomenon *Eat. Pray. Love: One woman's search for everything across Italy, India and Indonesia*.⁷¹ The protagonist goes on a journey both outward and inward and ends up finding spiritual fulfilment and true love in Bali. Selberg (2017, 85) notes that the island is described in flowery language by media and travel companies, and the country's 'spiritual and religious qualities' are highlighted. The same imagery can be found on Instagram. Bali is one of the more popular spots for yoga celebrities who in their posts celebrate the luxury and beauty of the island (while simultaneously selling their own programs and products).

When a spiritual traveler or yoga tourist can be immersed in yoga and eclectic, exotic spirituality on a paradise-like island it can be analyzed as an attempt by the individual to actualize narratives of self-development and authentic experience from popular culture and advertising. A good example of this narrative can be found on the website of the travel company Lonely Planet, who markets itself to the young segment of the traveling population. Lonely Planet describes Byron Bay in Australia as imbued with "Sunset spirit. [...] you'll find an eclectic cast of free spirits celebrating the sunset with drumming circles, interpretive dance and hypnotic fire twirling. The vibe is inclusive and the upbeat energy is

⁷¹ A semi-biographical self-development novel/ travelogue by Elizabeth Gilbert, published in 2006, played by Julia Roberts in the movie by the same name from 2010

infectious [...]”⁷² The same Lonely Planet website totes Byron Bay as a ‘mecca’ for yoga tourism.⁷³

It would be surprising if a text like this did not resonate with the desires of someone who is about to embark on a self-discovery trip, and who would like to meet others with similar goals. The respondent’s experience in Byron Bay and in the yoga class she took obviously made a mark, and the experience was something she longed to recreate through subsequent yoga practice. The respondent’s experience in a spiritual hub opened a door for sustained practice and, eventually, an interior perspective where the respondent gained the “capacity to find that peace” within *herself*.

6.3.5 Spiritual travel as a collective: Mysore pilgrimage and critiques of yoga tourism

Collective imagination creates spiritual hubs and social phenomena such as pilgrimage. Norman (2012) mentions spiritual hubs famous for their community aspect, such as Glastonbury in the UK, California hotspot Sedona, or the Indian mountain town Rishikesh (which is famous in yoga circles, see for example Strauss 2005). Norman’s (2012) prime example of spiritual tourism as a collective endeavor is the Camino de Santiago, a world-famous multiple-route pilgrimage to the shrine of the apostle St. James in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, northern Spain. Hundreds of thousands of people travel the route to this very particular place each year, and a sense of collective is created among the participants. Journeys and places like these are where people “[...] participate in part because it is the ‘done’ thing, because others have done it, and because, while there, one will have experiences with others of like persuasion” (Norman 2012, 32).

This is also the prime reasoning why yoga pilgrims visit Mysore. Since Ashtanga yoga is the most common style among YQ respondents and interviewees I thought it prudent to examine the role of Mysore in contemporary Ashtanga culture. Popular conceptions of yoga include it

⁷² <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/australia/new-south-wales/byron-bay/travel-tips-and-articles/10-reasons-youll-love-byron-bay/40625c8c-8a11-5710-a052-1479d276fd35> (accessed 19.04.18)

⁷³ “Yoga bliss. A long-time magnet for people seeking enlightenment, Byron is spoilt for spiritual experiences today. For those looking for an immersive yoga experience sign up for a stay at the Byron Yoga Retreat Centre (byronyoga.com) on the outskirts of town. An extension of the respected studio in town, it runs three to eight-day retreats that include twice-daily yoga classes, massages, meditation workshops and organic food in a peaceful setting.” <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/australia/new-south-wales/byron-bay/travel-tips-and-articles/10-reasons-youll-love-byron-bay/40625c8c-8a11-5710-a052-1479d276fd35> (accessed 19.04.18)

being an ‘authentic’ Indian practice, and as such, going to the source is inscribed with some significance. Mysore, located in the south Indian state of Karnataka, is commonly referred to as the cultural capital of Karnataka. In addition to its well-preserved heritage buildings and its historical significance, the city has a booming tech industry. Mysore is a popular tourism destination, especially for the famous ten-day *Dasara* festival. For respondents in this project, however, it is best known as the place where the late K. Pattabhi Jois created one of the most popular yoga styles globally.⁷⁴ Mysore’s important place in the history of modern postural yoga has been treated briefly in the historical overview, and both Singleton (2010) and Langøien (2013) have made important and detailed contributions to both historical and contemporary perspectives on Mysore.⁷⁵

67 of the YQ respondents and three interviewees practice the physically demanding Ashtanga style (which makes it the most popular style in the material). However, none of the YQ respondents explicitly mention traveling to Mysore for to practice. Participant demographics suggest that Nordic practitioners have the leisure time and the financial means to go – so why do they not?

One of the interviews where two ashtangi yogis discuss Mysore and practicing at KPJAYI⁷⁶ may offer some answers. The most significant hurdles are bad public relations and high demand (the global popularization of the ashtanga vinyasa style). Interviewee Linda has never been to Mysore, but she is familiar with the scene from her long engagement with Ashtanga. Therese has practiced in Mysore on one occasion and speaks of her experience with some ambivalence – for example towards the physical challenge engaging in such an intensive program, or the social competition between participants. In this excerpt, however, she talks about her experience trying to re-apply to KPJAYI.

⁷⁴ In his youth, the founder Pattabhi Jois was taught by Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, and further developed the Ashtanga style in his Mysore *shala* (KPJAYI, K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute), now run by Jois’ grandson Sharath Rangaswamy. Sharath (and to some extent his aunt Saraswati) divides his time between teaching in the Mysore *shala*, and traveling the world holding classes and workshops. Sharath has recently diversified and personalized the ashtanga brand after years of controversy regarding his grandfather’s sexual abuse of several of his students.

⁷⁵ For more on Krishnamacharya and on his connections to Jois and BKS Iyengar, see also Alter 2004, Singleton and Goldberg (eds.) 2014.

⁷⁶ K Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute, located in Gokulam, Mysore

Therese: Yes, and now there is more a sort of battle to get in there, it becomes a battle, who gets to go to Mysore this year, right? I have been ready with my application form and everything, right, and was about to send the application. And then it all crashed, or the server down in Mysore just crashed. And by the time I got back to resend, everyone is just resend, resend, resend... and by the time my application gets through it is already full. That kind of happened in ten minutes. So, it is kind of unbelievable. When I was there, [some years ago], I sent in an application, and got a response a few weeks later; it is all right for you to come. And then I had already booked an apartment, and hotels, and plane tickets, right. Now you cannot do that, you have to...

Linda: Wait. And take time off work, and that is not easy. And buying a ticket is super expensive.

In this short snippet of conversation, the interviewees bring up several interesting perspectives that foreshadow some of the discussion below, such as the popularization of the Mysore program and the challenges facing Mysore as a yoga tourist destination. Implicitly they also raise aspects of organization development, authenticity, and disillusionment. In the interview Therese states that she at some point really wanted to go back to Mysore, which she sees as the origin place of the Ashtanga style and the place where the practice is transmitted in the most authentic fashion. However, based on her experiences there and the problems of gaining admission to the program, Therese seems to have become a bit disillusioned with Mysore and the KPJAYI structure.

6.3.5.1 Mysore pilgrimage, privilege, and authenticity

The position of Mysore and KPJAYI in Ashtanga discourse can be understood through Gooren's (2010) institutional factor of conversion, where the institution represents the "[a]ppeal of their leaders, organization, practices, rituals, rules of conduct, ethics, values, and doctrine (cf. "interreligious competition")" (p. 51). The Mysore program has institutional and emotional structures that are like religious or religion-like institutions. However, conversion in a Mysore context must be understood more in line with motivation. By attending, those who already are insiders (or want to become insiders) strengthen their ties to the organization and the practice and receive guidance and validation from their chosen teacher.

Often it is 'certified' Ashtanga teachers who return to Mysore and their teacher year after year. They promote the place and the guru on social media. As an example, in January 2019 several of the internationally recognized Ashtanga teachers were in Mysore to practice with

Sharath. Their social media profiles were (to varying degrees) overflowing with gratitude towards the guru and the practice. The nascent guru himself posted videos of long lines of ashtangis filing in for practice in the early hours of January 1st. Therefore, at a certain point in their relationship with yoga Mysore seems to be where ashtangis deepen their practice and immerse themselves into the social settings surrounding and permeating the practice (Langøien 2013).

Langøien (2013) notices liminal structures in a Mysore pilgrimage context, relying on Turner's development of Van Gennep's model of rites of passage.

The pilgrimage as liminal is transformative; structures are broken down and rebuilt, and the journey through time and space itself, transforms the traveller (Turner 1973). In stepping out of their everyday time schedules and leaving their homes the yogis, like the pilgrims, gain a different perspective of their lives, and thereby opportunity for reflections. Additionally, in acquiring (further) knowledge of yoga, and embodying the practice, the otherness of the experience is heightened. There is a potential for a transformation of not just the body through "training" but also of the mind through knowledge and the changed bodied world. The self can be reconsidered and reconceptualised through the embodiment of new knowledge and realities (Langøien 2013, 52).

Coming to Mysore for the devoted Ashtanga practitioner can be looked at as a form of pilgrimage in the sense of a collective, liminal endeavor (Norman 2012). Pilgrimage, like all forms of travel, contains separation, marginality, and reintegration. In this context it involves a long journey, and a high level of involvement and effort. Attendance is rather exclusive, but many yogis return year after year, building a global network of fellow practitioners. Those who come tend to have deep connections to the guru, organization, practice, and rituals. Community building and self-development are ideal outcomes of this pilgrimage-like situation. However, interviewee Therese points out an imbalance in the guru-student relationship, where students become uncritical consumers of the guru's attention:

I was sitting at a cafe after practice, and hear people talk only about 'me me me me, Sharath told me this and he looked at me...' It became like a kindergarten. I thought hmmm... this is really immature! I also thought wow, is it really worth it going to Mysore?

The social scene influences the personal practice (and vice versa) – for example in the construction of informal social hierarchies and competition based on proximity to and attention from the guru. Nevertheless, with her statements Therese supports one of Langøien

(2013) observations which connects the Mysore scene to a form of communalism or in-group thinking. In

[...] addition to being economically privileged; there are thus undercurrents of moral and intellectual superiority. It can be argued that all this lends an elitist shine to yoga. Compared with non-practitioners and practitioners of other styles of yoga alike, ashtangis have found *the way*. There is pride in being part of a group that is not a part of the mainstream and in doing the most physically demanding style of yoga (2013, 92).

In Mysore, practitioners encounter a community of what Norman (2012) calls “others of like persuasion” with similar socio-cultural backgrounds and relative affluence (white middle class patterns of economic and temporal privilege) and create a common narrative within the group. Courtney Bender (2010, 59) notes about spiritual narratives that they function for “[...] staking out claims and possibilities for a certain kind of authentic and authoritative experience.” Mysore and Ashtanga vinyasa yoga narratives seem to function in the same way. In her 2015 article, Callie Maddox notes that her respondents (Ashtanga vinyasa practitioners in Mysore) are strongly connected to a narrative that promises both authenticity and authority. The “[...] desire to study at the source of Ashtanga yoga, to experience its birthplace, and to receive instruction directly from the family of its creator was a recurrent theme echoed again and again in the interviews” (2015, 332). In modern yoga imagination the city of Mysore is tied to portrayals of Ashtanga yoga’s history. Thus, the lineage and the teaching are perceived as authentic and authoritative, and with the help of western devotees the Ashtanga vinyasa founders have successfully created a global brand of yoga.

However, practitioners tend to have a complex image of the *place* itself (the city of Mysore, and by extension, the modern Indian nation-state). In the interview, respondents Therese and Linda make a distinction between the primitive past and the luxurious present in India, and tie this to the opinion that tourism and popularization has ‘ruined’ an otherwise accessible and low-cost experience. Therese says

[...] so many people want to go there now, so living there becomes a challenge. And those who rent out places turn the prices up so much. So, it even becomes a form of societal greed in a way.

Linda: And those are the people who can afford to go there. In the beginning it was quite primitive... where they who were not rich went. Now it has become a sort of luxury trip.

Linda's statement implies that she, like many travelers, has an image of an authentic India before modernity. Baked into this image is a particular conception of what yoga and Indian culture is – and what it *should be*. The 'should' is where notions of authenticity enter the picture. In this context the authentic India resides in a distant, romantic, invented past. For both Maddox' (2015) respondents and mine there is a discrepancy between an (imagined, pure) India in the past and a modern, capitalist India and Mysore *now*. Therese and Linda agree that this is an undesirable development, and that the influx of tourists and capital has created a form of "societal greed" in Mysore, where (as I understand Linda's statement) residents and vendors act like the capitalists that they, for some reason, should not be.

In the same vein, one of Maddox' (2015) respondents liken the current iteration of Mysore to Beverly Hills. In other words, the respondent does not understand the modern, urbanized India as authentic. Rather s/he reiterates a common dichotomy between the impoverished and/or ascetic India (i.e., the spiritual), and the consumerist West (i.e., the secular). The point Maddox makes in her paper is how easy it is to privilege "[...] pre-colonial or colonial conceptions of Indian authenticity that ignore current conditions of modernity, prosperity, and successful engagement with global capital" (2015, 339). Therese and Linda's statements support Maddox' points. Although they may not think Mysore is just like Beverly Hills they still seem to, as Maddox phrases it, carry an "[...] underlying assumption of encountering an India that is still 'mysterious' and different" (2015, 339). In a sense the interviewees reiterate colonialist-type notions about the orient. Commerce and prosperity ideals make Mysore *too much like* the west, and by losing its 'primitiveness' the city also (to some extent) loses its authenticity.

6.3.5.2 Summary

Going to Mysore to practice is social capital and symbolic power in action (Bourdieu 1986). Mysore practitioners are mostly long-time, elite yogis – or practitioners who aspire to be part of the elite. Both Langøien (2013) and Maddox (2015) note that practitioners immerse themselves in the yoga scene and its culture politics, both in-group (community, competition, and ego) and outgroup (towards the local culture, as authentic or westernized as the individual practitioner understands it). Some orientalist-type notions still prevail in the yoga milieu, especially in contexts of travel to exotic destinations.

The section on Mysore is not about conversion in the sense of the immediacy of meeting yoga for the first time. However, the structures present in Mysore are similar to aspects of Gooren's

(2010) cultural and political factors for conversion, such as the “[a]ppeal of the culture politics of a religious group (its view on local culture and society; its view on local politics)” (2010, 51-52). Being acceptance to a Mysore program the practitioner becomes immersed into a perceived authentic lineage of Ashtanga founders and into a community of “like-minded individuals” with overlapping goals and aspirations.

6.4 Retreats and meditation

Retreats is an aspect of the yoga milieu that connects traveling and social reasons for conversion. Retreats are popular not only in the yoga community but also in the overlapping meditation/ mindfulness sector. In this sub-chapter I look at involvement tied to retreats and analyze retreats (and traveling in a wider sense) as liminoid/ liminal experiences.

Few respondents became involved in yoga through retreats. Those who did were primarily interested in meditation (and sometimes other healing practices) prior to physical yoga. One respondent writes about going to a meditation retreat where *asana* yoga was included in the package. Also, remember the respondent from the chapter on health and exercise, whose doctor referred her to a specific retreat center to recover after chronic illness? At the retreat center, she met meditative, yogic, and healing practices which led to her deep engagement with yoga practice. The quote below is from yet another respondent (item 34), who notes something similar:

I started meditating, some weekend retreats included yoga. I attended my first retreat age 20, so that was first contact. Not any real interest the first years, mostly did it as a part of the weekend retreats. Remember being fascinated with shoulder stand, my back getting more flexible. Interest increased, participated at weekly courses after that, started doing some home practice. Been on and off yoga since 1996.

Combining meditation and yoga can also relieve some of the intense quality of a meditation retreat, as the respondent below highlights. S/he does not say anything specific about attending a retreat, but I have chosen to include the quote here because it highlights my point about prior interest in meditative practices – and because it highlights the findings in the former section, namely travel to exotic locations in the search for self.

I was travelling in India and primarily interested in meditation. I discovered that meditation was very difficult for me, due to my restless and wandering mind. Many people were practicing yoga in India and although I thought it was only physical exercise, and thus not

interested, I gave it a go. I floated like on a cloud from my first yoga class. I was very happy to experience yoga as a gentle way towards calming the body and mind and thus making it a great preparation for meditation.

This respondent reiterates a common perspective on yoga and meditation as complementary practices. When meditation feels difficult, *asana* practice is a useful way to calm both body and mind (or vice versa). The ‘orthodox’ perspective on the purpose of yoga is that it originally was meant to make the mind more prepared for meditation. This is a perspective that yoga authorities and ordinary practitioners alike frequently iterate. Norman (2012) notes that meditation retreats can be considered part of the spiritual tourism as healing category, and I would argue that yoga retreats can be included as well. Participants are focused on self-reflection and self-counseling (p. 28), and (I would argue) holistic wellness and sociability. The wellness concept implies a link between physical wellbeing and psychological health. The social aspect is equally important. Not only are retreats and classes places where practitioners meet and form a peer group, but the liminoid/ liminal quality of travel itself (Eddy 2012) can be seen to add social capital to respondents’ experiences.

The item in the YQ where respondents approximate how much they spend on yoga in a year has the form of a text box. The comments show that many respondents travel for the purpose of practicing yoga (and/ or meditation), which includes going on one or more retreats in a year. This pattern is supported by observational data as well. While it is possible for practitioners to attend retreats in their hometown (sometimes even with famous teachers visiting from abroad), going on yoga or meditation retreats during holidays is quite common. So is attending retreats and workshops as part of a continuing yoga teacher education. Going on retreats as an already (more or less) experienced practitioner seems to be a common way to deepen motivation for practice, and to meet fellow like-minded yogis.

6.4.1 The retreat as a liminoid or liminal experience?

Most postural yoga retreats can be understood as liminoid – and perhaps one of the ultimate modern expressions of leisure activity and of play. They include new experiences, new social relationships, and self-actualization. Both yoga retreats and (spiritual) travel function in the same way as Turner describes sports activities: “[...] since they are optional, they are part of an individual’s freedom, of his growing self-mastery, even self-transcendence” (1974, 68).

I understand liminoid to mean a small-scale or low-level (or possibly diffused) liminal phenomenon that, as Victor Turner (1974) says, resembles the liminal without being identical

to it. Turner coined the term liminoid as a neologism for the modern world, for contexts where individuality matters most. “Optation pervades the liminoid phenomenon, obligation the liminal. One is all play and choice, an entertainment, the other is a matter of deep seriousness, even dread, it is demanding, compulsory [...]” (Turner 1974, 74). In leisure (as it is, opposed to but predicated on work), there is not only freedom from obligations, but also freedom to enter or generate “[...] new symbolic worlds of entertainment, sports, games, diversions of all kinds. It is, furthermore, [...] *freedom to transcend social structural limitations, to play [...]*” (Turner 1974, 68). On postural yoga retreats practitioners can (and do) combine physical and meditative practices with aspects of leisure and play (surfing, for example, or mountain hikes, are common leisure activities during yoga workshops).

However, yoga retreats are phenomena with a more explicitly liminal structure than plain travel or competitive sports activities. This is primarily because yoga and meditation retreats come with an *expectation* of ritualized behavior that ideally will lead to personal development. But the ordinary postural yoga retreat is (generally) less intense compared to high-threshold and high-intensity retreats like (for example) Vipassana meditation or the rather liminal Kundalini retreat that interview respondent Sara describes. Sara is a Kundalini yoga practitioner and teacher. She thematizes traveling several times in the interview, from backpacking (embarking on a round-the-world backpacking trip), holidays (to visit friends and family in other countries), and festival/ retreat/ workshop attendance. Festivals and retreats/ workshops are important events in Sara’s yogic life. In one quote she talks about a festival that she would like to attend.

The best place you can practice is the festival in France. It is a pure Kundalini yoga festival. I have not been there yet, but people say it is fantastic. It lasts for ten days, you pay four thousand NOK for food and everything, and you can bring a tent. There you can attend workshops; you have morning sadhana, and three days of white tantra. Then you get a real boost.

Here Sara points to one of the core functions of yoga festivals and other meeting places: continued practitioner motivation through immersion in yoga and in social settings with other practitioners. Sara travels at least once a year from the city where she lives to attend a workshop with her Swedish teachers. In the quote below, she talks about a retreat she attended in Stockholm that gathers participants from all the Nordic countries. Sara specifically mentions some of the meditations and practices at the retreat, and how they

influence participants' energy, focus, and social motivation. An important point she brings up, which is like that Langøien (2013) makes about Ashtanga practitioners, is how the Kundalini yogis form an in-group feeling. They set themselves apart from the other hotel guests through dressing differently and doing their thing.

In Kundalini it is called white tantra. You sit for six hours meditating, and you sit in a special way, in couples in a line. So you form a sort of set-energy, I do not know why you are supposed to achieve that set-energy. And if you have to go to the bathroom someone else has to come and sit where you were sitting, so you do not rupture the energy. There can be meditations, everything from sitting and staring into each other's eyes, to eyes closed, mantras... you might repeat it for eleven minutes, or meditate for sixty-two minutes... anything can happen. And it is kind of intense. You can keep at it for three days as well. I have been part of that once, and it was really intense. [...] We closed our eyes, chanted a mantra, and went on for eleven minutes. Then we talked for eleven minutes, to ground ourselves, talked about anything really, and then we went back at it. Then we had an hour's lunch after three hours, and then another three hours. So you are sitting cross-legged and everyone wears white turbans, and... yeah. This was at a hotel in Stockholm, so there were lots of businesspeople... and kundalini yogis, dressed in white. Oh my god! Some special energies are created. And in the end, there was a microphone that started feedbacking with an intense, loud beeping noise. No one reacted. Everyone sat completely [still]. Then you are concentrated.

Both the “white tantra” and the meditation practices can go on for a full day or more. As Sara explains it the practices create intense, special energies and a deep level of focus among the participants. A Swedish website advertising a “white tantra” workshop writes that “[...] beginners experience a deep and somewhat challenging meditative experience. Trained meditators find new paths to their spiritual consciousness.”⁷⁷ This form of yoga/ meditation retreat fits well into Norman's (2012) notions of spiritual tourism as healing as the retreat focuses on raising positive energies for the collective and at the same time focuses on meditation as self-reflection and self-counseling.

For the respondents who attend retreats and festivals, it is clearly an activity they are highly motivated to do. The energies created among “like-minded individuals” (Gooren 2010) and

⁷⁷ <http://www.rootlight.se/yogakurser/vit-tantrisk-yoga-17-feb-2018-24788834> (accessed 25.04.18). My translation.

the boost practitioners like Sara gets can also be an incentive to continue the work at home after the retreat is over. Norman (2012) writes about the retreat experience as an “[...] escape from the everyday, or of sacred time or ritual renewal” (p. 31). Ideas of sacred time or changes wrought through ritual are well known from social anthropology and religious studies literature.

In an article on Vipassana⁷⁸ retreats, religious studies scholar Glenys Eddy (2012) concludes that “[...] intensive meditation retreats warrant investigation as specifically *liminal* phenomena [...]” (2012, 58, see also Turner 1974, and Turner & Turner 1978). It seems that postural yoga retreats, depending on context and intensity, can be analyzed as both liminoid and liminal. A retreat includes traveling outwardly (to a physical place, separation) to facilitate an inward journey (during the retreat, *limen*). The experiences are then aggregated as the practitioners becomes re-introduced to everyday life (and ideally continues the practices in a home setting). Although this is a rather basic analysis, it says something about the importance of both the physical location and the practitioner’s expectations. Through practice and meditation, practitioners are taught to expect a particular set of experiences like those Sara describes. Liminal rituals also imply change and personal development, which is *experienced* individually. However, Turner (1974) highlights that the liminal process itself is group focused. The ritual structure invokes a Durkheimian “collective representation” where actions or symbols have a common emotional and/ or intellectual meaning for participants (1974, 85). The liminal qualities of phenomena like practicing in Mysore, “white tantra” retreats, or even high-threshold meditation retreats are part of the authenticity-building structures of the yoga and meditation brands.

⁷⁸ Vipassana is a very particular type of silent meditation retreat, which due to its intensity and internal focus (albeit in a communal setting) is often understood to generate liminal (and sometimes life-changing) experiences for participants.

6.5 Individualism and social/ cultural capital

On one hand, travel and tourism is a commodity. Exotic experiences are for sale, and what is perceived as authentic becomes packaged and popularized by the tourist industry. Spiritual trends also become ‘touristified’ -- as Torunn Selberg notes in a 2017 chapter on spiritual tourism. The spiritual tourist (as opposed to spiritual traveler, which is a distinction Norman (2012) also makes), who is the staple of explicitly spiritually oriented group travel companies, are not represented in this project. Very few respondents indicate that their travels are anything else than individualized projects. The qualitative difference may be slight, but most respondents who travel have engaged in personal, individualized journeys (backpacking), as opposed to more mainstream, company-organized tourism. I analyze this as a conscious choice the respondents have made, and that is reflected in their travel narratives. Implicitly and explicitly, they describe themselves as individual travelers rather than tourists. By that, their narratives are socially coded for authentic and individualist values. Part of the identity building work of travelling is the accumulation of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986). Many respondents in this project have a special relationship places that are important in a yoga context, and which popular culture deems appropriate for self-searching activities.

6.5.1 Self-development

Most respondents who have met yoga during their travels belong in the categories ‘experience,’ ‘quest,’ ‘healing,’ or ‘retreat’ (Norman 2012). These categories are overlapping and perhaps even successive. Traveling as an experiment tends to happen when everyday life becomes problematic, when the respondent needs to examine or adjust her way of life. Respondents also seek experiences to substitute behavioral or cognitive patterns that have become unsustainable (2012, 29). Norman (2012) further notes (particularly regarding meditation retreats) that retreat tourists are commonly found alongside healing tourists. However, where traveling to heal is connected to treating or ameliorating physical and/ or psychological issues retreat tourists seek “[...] socio-geographic escape rather than emotional or psychological repair, even though the language used to describe the after-effects may turn out to be similar” (2012, 31).

There are not necessarily any clear boundaries between Norman’s categories. As such, the business meeting attendant taking a yoga class and afterwards “wanting more,” the meditation-oriented India traveler who “floated on a cloud” after her first yoga class, and

Sara's intense "white tantra" experiences can belong to the same relatively unbound categories. What is different is the type of travel, and practitioners' differences in motivations and circumstances both before encountering yoga and after. Some respondents can be called pragmatics, in that they do not travel in search for a deeper meaning or in search for their self. Others travel for 'deeper' reasons – and these can be placed in a quest category. These respondents' travels (or quests) are as much internal as external – the ideal is finding something within by traveling in the physical world. One YQ respondent explicitly stated that she was on a quest, and narratives like these are good examples of the intensity that can emerge in a conversion-like process.⁷⁹

Some respondents use words such as spirituality and seeking in their narratives. These concepts foreshadow a longer discussion on spiritual seeking in a later chapter. However, the seeker concept is important to mention here as well because of the long-standing cultural-historical connection between travel and (personal) religio-spiritual themes. Traveling as questing or as an experiment with a different way of living can be compared to the spiritual seeker⁸⁰ trope. However, in contrast to Lofland and Stark (1965) who speaks of the spiritual seeker as one who deviates from the mainstream and from social norms ('drifters and deviants' as Sutcliffe 2017 describes seekers in early sociology), in the YQ material the seeker perspective can be analyzed as something with positive social and individual value. For the respondents who to some extent identify as a spiritual seeker, traveling and finding yoga has been an integral part of their self-exploration. Instead of settling on a religious/

⁷⁹ An interesting observation comes up also in relation to this project's method. For example, in retrospect it is interesting, and even a methodological shortcoming, that this relatively substantial section of respondents is not visible based on the YQ items 32 and 33. At the time I created the questionnaire I did not properly consider the importance of 'travelling in the search of self' for yoga practitioners, and I was primarily concerned with the localized/ home-oriented aspects of potential conversion – even though modern postural yoga very much is a transnational (and global) phenomenon. However, the part of the conversion narratives that deals primarily with *tourism, travelling and pilgrimage* becomes quite visible in the open-ended Item 34, where I asked respondents to describe how and why they had become involved in yoga practice and is therefore a significant part of this chapter. The spiritual traveler (the accumulator of social and spiritual capital) is the core subject of this sub-chapter. The respondents who have answered Item 34 with something travel-related I began with dividing into three very rough groups; those who have participated in a retreat (or a group), those who have encountered yoga during ordinary travels or holidays (often with friends), and those who have undertaken a more explicit spiritual journey – most often to India. My preliminary categorization overlaps to some extent with Norman's (2012) typology, regarding not only travel, but also motivations for yoga practice in general. Healing (and health) is the primary, or a large, motivator in many conversion narratives in the previous chapter and the element of the quest' is present in Tom's 'heroic journey.'

⁸⁰ A concept coined by Lofland and Stark in 1965 in their work on conversion to NRMs

spiritual alternative, respondents' social interactions and practice experimentation (i.e., opening for new and multiple perspectives on life and the self) are considered wanted and valuable parts of the journey.

As such, spirituality for the traveling quester does not necessarily imply being connected to a particular place and the experiences it offers (although it in some cases it certainly does), but to the practitioner's idiosyncratic combination of an internal and external journey. The exotic location is still desirable, but in the quester/ seeker perspective the journey itself matters more than the result. Spiritual travelers are engaged in projects (practices and behaviors) of identity making and meaning making, which contribute to the well-being and health of the person in question.

A common factor is the individual focus and the self-reflexive performativity in spiritual travel narratives (Norman 2012, 20-22). For respondents, yoga becomes the core in a self-development process. Related to conversion, Gooren (2010) would likely categorize self-development under *individual factors*; aspects that revolve around the convert's "personal need" to change her life situation and find and express feelings of meaning.⁸¹ Through yoga, practitioners gain a sense of being "[...] existentially and socially empowered, feeling more "whole," "alive" and self-confident" (Newcombe 2013, 73).

Although Norman (2012) highlights the individual focus in spiritual travel narratives, it is important to remember that self-development in any form is not only an insular or idiosyncratic process. Developing the self is a social process as well. It becomes clear in respondents' narratives that without a cultural impetus for travel (which is a strong force in the affluent west), without meeting significant people while traveling, or without meeting the 'right' yoga teachers, the process would likely have been very different for these respondents.

6.5.2 Cultural and social capital

Respondents who have been on an interior and exterior journey to meet yoga and develop their selves have, in most cases, done this individually. The process of learning yoga can be analyzed as the formation of cultural capital. On cultural capital, in which French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu includes forms of art, practice and knowledge/ education, he writes that

⁸¹ Or even deal with feelings of meaninglessness, referring back to Sarbackers (2008) cessative aspects of yoga practice

The work of acquisition is work on oneself (self-improvement), an effort that presupposes a personal cost (*on paie de sa personne*, as we say in French) an investment, above all of time, but also of that socially constituted form of libido, *libido sciendi*, with all the privation, renunciation, and sacrifice it may entail (Bourdieu 1986, 244)

This perspective on the process of acquiring a skill or knowledge can be applied to yoga practitioners as well. Becoming a proficient yoga practitioner often requires years of rigorous practice, and many experienced yogis live lives that can be compared to some form of renunciation. Cultural capital, Bourdieu (1986) explains, is in its embodied state “[...] long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body [...]” (p. 243). It is a practice that becomes inscribed in the individual (indeed, the very goal of yoga practice), becomes *habitus*, and that gives the proficient yoga practitioner something non-practitioners do not have, and that frequently inspires admiration.

Bourdieu (1986) notes that other states of cultural capital exist as well, and these are relevant in a yoga context. Proficient yoga practitioners tend to institutionalize their knowledge (cultural capital) and become teachers with formal education qualifications. Embodied capital can also be objectified, that is, converted into the material realm. In the contemporary yoga world this takes the form of pictures, books, and internet- and social media presence.⁸² The proper consumption of cultural goods requires symbolic cultural capital (although not necessarily economic capital).

Cultural capital, in the form of yoga practice, is both an individual skill and a social sign. Even though respondents talk primarily about themselves and their own personal development (in this context a form of *libido sciendi*), there are hardly any narratives where other people are not present. The social aspect shows itself not only in first-encounter narratives, but also in motivating factors and in how the self-and-practice nexus appears when yoga becomes an important factor in everyday life. This, in a sense, is where cultural capital adds to, or becomes converted to, social capital. Bourdieu (1986) describes social capital as

[...] the aggregate of the actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in

⁸² Objectified cultural capital is a field too large to discuss in detail here, but a thorough discourse analysis of popular/ social media and ‘yoga celebrity’ would be in order. For further reading I refer to Puustinen and Rautaniemi (2015) and their analysis of representations of yoga in commercial media.

other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (1986, 248-249).

In other words, as members of a tribe of yogis, YQ practitioners gain access to a network of like-minded individuals who give each other a collective aura of credibility. This pattern of collectiveness or in-group feeling is very clear in places or instances like Mysore as an elite pilgrimage site – and milder perhaps in the liminal/ liminoid functions of retreats and workshops. Being part of a collective or in-group (practitioners in contact with other practitioners/ teachers) is, I would argue, one of the aspects of social capital in this material. The other aspect of social capital, however, is constituted in relation to outside world (of non-practitioners).

A (skilled) practitioner holds embodied cultural capital, which is actualized as social capital through the membership in a collective/ group (socio-cultural entity) of other practitioners. For others watching from the outside the group (through functions of objectified – and institutionalized cultural capital as well) is awarded a certain aura or flavor of credibility. Keeping with the theme of this chapter, traveling to exotic locations (for yoga) adds to an aura of high achievement. Any form of travel, and especially one that is explicitly self-developmental for the respondents, has to do with “playing roles and achieving status” as Turner (1974, 77) phrases it. Upon returning respondents can better (or more successfully) play the role of the enlightened yoga practitioner who has had life-altering experiences, and through the role increase their status in the yoga community.

Using Bourdieu (1986) I have argued that travel that is coded as authentic and exotic aids in the accumulation of cultural and social capital. By going to an intensive Kundalini retreat, visiting Asian temples with monks and nuns, practicing in Mysore, or joining other spiritual seekers in a beautiful, significant location respondents become endowed with (by proximity and/ or by experience) specific competence. Together, the place and the experiences offer respondents “knowledge of genealogical relationships” and help them accumulate “real connections and skill at using them” Bourdieu (1986, 250). Travel experiences, the yoga conversion experience, and subsequent practice give practitioners an “acquired disposition” and competence which they can wield in social, identity-building settings. A few respondents write about how the various destinations they visit (most commonly India) and their encounters with different religions, cultures, and people have changed their views on

themselves and their life. As such, spiritual travel and pilgrimage is important *identity work* for yoga practitioners.

6.6 Summary

In this chapter I have treated social aspects of yoga conversion (and continuing motivation for practice) with two foci: respondents who have been introduced to yoga through family, friends, or acquaintances, and respondents who have encountered yoga while traveling.

122 of the 170 YQ respondents listed family, friends, or acquaintances as either the primary or secondary factor of their conversion to yoga. Yoga practice can forge and maintain social relationships and tends to be present alongside conjunctive factors such as health and self-development. Social factors of conversion are commonly found in other studies on yoga and in NRM literature.

Without qualitative data from interviews and the YQ I would not have found the respondents who have encountered yoga while traveling. Some have stumbled upon yoga either alone or with friends. Most of the yoga-and-travel respondents, however, have sought out yoga and meditation during travels to exotic locations. These respondents can largely be categorized as lifestyle yogis (or budding practitioners who will develop into lifestyle yogis). Bjerrum and Pilgaard note that “[t]he lifestyle yogi is very dedicated to the yoga world as a whole and is more engaged in the spiritual and theoretical aspects of yoga. They invest more time and interest in travels/ ‘retreats’ and wants to combine yoga practice with theoretical aspects” (2014, 61).

The combination of social encounters and internal- or self-motivation is visible in travel narratives. In the post hoc retelling of their journeys, respondents combine the spiritual aspects and social aspects of traveling and re-make their journeys in the form of a conversion narrative. There is an element of playfulness or wanderlust in respondent narratives as well as an awareness that through travel, encounters with particular people, and meditation, yoga or other spiritual practices, the respondent will have undergone some form of personal change. On returning home and reintegrating into their communities, the respondent carries the new knowledge (and increased social capital) with them.

What is particularly interesting about the travel motif is that respondents use it to change something in their life situation. Both yoga and traveling becomes both an inner and an outer journey as respondents develop their selves and their own identities through new and exciting

experiences. The respondents I presented in this chapter have therefore traveled on two interconnected levels. Exterior, physical travel involves a particular place (often with special or spiritual connotations) where respondents become involved with people in a yogic or spiritual milieu. The exterior journey is tandem to an interior, and one of the most obvious findings in this chapter is that travel is intimately connected with self-development.

The number of yoga retreats, courses, and vacations on offer around the world is staggering, and wellness travel is a growth sector. Yoga practitioners in the Nordic market are willing participants in this market. Based on the YQ demographics I estimate that yoga respondents belong to a category of Nordic residents that travel more than most – both for work and leisure and for yoga specifically.

Exotic locations and new experiences are at the heart of most traveling narratives. The reasons for travel are many, ranging from leisure to experiments and spiritual quests. For some respondents their introduction to yoga has been work-related, and other respondents have ‘stumbled’ upon yoga during leisure travel. A few respondents have attended meditation retreats and encountered yoga that way. These are, I would argue, low-intensity introductions where respondents have not necessarily had a clear idea that yoga was something they were interested in. However, it seems that most respondents had an idea about what yoga was and what effects the practice could have when they began. Encountering yoga on explicitly spiritual travels is connected to experimentation, self-exploration, and questing (Norman 2012). These respondents’ travels have often involved exotic locations and somewhat more high-intensity introductions to yoga.

Travel is an important motivating factor for experienced practitioners. The main reason I have chosen to look at both introduction to and continuation of yoga practice in a traveling context is that in a post-hoc research setting it can be difficult for respondents to differentiate. This has to do with my method choices, speaking with respondents (sometimes long) after the fact, but also with the internal structure of a self-narrating process. The stories we tell about ourselves from a retrospective (or post-hoc) perspective are always informed by our current situation and point of view, and by retelling from memory there is always a narrativization and structuring of events and motivations that likely were not as clear in the moment they happened. Unlike Steen Haugen (2016) I have not asked specifically for motivating factors in the YQ or in interviews, but the post-hoc reporting method I have used (Taves 2011 [2009]) still gives a glimpse into respondents’ reasons to continue with yoga. In the transition from

early yoga involvement to a solid personal practice, there is a shift from external motivation and involvement factors such as family or friends to an emphasis on internal- or self-motivation.

Traveling and going to retreats emerge as important self-development strategies in this chapter. I argue that part of what makes travel or retreats effective is their liminoid (or in some instances liminal) quality (Eddy 2012). Turner & Turner (1978) placed “religiously motivated travel phenomena” into a liminoid pattern (Eddy 2012) and looking at the examples from the YQ and the interviews I find that the category molds well to respondents who travel with an aim of spiritual- and self-development, positive experiences, play, and leisure. In this context, travel and tourism can be understood as play, because respondents experiment with new ideas and new ways of life. The most intense encounters with yoga, however, can be analyzed as liminal. These tend to emerge when a practitioner has become familiar with yoga. This model is especially relevant for those who Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014) call lifestyle yogis. Sara’s liminal experiences during a Kundalini retreat, or the source-and-authenticity accumulation of a practice stay in Mysore, can give the seasoned practitioner a disposition and a level of knowledge, skill and connections that increase their social – and cultural capital.

The places respondents go to are about as varied as their reasons to go. Some respondents have not traveled further than to a training session with their company, or to retreats in unspecified locations. Other respondents have gone to metropolises such as London or Singapore to encounter yoga. However, the respondents who wrote the most detailed travelogues were also most explicit about their destinations, as their surroundings particularly inspired them to engage in yoga. These are high-intensity, high-engagement respondents who treat their travels as spiritual experiments or quests – and they are respondents for whom yoga matters. These respondents frequently mentioned the East (India in particular, but also places like Bali), and their traveling becomes intertwined with yoga as a part of their identity. The lifestyle yogis (Bjerrum and Pilgaard 2014) go on extended practice stays, and connect traveling and yoga through notions of authenticity, lineage, and exoticism. For a few, practicing in places like Mysore, India is a big part of their identity as yogis.

Spiritual travel and yoga tourism are parts of what Colin Campbell (2007) calls “easternization processes.” In yoga imaginations, images of the east hinge on concepts such as exoticism and bricolage (Altglas 2014) and to some extent prevailing orientalist notions

(Said 1978, Maddox 2015, Langøien 2013). However, as Langøien (2013) notes, traveling yogis are not uncritical consumers. They reflect on their own privilege, and on what it takes to be a real yogi. Critical perspectives on traveling are visible in the material for this thesis as well, when Therese and Linda discuss practicing in Mysore. Their discussion implies an insider versus outsider tension, aspects of class and privilege, consumption, and authenticity.

PART 3: RELIGION, NON-RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE YOGA MATERIAL

Introduction

This part of the dissertation deals explicitly with religion and non-religion emerging from the yoga material. There are three main positions vis a vis religion in the material: Christianity, non-religion, and subjective spiritualities. For the sake of structure and analyzability to treat them separately – religion and non-religion in one chapter and subjective spiritualities in another. This treatment, however, comes with considerable difficulty. Interviewee - and questionnaire respondents' involvement with and attitudes towards religion and spirituality are rarely straight-forward. For many, their worldviews and beliefs change during their lives.

The first chapter of part three, chapter 7, engages with religion and non-religion in the material, which I have broadly conceived as two ends of a continuum. In this chapter I begin with presenting some data from the YQ, such as a forced-response question about respondents' childhood religion, and items where I asked them to describe their religious identification (open-ended items) in their youth and at the current time. Two main trends emerge here. First, several respondents have grown up with no religion and have continued to have no religion in their adulthood. Second, a sizable portion of respondents have grown up with some form of Christianity, mainly state church Lutheranism, but the majority of these have since left religion behind.

It turns out that writing about religion is much easier than writing about its absence. This leads to an interesting imbalance in the text, which to a degree begins in the survey design and in the data material. The respondents who are engaged in religion or spirituality tend to be vocal about the contents of their worldviews. The non-religious, however, are not. Most non-religious respondents have not felt the need to elaborate on their worldviews (when I have not asked them specifically to do so). The lack of qualitative data makes non-religion difficult to say much about, and in a sense non-religion becomes an empty category.

Writing about the contents of the religion category is, comparatively, much easier. A challenge, however, emerges in defining what I from a religious studies perspective talk about when I talk about religion – and what respondents talk about. The category religion includes aspects such as a founder, holy texts and creeds, sacred spaces and places, a focus on personal belief, et cetera. A common and (common-sense approach) I find in the material is that *Christianity is religion*. Respondents in this project share a Christianity-centric (Lutheran) perspective on what a religion is and does, and in this project, Christianity is a category that is organized, traditional, and connotes Nordic-ness.

Respondents' childhood religion is generally either 'no religion' or 'belonging but not necessarily believing' to State Church Lutheranism⁸³ (SCL) (Botvar 2001). As respondents start to report on the (self-selected) religious identification of their adolescent and adult lives, the picture becomes much untidier as religious change and diversification become key terms. The number of respondents identifying as SCL Christians plummet, and the number of non-religious and spiritual respondents grow. Apart from the triple-nones, a Sikh, and a few respondents who continue to belong to the Church of Norway, all respondents note that their religious self-designation, affiliation, or identity has changed since childhood. At the end of the chapter, I discuss different perspectives on Christianity in its Nordic context. Among respondents I find diverse opinion and attitudes. Some respondents are positive to the Christian message and have no problems combining a 'Jesus ideal' with yoga and/or other perspectives. Other respondents are of the mind that institutionalized Christianity is nationalistic, intolerant, inauthentic, and somewhat confining.

In chapter 8, we shall see that religious positions and identities tend to be constantly changing and developing. Respondents' current religious identifications, both in the YQ – and interview material, include what I would call alternative or subjective religion or spirituality. This concept – spirituality – is amorphous and difficult to define. Both in the literature and in respondents' experience the term contains different things. These range from vague, idiosyncratic notions of the individual and the world to elaborate systems of practices and philosophies. In the questionnaire I have used concepts such as alternative or spiritual without clarifying my own definition. The in this context empty or open categories have let respondents fall back on common-sense definitions, which has turned out to be interesting. Some respondents embrace the idea of the alternative and are clear on what spirituality means in their own lives. Others are vehemently opposed to defining their convictions and practices as alternative, or they are unsure of what spirituality even means. However, the core idea that unites respondents is the *self* as the nave around which the wheel of experience revolves.

A few respondents inhabit the ends of the spectrum (self-define as religious or as atheist). Most respondents, however, inhabit the grey zone of being not-so-religious (Clark 2007), semi-secular (Af Burén 2015), or subjectively spiritual. This implies that they operate between religion and secularity, and that they populate this space with subjective and/ or

⁸³ Now the Church of Norway since the formal state church arrangement was dissolved in 2017.

idiosyncratic ideas regarding the 'big questions' in life. Yoga and meditation practices are, unsurprisingly, core features in the subjective spirituality material. What is surprising is how important Buddhism is. In the material it emerges as a religio-philosophical position that many respondents have connected with in youth or adulthood. Very few of the Buddhism-aligned respondents define themselves as alternative. Modern western Buddhism is connected to a particular historical development and interpretation which gives it a public image as a secular philosophy. Modern western Buddhism is deeply connected to a modern ethical project of self-development that yoga is an integral part of as well. One of the important findings from this section is that for several respondents, yoga, meditation, and a connection to Buddhist philosophy is almost inseparable.

I also present data on respondents' self-definitions, and some items that present their beliefs and convictions. The general pattern here is diversity, and it is not a given that respondents' self-definitions and their actual beliefs and convictions are completely coherent (nor did I expect them to be). However, to not only emphasize the belief aspect I have cast a wider net in the YQ. Respondents' experiences (religious to various degrees) are an important part of the data. Everyday' experiences such as oneness with the universe or nature, or déjà-vu, are quite common. However, the more spectacular the experience, the less common it is in the material. A similar pattern is found looking at consumption of alternative practices, therapies, and techniques. Unsurprisingly, the most 'outré' techniques are the least popular. Respondents tend to choose low-commitment astrology rather than astral travel.

7 Christianity and non-religion

7.1 Introduction

Respondents' attitudes towards religion and their self-definitions as either religious, non-religious, or something in-between is an important part of this project. Several items in the Yoga Questionnaire revolve around respondents' relations to religion, and the questions are meant to (to the extent possible) measure religious affiliation/ non-affiliation over time. The general pattern is that most respondents have changed their affiliation – except for a few of the Christian respondents, and some of the non-religious respondents.

In this chapter I attend primarily to the respondents who implicate traditional, organized religion (in this context, mostly Lutheran Christianity) and non-religion. Using data from both the questionnaire and interviews, I present respondents' definitions of their current religious (or non-religious) identity and attend to how their identity has changed. In the questionnaire, change becomes visible by looking at the religion(s) respondents were raised in (i.e., the religion of their parents/ guardians, item 23), if respondents have had previous religious affiliations (not selected for them by parents/ guardians, item 24), and their recent/ current religious identification or non-identification (item 25).⁸⁴ I supplement with other religion related YQ items. When interview respondents touch upon organized religion, the material shows a similar pattern. Religious affiliation changes throughout respondents' lives – sometimes radically, sometimes not.

7.2 Childhood religion

Yoga Questionnaire item 23 asks what religion (if any) respondents were raised in. Respondents were instructed to check all appropriate boxes. The 170 respondents gave a total of 195 answers, so there are some overlaps/ multiple answers. The responses to item 23 divides into two main categories: No religion (N=67), and various forms of Christianity (N=109). Breaking down the wider Christianity category, 58 responses indicate State Church Lutheran, 39 Other Protestant denominations, and 11 respondents note Catholicism. One response indicates that the participant has been raised Orthodox. Some variations in type and denomination are a given, but SCL/ Other Protestant is by far the most common. In addition

⁸⁴ Item 23 is a “forced answer” type, where respondents had to choose one or more alternatives. Items 24 and 25 are “open answer,” where respondents could input their own definitions, and write as much as they wanted.

to the Christianity and nones categories 9 responses indicate Other. Some of these respondents have used the comments option to explain or deepen their answers. 10 responses indicate Buddhism, Paganism or Neo-paganism, some form of New Religiosity, Hinduism, or Sikhism.⁸⁵

Looking a bit closer it becomes clear that even childhood religion is not clear-cut. As several respondents note in the comments section, they have been raised with a mix of no religion and *some* religion/ spirituality. Taking a brief look at the participants with multiple responses to Item 23, I find that the most common combination is None and State Church Lutheran (six respondents). In addition, the respondents who combined the None and Other categories could have been categorized as None and SCL as well. Some note that they, for example, have been “*State Church Lutheran but not religious parents,*” “*But not practicing or believing...*” or, as one respondent writes, “*But Christianity has partly been a part of society and in school.*”

What a ‘forced question’ like item 23 does not reveal is if Christianity (or other religions/ spiritualities) remained an option for the individual respondent when he or she became old enough to decide for themselves. I therefore added two extra items to the YQ to measure changes in religious belonging/ engagement.

7.3 Respondents’ self-selected previous engagements

121 respondents answered Item 24, which details respondents’ self-selected but *previous* religious engagements (open-answer item⁸⁶). The general pattern is that in their youth only some respondents have stayed within a form of Christianity. Many have left the church to either become non-religious or to pursue other religious/ spiritual paths. I have categorized 35 respondents in this item with the tag Christianity. Most of the Christianity-tagged respondents note that they have been Christian, Protestant, or Lutheran, or mention an identification with –

⁸⁵ The Yoga Questionnaire features three questions regarding religious orientation / ‘traditional’ religion: the religion of respondents’ parents/ guardians (item 23), their previous, self-selected religious identification (item 24), and their recent/ current religious identification (item 25). I have removed the Muslim, Druze, Jain, Baha ‘I, Chinese Traditional, and Jewish categories from the overview (N=0).

⁸⁶ Compared to item 23 which is a forced-selection item, item 24 is open-ended which allows respondents to type in their own answer, long or short. The rationale behind this type of open question is that I wanted respondents to elaborate on their youth and adult affiliations, and whether they at some point had made informed, individual choices on religious belief and/ or belonging.

or belonging to -- the State Church of Norway (now CoN). Some respondents, like the one quoted below, write in detail about their engagement as youths.

As a child I was very drawn to Christianity, of course influenced a little by my parents, but it was my choice to participate in Christian activities as a child and early teenager. My parents were not religious, but believed in God and Jesus, and considered themselves as Christians, but had an open mind towards other religions and spirituality, and I never learned that something was wrong or bad.

However, even in this group there are those who could be categorized as non-religious or only nominally religious, exemplified by the entries below.

Member of Statskirken. Occasionally protestant practices in Elementary School. Praying, reading the bible etc.

I have never been that religious, but in the past I have participated in Christian Lutheran traditions (like confirmation).

The respondents who have been involved with Christianity in their youth seem to differentiate between a personal and a nominal engagement. A connection between family and Christianity (or family and attitudes towards religion/ non-religion) is also important. Within the 35 Christianity-tagged responses to item 24 there is some overlap, as seven respondents combined Christianity with other religions or spiritualities they felt connected to. The most common combination is yoga and/ or New Age spirituality, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

7.4 Respondents' current religious identifications

Item 25 is an open-ended item that asks about respondents' recent/ current religious identification, and this is where the data on religious identification reaches peak diversity. The response count goes slightly up here, to 135 (of a total 170 respondents). There is some overlap with the answers to Item 24, which means that some respondents have changed their affiliations as adults, and some have stayed with their youth affiliation. It is not a given that respondents have delineated strictly between their previous and current religious identification.

7.4.1 Christianity

In Item 25 only 12 respondents wrote something that could be categorized as Christianity-affiliated, which is down 21 respondents from the previous item. This change is not surprising seeing as respondents report on their adult life where they are free to choose their own religious identification. Only four respondents see themselves as solely Christian, and write that they are “Christian,” “State Church Lutheran,” or “Christian Lutheran.” One of these respondents also weights the religious activity aspect, as s/he writes that *I sometimes go to my local Lutheran church*. Respondents do not necessarily think of being religious as a participatory identity. To be a Christian as an adult one does not have to belong (to a church) or participate in religious activities. However, Christianity is still a social and moral identity.

I have categorized eight respondents as both-and, as they are mixing their Christian beliefs with other religions or spiritualities. One respondent, for example, notes that s/ he belongs to the *Christian Church and New Age and Buddhism*. The combination of Christianity and eastern religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, or Sikhism is something several respondents mention. One respondent says

I have become less Christian even though I still belong to church. Now I would see my religious to be closest to Buddhism.

Some Christianity-aligned respondents also combine their beliefs with yoga philosophy (and a reverence for nature), and for this respondent the combination works well:

I just returned from Christian yoga and meditation retreat that was held by a lake, in the woods - and that describes my religions, spiritual paths and practices the best.

Another respondent, however, found the combination of Christianity and yoga a bit more difficult:

More liberal Christianity (Lutheran church). Attended a course in Medical Yoga, but the meditations and mantras proved too much for me being comfortable.

While many respondents seem drawn to the eastern and countercultural origins of yoga it seems that for a small section of respondents (both Christian and not) the spirituality connoted to (some forms of) yoga are too exotic or too reminiscent of practices from other religions to be entirely comfortable.

The diversity of religious/ spiritual ideas and self-identifications become visible in several other YQ items as well. Generally, the pattern is that the more diverse and undecided a respondent is on his/ her religious beliefs, the more they write in the questionnaire form.

7.4.2 Religion in items 37, 38, and 46

In the Yoga Questionnaire religion also becomes visible in Items 37, 38 and 46. These items ask about how respondents would categorize themselves and their beliefs. Item 38 queries about respondents' self-definitions, asking them to pick from a list of different religious, spiritual, and non-religious identities. 166 respondents answered this item, but only five of them self-define as a religious person. Since religion in the material is closely connected to being Christian, the answers to this item and the respondents who in item 25 self-defined as Christian match.

In the two next items I ask more specifically about the respondents' beliefs. Item 37 is a question framed "Which of the following best describes your belief?" All 170 respondents answered this item. Two of the answer options imply some form of theism and/ or a personal relationship to the divine. 14 respondents opted for the alternative "There is a personal god (-dess)", and 24 respondents selected the option "There is a guiding intelligence." Item 46 asks "Which best describes your view of the Afterlife?" 166 respondents answered this question, and the option "Conscious survival of the soul/self in some other realm," which is the one that is closest to a theistic approach to religion, was chosen by 35 respondents. These items are not Christianity-specific and opens for a variety of other ideas. It is, however, interesting to see the discrepancy between self-definition as Christian on the one hand (only five respondents self-define as exclusively Christian) and a relatively high number of respondents who hold some forms theistically oriented *beliefs*.

The six YQ items I have presented so far gives a picture of Christianity where respondents affiliation changes over time. Christianity is common in respondents' childhood and family socialization, which reflects Pål Ketil Botvar's (2001) notion of belonging [to the church] but not necessarily believing. This pattern is typical for the Nordic situation. However, there are traces of Christian beliefs in the material. Although few respondents self-define as Christian (or as a religious person at all), in items on belief content (such as gods, goddesses, or the afterlife) the number of respondents that choose theistic options is higher.

7.5 The nones

As I mentioned above, in item 23 (N=170/ 190 answers) 67 respondents noted that they had been raised with no religion. In comparison, of the 121 responses to item 24 (previous/ youth engagement in religion) I have categorized about 50 as Nones. Most respondents in this category are straight forward nones, who have typed “none” in the text box and left it at that. A few respondents in this category self-define as atheists or agnostics. Some respondents also clarify their responses a bit: *Atheist, later more towards agnostic* or *None. I was never a Christian, more inclined towards atheism, or No specific religion.*

In Item 25 (recent or current identification) I have categorized a little over 50 of the 135 responses as pure nones. Most respondents have written “none,” and a few have self-defined as agnostics. Some respondents are even more detailed, stating that they have *No specific religion*, or that they have no religion [...] *but I consider myself as open minded*. Some highlight their previous engagement with religion, but note that they are currently not religious:

*Christian as a youth, withdrawn from the Church as an adult*⁸⁷

None, not part of the Christian church anymore either.

Other respondents are more emphatic in their attitudes towards religion. One says s/he has *no religion, no path*, and one states that his/ her religious views amount to *[n]othing. I firmly take a stand in not believing in any type of religion*. The latter type who are antagonistic towards religion can be identified as anti-religious (Lee 2015). In the yoga material the anti-religious nones are very few, and they are particularly hard to spot in items 23-25.

The non-religion category is diverse. The category encompasses the whole spectrum from anti-religious atheists to respondents who self-define as having no religion but who mention ties to philosophical and spiritual traditions (but also tend to brand these as secular). Even in the Nones category in item 24 and 25 some respondents mention feeling connected to a religion or spiritual path or comments with their philosophical views. A couple of quotes can be used as examples.

⁸⁷ Originally in Norwegian: Kristen ungdomstid, som voksen utmeldt av kirken

I've always found my philosophical path in life has been related to that of let's say -secular-Buddhism. Zen & Taoism. I am however an Atheist and have been for my entire life. So no, no involvement in religion/spiritualism whatsoever.

I have never been directly involved with any religion. We have always been open to religious views, but never practiced anything.

As a general attitude, it seems that the None-respondents differentiate between having a religion and having a philosophical worldview and/ or being inspired by movements, people, or ideas.

7.5.1 Non-religion in items 37, 38, and 46

Items 37 and 38 give some context to non-religion in the material. Item 38 (N=166), where respondents were asked to choose the description that fit them best, sheds some light on their self-definitions. 20 respondents chose agnosticism, which is the most popular position in the 'unbelievers' section. 16 respondents do not know what they would call themselves. These 36 unsure can be seen to represent the nones who are non-religious, but not anti-religious.

One respondent is "Not a spiritual person," 13 define themselves as "Not a religious person." And another 13 respondents call themselves "A convinced atheist." That 27 respondents have chosen alternatives that firmly negate religion is interesting, and quite consonant with the number of nones in items 23-25.

Explicit non-religion and/ or atheism also becomes visible in the items on beliefs. In item 37 (Which of the following best describes your belief, N=170), 26 respondents opted for "I don't think there is any sort of God(-dess), spirit, life force or guiding intelligence," and 18 respondents were clear that "None of these" (options above) adequately described their beliefs. The agnostics (and the otherwise undecided) were also represented, where 15 respondents chose the option "I don't really know what to think." In Item 46 (N=166), which asks about the respondents' view of the afterlife, 47 respondents selected that they believed in "No individual, personal afterlife of any kind."

Looking at the answers from item 23-25 and the comparative items it becomes clear that the non-religious comprise a large part of the material, and that the content and levels of non-religious positions are as diverse as the religious positions. As noted above, the data shows that it is common for respondents who have grown up with some connection to religion

(particularly State Church Lutheranism) to not pursue a religious position into adult life. However, the longitudinally non-religious are common in the YQ. A pattern among nones seems to be that once a respondent is raised non-religious, he or she remains non-religious throughout life. In the questionnaire, none-none-none in item 23-25 is a relatively common configuration: 17 respondents indicated none in all three items, and there is reason to believe that these respondents grew up without any religion and have not identified with any religion since. 18 respondents have indicated none on one (generally item 23) or two of the three items, leaving the remaining blank.

7.5.2 The blanks

The level of nones in the Yoga Questionnaire is high, but so is the number of respondents leaving one or more items blank. This becomes particularly visible in items 23-25, where the responses move from 170 (with a total of 191 responses), down to 121, and then back up to 135. The question, though, is how to interpret the blanks.

The majority of those who have left one or more options blank have stated None in the first item. As such, leaving items blank can on the one hand be interpreted as a continuation of the previously stated none. Perhaps these respondents could be called implicit nones. On the other hand, it could be that since the questionnaire is long and exhaustive, respondents could not be bothered to answer every question.

It could also be that respondents feel that the questions are irrelevant to them. This latter point, reminiscent of a strongly atheist position quite common in atheist milieus (Lee 2015) but not so much in this study, becomes visible if one looks at some of the open-ended items answered by respondents who have left one or more items (23-25) blank. For example, one of the respondents who have left several blanks writes in a later item that

I'm not inclined to join any kind of religion, I find my exploration/ path deeply personal and don't want it 'tainted' by any kind of dogma. But I have changed through my yoga/ meditation practice and easily connect to many kind of practices.

As such, it can be discussed whether the blanks should be interpreted as firmly atheist, as implicit nones, or simply as not much of anything at all. Due to the limitations of the questionnaire (even with open-ended question such as item 24 and 25) I do not know much about what the blank respondents' non-religion comprises of – since they simply have not answered anything. A questionnaire like the YQ that explicitly asks about religion does not

prime respondents to divulge on non-religion to the same extent as religious positions. However, if I choose to count the blanks as full nones the number of non-religious respondents doubles to about half the respondent sample (N=170) in both items 24 and 25, which is a significant increase.

7.6 Discussion: religious and non-religious positions

For inhabitants in the Nordic countries, traditional and organized religion usually means Lutheran Christianity. The various state – or folk churches have played an important role in educating the population and to some extent in shaping what it means to be Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, or Danish. Until quite recently the state – or folk churches held a hegemonic position. However, in the encounter with increasing secularization (on several levels, see for example Botvar and Schmidt 2010) and religious pluralism/ diversification, the church has lost some of its defining power.

The YQ data shows that non-religion is a common position among the respondents. In countries as secularized as the Nordics this is not surprising. Phil Zuckerman (2009) notes that Sweden and Denmark are among the least religious countries in the world today, if measured by belief in core religious creeds and church attendance. The same pattern is found in Finland. Even though church membership is high, like in the other Nordic countries, attendance is low. “According to surveys, about 6 per cent of Finns attend worship services at least monthly and about two-fifths (43%) never attend. In Helsinki only about 3 per cent do so equally often while over half (54%) never attend (Gallup Ecclesiastica, 2011: N=4,930)” (Ketola et al. 2014, 157). Compared to the United States, a highly religious country, the level of irreligiosity in the Nordic area is high:

First, the majority of people in both Norway and Denmark are secular, and few are highly religious. For instance, in 2008, only about 13% to 15% of Norwegian and Danish people reported having strong beliefs in God, whereas 61% of the U.S. population report such beliefs (National Opinion Research Center [NORC]/University of Chicago, 2012). Second, church attendance rates in Norway and Denmark are among the lowest in the world. Data from the European Social Survey Round 6 Data (2012) indicate that about 5% of Norwegians and 4% of the Danish people attend church weekly or more often. This is different from the United States where about 43% of the population attend church 3 or more times per month (Gallup, 2010). (Kvande et al. 2015, 1)

It is not only church attendance that is in free fall in the Nordic countries. Baptisms too are less common than earlier. Tone Witsø Rafoss (2017, 9) notes that the numbers of baptisms have fallen from 96,1 % of all newborns in 1971 to 57,8 % in 2016. The same report notes that the separation between church and state which happened as recently as 2017 in Norway, may be a further indicator that Christianity no longer has a central, taken for granted position in Norwegian society. At the same time, about three quarters of the Norwegian population are still members of the Church of Norway. Certainly, church attendance, baptisms, or even membership is not the only way of measuring belief. The situation is much more complex. Nevertheless, comparative attendance numbers can for example highlight the secularized⁸⁸ context in the Nordics – where it seems that *having no particular religion* (but being a silent member of the Church) is the default position.

Being religious (in whatever way that is understood by the individual) indicates an actual choice. In common Scandinavian parlance this is being a *personal* Christian. As the YQ data shows, religion as an actual choice tends to happen as people leave childhood behind (or at least reach some level of self-determination). Until that point religious socialization in the family or at school tends to determine religious belonging. One respondent, for example, notes that s/he had been “*raised Christian, but not practicing or believing.*”

7.6.1 Christianity: family and religious socialization

In the chapter on yoga conversion, I showed how important friends and family were in inspiring respondents to start with yoga. The same social aspects are important in respondents’ relations to organized religion. Many respondents have received a nominal or basic socialization into Christianity as children and youths and consider state church Lutheranism as a part of their cultural repertoire. That Christianity has been a part of society and school, but not necessarily a particularly large part, is a statement that rings true in the Nordic context. For most respondents in the Nordic countries, it can be argued that culturally the concept of *traditional, organized religion* signifies some form of Christianity. State churches (and more recently folk churches) have traditionally had a strong position in Nordic countries, and while the bonds between church and state have loosened across the board, the

⁸⁸ Here I use secularized in the modern sense of the word, connected to political programs aiming to establish a division between religious and political power – and in the sense of common, societal processes which make religion less visible in society, often combined with falling attendance in religious communities, for example in the Nordic folk churches.

respective countries' folk churches still have significant power as a provider of life transition rituals and as a stakeholder in public discourse.

The data shows that the church (both the folk variety, and so-called free churches) has some significance for respondents. It is particularly important in early stages, in education, and as an interlocutor in maintaining social bonds. The data for this project suggests that education and the social aspect of religion (particularly tied to family) is key to understanding the responses from many participants. Although religion as a school subject and school-related activities such as confirmation no doubt is important agents of religion, it seems that relations to family and friends (Gooren 2010) continue to be the most important factor regarding childhood and adolescent religion. One respondent commented on item 23, stating s/he was

Basically Christian via parents' rituals and school teachers who were quite religious and in the Christian faith. But also there was an opening for broader New Age ideas on my father's side of the family, and my mother's side did not want to speak much of religion or politics in order to prevent too much influence on our thoughts on this. This last point was fairly well established in both parents.

Some Christianity at home and in school, some exposure to New Age ideas, and all of it encompassed by a hands-off approach to religious issues seems to be common aspects of a child's upbringing in the Nordic countries. Respondents like the one above narrates and reproduces adults' religion-related desires as s/he factually addresses family life and childhood/ adolescent religious socialization as a matter of parental (ritual) embodiment of religion and the extended family's discourse (or lack of discourse) about religion/ spirituality. However, the respondent's own agency in childhood religion goes unmentioned.

Susan Ridgeley (2012) indicates a distinction between children as the subjects of adults' religion-related desires, and children as creators and interpreters of religion. The respondent above does not imply that she had a direct influence on religious life at home or in school, but rather that religion was something presented. Children just participated in religion, but it was not necessarily openly thematized. Thus, she (along with many respondents) can be understood as a 'subject' of religion. However, as Ridgely phrases it, "[...] it is in the interplay between the generations that both children and adults shape their religious traditions by developing or modifying ritual and theology to fit their particular needs." (2012, 240). This

indicates that while adults want to (and do) socialize their children into (or out of) religion, children and youth also can be thought of as co-creators and interpreters.

The child as an interpreter of religion is well exemplified in interview participant “Nadia’s” story. In the interview Nadia and I had talked about what spirituality means to her. Then I asked if the feeling of being spiritual was something that had been with her always, or for a long time. Nadia responded:

Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think I remember... the spiritual, I didn't think of it as spiritual, but I think when I was five years old, I remember just like oh! I've been alive for five years! That seemed like a long time, but... (laughs). So then... I grew up as a Presbyterian, my parents were outside of [a large city] on the east coast in the US, and so... my parents were active in the church. It wasn't like we talked about it a lot, and they weren't evangelical, in that sort of Christian sense, but it was just sort of part of ... really similar to how it is for a lot of Norwegians, only we would go to church every Sunday. But it was more of... you know, just a sense of human decency, you treat people the way that you want to be treated, the golden rule, and so that has always been part of my life.

Nadia’s narrative touches upon several issues. Her childhood religion⁸⁹ seems, like in the stories of several YQ respondents, to have been oriented towards ritual (Sunday service) and family. Religious discourse in Nadia’s context seems to have been embodied (Ridgely 2012) and silent. Nadia says they did not talk about religion a lot, it was something that just happened in everyday life. It also was a social event: a likely analysis is that the church provided the family (and the general congregation) with a place where religious activity and social activity came together seamlessly.⁹⁰ If religion is understood in the Durkheimian sense of glue that holds society together, in Nadia’s case (along with many other respondents) childhood religion equals sociability, which again equals ideology. Ideology in this context could code that being religious and attending church, or subscribing to Christian values, is part of living a decent and moral life. Nadia says that when she was growing up, being

⁸⁹ Nadia’s parents (and most likely their ancestors as well) were Presbyterians, a Scottish-heritage protestant denomination common on the east coast of the US.

⁹⁰ Had I known during the interview that I would pick up on this little detail of her narrative, I would have asked Nadia if she attended Sunday school, or church picnics, and how much of her parents’ social circle comprised of members of the same congregation.

religious also was to be a good human being. Following the “golden rule”⁹¹ has been an important part of Nadia’s life ever since.

The circular logic in everyday religion is functional, relatively low-demand, and connotes being Christian in a positive, family values sense. Another of the interview participants, although maybe not a co-creator of religion as such, was early in his life able to interpret adult religious behavior and get to the motivations underneath. “Tom” names his grandmother as the main inspiration for his perspective on how to enact belief, and how to talk (or not talk) about religion:

I had a good role model as a child, my grandmother. She was very spiritual, as I understood it. She never went to church, and she did not talk much about it. But I understood that she was a person who has sorted out her relationship to the creator. And that has maybe been a... a reference for me, on how to live with my... with my relationship to the spiritual and religious. I do not speak about it, it is private.

Tom’s grandmother seems to fit into Grace Davie’s (1990) believing without belonging category. According to her grandson she never went to church, and seldom mentioned religion. Silence on religious issues, or perhaps more precisely religion as an intensely *private* affair – not to be shared even with the people closest to you – seems to be a common pattern in the yoga data. Tom notes that he has inherited his grandmother’s reticence towards verbally sharing his views on religion or spirituality. He prefers not to talk about it; his relationship to religion belongs to him alone.

Another couple of respondents also mention their grandmothers as sources of religion. The respondent (below) is typical of this category, where religion belongs in the sphere of tradition and with grandparents/ elderly people. The grandparents’ generation grew up in a society where religion (although already in decline) still was the norm. Her/ his parents, like many parental figures in the data material, has moved away from religion.

⁹¹ Matthew 7:12 “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (New International Version; <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+7%3A12&version=NIV>, accessed 12.12.17)

[I was] baptized in the Church and also underwent confirmation in the church at the age of 15. Mostly because my grandmother is religious. My parents however have never been religious. Today I am a [scientist] and an atheist and I have left the church.

Based on the average age of the respondents, most of their parents fall into the ‘Baby Boomer’ category. The boomers are born after WW2, divorced from organized religion, and subject to influences from the counterculture and the New Age movement (Roof 1999). Simplified, this respondent’s parents’ generation is either altogether disengaged, or are off on their own spiritual trip. The religious grandmother is the one who organizes children’s socialization into traditional religion. As such, this respondent’s answer sheds light on larger societal processes of secularization and scientification, and on gender issues related to traditional religion in contemporary society.

There is a clear gender aspect to religious belonging in this context. Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce (2012) present a sociological perspective on religious engagement. In traditional, organized religion (in their case Christianity in the UK and the US) and all aspects of which religion can be measured (attendance, beliefs, prayer, etc.), there is a gender gap. The gender gap has increased with time: the more contemporary the society, the greater the female dominance in Christianity. The gender gap also increases with intensity. The more demanding religious involvement is, the more females participate. In addition to gendered involvement, Trzebiatowska and Bruce (2012) note that in most cultures women (including grandmothers) have the primary responsibility of childcare -- which includes religious socialization. However, the YQ data indicates that religious socialization to some extent remains important for faithless Baby Boomers. Even when they themselves have lost faith in (the supernatural elements of) their religion, they may feel that religious instruction is a useful foundation for morality. They may also feel obliged to pass on some vestige of a distinctive religio-ethnic heritage, or that the decision to be uninterested in religion is one that their children should make for themselves (Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012, 100). Despite their families’ relative silence on religious matters and the societal ideal that children should decide for themselves when it comes to religion, both Tom and the YQ respondents’ quotes indicate that a certain level of religious socialization is unavoidable. Several respondents mention that they had a Christian confirmation because their family (especially the elders in their family) expected them to.

Respondents' religious journeys mirror societal development. Changes happening on a macro level tends to repeat on a micro level (in people's personal lives and in their value structures). The Nordic public has become increasingly non-religious, or only nominally religious. In addition, upward mobility (changes in social class and education levels) and urbanization are markers that indicate increased secularization on a personal level. Beyond (some) socialization into religion as children and youths most respondents do not bring traditional, organized Christianity with them into adult life.

7.6.2 “Protestant. More devout than my parents”

In this section I give what perhaps is a disproportionate amount of analytical space to a very small group within the yoga material, namely those who at some points have been involved with conservative, charismatic, or evangelical churches. I have chosen to highlight this small group to show that in addition to how family influences early religious socialization, in adolescence the influence of friends and peers becomes increasingly important. Some of these respondents have (especially during their adolescent years) chosen to engage in Christianity.

A few YQ respondents note that they were involved in conservative and charismatic churches. One respondent says that s/ he was *Christian Lutheran (Charismatic, Pentecost, Seventh Day Adventist)*, while another notes that s/ he was affiliated with *Christianity - grew up in a more conservative environment which I left in my 20s*. Conservative and charismatic churches are a relatively small section of the Christian milieu in the Nordic countries.⁹² The state/ folk church has its conservative aspects, and for the respondent immediately above it is not clear whether she has grown up inside or outside the state/ folk church. For the first respondent, however, the movements and organizations she mentions are clearly free churches. In the Nordic countries one characteristic of the free churches is that members are not simultaneously members of the state/ folk church (although dual membership was common practice in the early decades of the 20th century (Thurfjell 2015)).

The YQ respondent quoted below talks about her teenage interest in religion, and how that led her to enroll in an evangelical Christian high school.

⁹² By late 2018, 355 070 people were members of state subsidized Christian religious communities in Norway. See <https://www.ssb.no/trosamf/> (accessed 19.02.19)

[...] As a teenager, I chose for a Christian high school, because I was interested in religion. However, I disliked it after 2/3 years because a lot of friends from high school were too different in views and values (mostly strict evangelical tradition). Since then, I have never looked into Christian religious groups/communities again and sometimes I am aware that I have some prejudice against these Christian traditions (evangelical).

This quote is quite telling of how an YQ respondent may approach the space between religion and secularity, and how important both one's own interest and other people's views and values are in the development of attitudes towards religion. This respondent's initial interest turned to dislike – and the respondent explains this with a difference in values between her and her evangelical Christian friends. This experience has led her to turn away from Christianity and developing some prejudice against evangelical traditions.

The respondent does not elaborate on what this prejudice entails. However, early experiences can shape one's feelings towards a particular tradition – in this case evangelical Christianity – for a long time afterwards. The YQ respondent's story, and that of interviewee respondent Nadia, are useful in highlighting respondents' personal choice regarding religion and spirituality. Their narratives also show how peers and friends make *opting out of* or *opting into* religion easier.

The continuation of Nadia's story is interesting in this context. She was raised in a relatively open-minded Presbyterian church, and to some extent her childhood socialization into Christianity (and residing in a country where Christianity is highly socially acceptable and perhaps even demanded in certain milieus) may have primed her to find friends who were religious as well. In high school, those who ended up as her close friends were evangelical fundamentalists. About them Nadia says that

I had some close friends in high school who were evangelical fundamentalists, and I was sort of really into that for a few years, maybe ten years. But they were so... [...] it really turned me off, that there was so much self-righteousness and suspicion of critical thinking. Yeah, I really liked it, the company of these people, but I was always at a distance intellectually.

Nadia describes her evangelical fundamentalist friends as good company, and that she was part of the evangelical scene for a few years. Nadia's story and the story from the YQ respondent exemplifies the importance of peer groups and friends in religious conversion and change. Especially for young people, fitting in and being accepted by the right people is

important. In his categorization of factors that influence changes in individual religiosity, Gooren (2010) rates the social aspects of conversion highly. Both social networks (i.e., “The influence of relatives, friends and/ or acquaintances on joining or leaving a religious group” (p. 51)), and in-group social factors such as role learning and socialization have strong impacts on the individual. As I understand Nadia, the social aspect – friendship, a feeling of belonging, an in-group – was probably more important to her than the Christian fundamentalist aspects.

Nadia broke off the relationship with her fundamentalist friends for intellectual more than emotional reasons. As she became an adult, and thus more independent, the evangelical habitus no longer fit with her personality and value structure. As important as peers, friends and extra-familial ties are for conversion and for staying in a religion, a person will change, mature, and develop. The YQ respondent above found that her views and values were at odds with the friends she had in her evangelical Christian high school, and Nadia notes that despite how much she liked her fundamentalist friends she found herself apart from them intellectually and found the evangelical fundamentalist culture stifling. The YQ respondents above seems to say implicitly what Nadia is explicit on: that the suspicion towards critical thinking and self-righteousness in the evangelical milieu after a while became difficult to stomach. The YQ respondent “never looked into Christian religious groups/ communities again,” and in Nadia’s case she did not return to her childhood/ adolescence Christianity either. Both went on to discover yoga, and for Nadia Zen Buddhism and meditation have become important practices.

For respondents, early life and adolescence are framed in relation to parents and authority figures, and through them, to organized, traditional religion. Nadia, having grown up in the US, had an upbringing that is slightly different from the Nordic situation. However, her story is good to think with considering how a person’s religious affiliations and identities change over time. Change in religious affiliation happens, for Nadia as for most respondents, in a complex interplay between outside forces and personal choice. Respondents negotiate between familial religion-based aspirations and socialization, peer connections, and themselves as a (co-) creators and interpreters of religion/ spirituality.

With respondents who have been engaged in evangelical/ charismatic/ fundamentalist free churches, the pattern is that their affiliation has changed over time. As adults they have disengaged from the free churches, and yoga has become a part of their everyday life. What

separates these respondents from the SCL majority is their explicit positioning *against* Christianity and free churches after leaving.

7.6.3 “Jesus as a guide to how we should live” or “Lutheran with a twist”: a Nordic undogmatic approach to Christianity

The Christianity-aligned respondents in this project are a heterogeneous group that is quite difficult to analyze. Their histories with and positioning towards Christianity are, with a few exceptions, quite vague or indistinct. Respondents hold multiple positions in their worldviews, and there is no clear picture leading the group in any direction related to Christianity – other than what I have chosen to call a Nordic undogmatic approach to religion.

In YQ item number 24 and 25 I ask which religion(s) or spiritual paths YQ respondents have been involved with in the past and currently/ recently. As I have shown above Christianity is a factor in many of these answers. The respondents in the Christian category fall on a spectrum from conservatives, who I have discussed above, to very open-minded Christians who are less (or not) church-bound and positive towards other faiths. The latter category can be summarized in a quote from one respondent, who notes that although everyone chooses their own path s/he follows a clear example: *Jesus as a guide to how we should live*.

In this short sentence I find an attitude that is common among the open-minded Christian respondents. The figure of Jesus is understood as a good person who was selfless and kind to everyone, and an example to be followed. Whether he was the son of God, and a divine being, is to some extent irrelevant. Rather the example – what would Jesus do? - seems to be the key. As an authoritative religious figure, respondents project their own motivations, attitudes, and ideas of what it entails to live a good life on the Jesus figure (Martin 2017). This attitude speaks of an open and undogmatic form of Christianity, or a Christian orientation, that is present in the yoga material. The same projected Jesus could (and probably does) connote conservatism and fundamentalism as well. However, the majority of YQ participants value perspectives that privilege an open mind and a low level of engagement. Consider the quote below:

As a child I was very drawn to Christianity, of course influenced a little by my parents, but it was my choice to participate in Christian activities as a child and early teenager. My parents were not religious, but believed in God and Jesus, and considered themselves as Christians,

but had an open mind towards other religions and spirituality, and I never learned that something was wrong or bad.

This respondent's parents socialized her into a Christian habitus, and later she internalized being Christian and made it her own choice to participate in religious activities. However, when the respondent says that "My parents were not religious, but believed in God and Jesus, and considered themselves as Christians..." it is interesting from a religious studies perspective. The respondent first negates the term religious. Directly afterwards s/he defines her parents into the common consensus (social code) on what it is to be religious in the Nordic countries, namely personal belief (self-defining as a Christian person).

The respondent points to a crucial aspect in understanding how some respondents think about religion. Being religious is not the same as believing in God and Jesus (or anything else, for that matter). Rather, religion and being religious often connotes something negative. Respondents talk about a straitjacket of organized, institutionalized, church-based activity. Organized religion is old-fashioned, and something that grandmothers and people who do not 'know better' do. Unthinking, uncritical belonging is not a desired position for this segment. However, if belief (and following the good example of authority figures) is a choice and a personal conviction, and if it in a sense looks more like spirituality – then it seems to be understood as the real thing.

The respondent above notes that she and her parents participated in Christian activities in her childhood and youth. However, several other respondents indicate that they never (or very seldom) did – even though many had a relationship to religion. This segment of respondents exemplifies what Grace Davie (1990) calls believing without belonging or implicit religion: people to believe in (or relate to) supernatural beings, without ever attending religious services (or even calling themselves religious). On a societal level implicit religion indicates that belief is declining at a slower rate than belonging to organized religion does. Davie's (1990) British statistics show a "[...] profound imbalance between any statistics of church membership and those concerned with religious belief. In short, a large majority of people in contemporary Britain continue to believe but have ceased to belong to their religious institutions in any meaningful sense [...]" (1990, 457). One could argue that similar developments have been (and are) ongoing in the Nordic countries as well. *Personal* belief does not seem to predicate involvement with any institution, or religious activity.

While church *attendance* has been consistently low (and sinking) over many years,⁹³ the Church of Norway still has a very high membership rate. Pål Ketil Botvar (2001), inspired by Davie (1990), categorizes this latent membership as *belonging without believing*. In the YQ material it is quite a common position. I have not asked specifically about CoN membership but based on how many respondents have mentioned the church there is reason to believe that many respondents are part of the silent majority or latent membership who use the church when a service is needed. The Church of England, like the CoN, provides life transition rituals for its members, from birth to “[...] – most of all – death. Despite a lack of regular attendance, it is to the Church of England that most English people turn when the services of a religious institution are required” (Davie 1990, 457). The same pattern is visible in the Nordic countries. Most church members have minimal or casual involvement with the church. They will never attend a regular service, other than perhaps at Christmas or after graduating primary school, for funerals and marriages, or maybe only for concerts or other cultural events. The latent membership category encompasses most of the (N=56) YQ respondents who reported being raised in the Norwegian State Church (now the Church of Norway). The Nordic demographic could also be called culturally Christian (*kulturkristne*). This means being raised with some awareness of Christianity and (what some respondents call) “the Norwegian Christian heritage” but otherwise being minimally or casually involved with organized Christianity.

Latent CoN membership (the *belonging without believing* position) and implicit religion (*believing without belonging*) both relate to a category of respondents I have termed the middle position. These respondents are Christian (of some sort), but skeptical and critical towards tradition, institution, and authority figures. They contrast their own open view with the perceived narrowness of organized Christianity. Some of the key concepts that characterize this middle position is authority of the self, skepticism to organized religion, and a non-dogmatic and almost perennial approach. One YQ respondent writes that

[I am] Lutheran with a twist. I find the way of looking Lutheran really narrow. I believe in Jesus, but I do believe in nature, intuition, karma. It's all matter of way of looking.

⁹³ At the end of 2016 71, 5 % of the Norwegian population were members of the Church of Norway. See <https://kirken.no/nb-NO/om-kirken/bakgrunn/om-kirkestatistikk/> (accessed 16.11.17)

This respondent believes in Jesus, but at the same time she is critical towards what she sees as a narrow Lutheran viewpoint. Lutheran with a twist implies having balanced a Christian affiliation with alternative ideas and concepts, such as nature, intuition, and an (eastern-inspired and/ or new age) idea of karma. This *open, non-dogmatic approach*, sometimes in the context of Christianity and sometimes the alternative or new age is common in this study. The open, undogmatic approach overlaps with a perennialist attitude. One interview respondent, “Karin,” says that

[...] In a sense, religions are very similar. God and... Allah are really the same, and even if I am skeptical towards believing in things in the Bible and the literalness of it, in a way what you choose to call God... does not really matter. After all, it is something that is common, and that is larger than you are.

Karin is not alone in having an inclusive attitude towards religion, although it for her comes from a position that is mostly outside of religion. She sees religions (the monotheistic religions, at least) as intrinsically the same, and to her it does not matter which name the divine has. The problem arises when the bible (or other religious texts for that matter) is believed and acted upon uncritically and literally. Also, the concept of belief in the traditional, institutionalized variant seems irrelevant to her. Karin is a student of medicine, and she is skeptical of things presented as unexplainable. However, the quote below is telling as to how she has started to negotiate the seemingly unbridgeable science-and-religion chasm.

You have to understand it within your paradigm. [...] Although many things might be bullshit, it depends on how you understand it, how you interpret it. Things I used to be very skeptical towards I am probably more open to now. I do not know why. Earlier I used to be very adamant that science is right, and I am still very into science and philosophy. But then I have realized that, well... things like energies. That you can call something God without being completely weird, special, and Christian. I sort of figured there is more, somewhere. I might not want to call myself an agnostic, but... I am more open towards it.

Through a combination of yoga practice, studies, and other experiences Karin has opened for new ideas. Increasingly she uses religious/ spiritual interpretations of various phenomena – such as energies. Whether phenomena like energies are factually real and if they should be

interpreted literally is to some extent not very important for Karin. What matters is that the practices work and that the concepts are good to think with.

In the process of opening towards alternative ideas Karin places herself in a middle position that is self-authoritative and quite idiosyncratic. Belief and skepticism are about Karin's own understanding and interpretation. Without discrediting or leaving behind a scientific perspective Karin seems to have found a way of reconciling with the religious or spiritual aspects of life she has been discovering through openness, a perennial attitude, and an attempt at non-judgment. Exactly what the development in Karin's thinking relates to (whether it is yoga practice, education, socialization, or a composite) is hard to say. Karin is still young (somewhere in her mid-twenties) and like many of the respondents from the YQ (particularly in item 24) the period of young adulthood is often where religious change takes place along with other life developments (Gooren 2010). However, it seems to be a relatively new realization for Karin that one can "call something God without being completely weird, special, and Christian."

7.6.4 Christianity as something "weird and special"

Why is it that respondents like Karin have an attitude that something can be weird, special, and Christian? Like many YQ respondents, Karin too seems to be skeptical towards Christianity in the organized sense. She did for example never indicate that she attended church for any reason. In addition, in the interview Karin uses the word Christian in a slightly derogatory sense. It seems that for her traditional religion is something that is distant, a position that is difficult to understand from her sphere of experience.

This latter point is interesting to explore. I bring it up because Karin (as well as several other respondents) exhibit reluctance or discomfort with Christianity when they are speaking on their own behalf, even though they are generally positive towards religion as a more abstract concept.

In his book on post-Christian Swedes, David Thurfjell (2015) opens some analytic possibilities. In one chapter he asks why it can feel embarrassing to be a Christian. Thurfjell (2015) calls this phenomenon a socio-psychological reaction and a subtle cultural phenomenon, which is predicated on a sometimes-difficult balancing act between belonging to a religion and wanting to fit in to the post-Christian mainstream. The mainstream is primarily secular, and embarrassment emerges in relation to hegemonic non-Christianity.

Generally, the experience of embarrassment is based on identification and social norms, and “[...] arises in a person when the culturally specific social rules that apply within the group with which she identifies, consciously or unconsciously, are seen as being marginally overstepped by herself or some other known or unknown person within the group” (Thurfjell 2015, 195).

In the Nordic countries there is a tendency for Christianity – or, more specifically, Christian people – to be seen as deviating from the secular norm. Thurfjell (2015) points out that in the “socio-psychological discourse” the Christian lifestyle is seen as uncool. Thurfjell (2015) says, Christianity primarily is about emotional structures. A sincere religious attitude does not function well alongside the dominating postmodern, ironic culture (p. 196-199). Christianity is associated with stupidity, irrationality, and naiveté. In that context, like Karin indicates, choosing a Christian identity is particularly difficult to understand. I would add, based on the YQ data, that this socio-psychological discourse is mainly subconscious or implicit. Few respondents would explicitly verbalize these attitudes – although they may have them.

Thurfjell notes that embarrassment is most common among those who have grown up active within the Christian mainstream. In the YQ material some respondents have been active in a church in their childhood and youth and have subsequently left organized religion. Christianity is an identity they no longer want to perform, and that has become irrelevant for them. However, based on the yoga material I think the position of embarrassment versus Christianity runs deeper than just this demographic. Rather it permeates much of society. In comparison, yoga fits in the hegemonic non-religious discourse. One may be a serious and dedicated yoga practitioner without ever touching religious, spiritual, or philosophical aspects. Yoga does not connote stupidity and naiveté - but the opposite, namely a quest to locate something authentic in an embodied practice that does not require belief of any kind. Yoga too has its emotional structures, but practitioners do not connect it to something remote or to piousness. Rather, yoga is a postmodern construct that for practitioners meshes with popular culture in a way traditional, Nordic Christianity is unable to. The discomfort and embarrassment that come into play with Christianity vanishes in the yoga context. Partially because yoga is a different category, and partially because yoga does not engender the same negative socio-psychological connotations as Christianity. In short, there is no stigma attached to being a yoga practitioner. In comparison to being a Christian, being a yogi is not socially risky.

7.6.5 Religion critique, nationalism, and Nordic-ness

Thinking of Christianity as a social risk is echoed in the material in, among other things, respondents' reflections on interior attitudes and emotions like embarrassment and discomfort. Respondents' also tie religion to larger social and political problems such as nationalism and division among people. This was a finding that was both surprising and not.

It was not unanticipated that many yogis are engaged with social issues and have a particular type of value set, even though they are not very politically active. It was more surprising to see how respondents analyze religion (and religion-based actions and attitudes) as a cause of negative social and political issues. In turn, respondents use these issues to criticize religion. The core idea among those who are critical to religion (instead of only indifferent) is that religion can be both used and misused. Respondents are both in explicit and implicit critique aware of the possibilities (and dangers) inherent in nationalistic Christianity on the one hand, and in religion as an overarching theme on the other. What I find is primarily a critique that emerges from respondents' left-wing political standpoint and urban, liberal value sets. It functions as a political marker – and to some extent a partisan issue.

David Thurfjell (2015) explains one strand of reasoning behind why religious people are attracted to religion, where social, aesthetic, and emotional issues are at the core.

Seen from a history of religions perspective, an important reason why religion has not disappeared [... is] probably the fact that religiosity for most religious people only partially fills the function of a hypothesis about how the world is constituted that is comparable to the natural sciences. For most religious individuals and organizations, however, this nature-oriented explanation is not what their religiosity is about. Rather, it is group belonging, community, political considerations, aesthetics, emotional attachment, loyalty, and perhaps even the feeling of dedicating oneself to something that is not rational that entice people to religion (Thurfjell 2015, 86).

This quote can just as well explain why people are not attracted to, or why they choose to criticize, religion. An example can be found in one of the interviews.

Therese and Linda are both Ashtanga teachers, and I interviewed them during a workshop with an internationally renowned yoga teacher. Both have practiced and taught for many years, making them among the most experienced of the interviewees. Their experience gives

them some authority on all things yoga, and during the interview it became clear that many of the topics discussed was something they both had spent time thinking about.

In the interview Therese directly equates religion with world religions and with their accompanying traditional, organized structures. In Therese's view religion primarily has negative associations. It is constraining and creates conflict and division.

The interview passage that ended with a critique of traditional, organized religion started with a discussion of the Yoga Sutras. The YS is popular in yoga milieus and is used for teaching purposes and as practical philosophy in respondents' everyday life. In Therese's view, however, yoga philosophy is not really taught as it should be here in the west. The philosophy is not properly valued for what it is and can do. For her the Yoga Sutras are as much an introduction to practical psychology as it is a philosophy or a form of religion – even though the way Therese describes the book below highlights that it fills many of the functions of a traditional religious text. The YS is perceived as real and authoritative, and it provides answers.

[...] it is a real thing that you can... it's more important than anything else I've read or heard about other places. It's the answer to a couple of things. In the west, that philosophy is not valued. It is maybe unknown. It may not be valued for what it is, so it becomes a little bit alienated and strange...

Linda counters with a perspective where the foreign origin of the Yoga Sutras and yoga philosophy is more problematic. Yoga texts and philosophy are in Linda's view closely tied to Hinduism in the traditional, religious sense. She says, "It is traditionally tied to religion. We are not Hindus, and that's where problems start." Linda acknowledges that yoga philosophy hails from a different (Hindu/ Indian) religio-cultural context. Not only the context but the yoga texts in themselves can be hard to interpret and understand. However, apart from the obvious (cultural and linguistic) translation problems, respondents' main issue is not the context and content per se. Those are mainly perceived positively. The problem is the religious connotations.

In many respondents' perspective, organized religion is divisive and feeds negativity into society. Religion and nationalism put people in 'boxes' and separate them from each other. This point becomes apparent as Therese, a bit later in the same conversation, rhetorically asks

Am I Christian or not Christian? Am I this or that, it's just grouping things, right. Like, I'm better than you and we are opposites, right? [My religion] is better than yours, in a way. [...] But it is sort of like Christianity... are you a Christian, are you a Catholic, are you a Hindu, are you... then we put ourselves in boxes. Then it becomes just the same. The religion becomes the same as if you live in Telemark or Vestfold, you know. Do you live in Norway or Sweden? We are better than you are and we do like this and you do like that... that is an estrangement. But here [with yoga/ YS] you go beyond all that... Should would could! But really... there is a form of paramount understanding everybody can agree on. [...] But this [yoga] is something everyone can agree on. If you calm your mind, you become a more comfortable person to be around, for both yourself and others, right. Your life gets better. There is not so much stuff churning in your mind, and things calm down. So that is a thing we... we should fight for that, that is a bonus for the other things.

Therese mainly talks about religion at a public level, or at least in the abstract. She does not mention any personal experiences with (for example) Christianity. Rather she speaks on the level where, like Cora Døving (2011) says, religion appears as a phenomenon in the public sphere and does something (negative) to people.

According to Thurfjell (2015) Christianity's hegemonic position in the Nordic countries has been an important part of connecting state church membership to national belonging. This idea is to some extent visible in the yoga material, both explicitly and implicitly. Implicitly the ideology emerges not as an outright statement, but an undercurrent of feeling in their statements. An example is an idea that state church membership is (or at least was) the done thing in a Nordic context. When the connection between Christianity and nationalism emerges explicitly it takes the form of a critique which highlights a particular understanding of and attitude towards religion. Traditional religion, for example Christianity, is in this context about a conflict perspective where groups are constituted in opposition to each other.

Informant Therese alludes to a religion hierarchy (where one religious tradition is better than others) which in turn creates out-groups and in-groups and communalism, which she equates to regional rivaling and nationalism. Therese's interpretation is interesting because in public discourse religion is frequently associated with nationalism. Civil religion (Bellah 1991) is an obvious avenue, that is, the implicit religious valuation of the nation through rituals and material objects. Religion, as such, functions to glue the society (and the nation-state) together (Durkheim 1976 [1915]).

Another interesting aspect Therese brings up is that to be a proper inhabitant of a country, you belong to a (particular) religion. Lois Lee (2015), in her analysis of material (and banal) expressions of non-religion, finds what she calls a “narrative of Britishness.” The narrative includes both Christianity and non-religion, seeing as most Brits identify as one or the other (ibid., 74). The situation is not particularly different in the Nordic countries. Nordic societies hold a canopy of secularity (the state functions in a non-theocratic manner) over an umbrella of (post-state church) Christianity (holidays are after all still the holy days of the Christian calendar, and schools teach “Knowledge of Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of life and Ethics” (KRLE)), over the individual who is (relatively) free to choose her worldview in a relatively pluralized culture. However, in public opinion Norwegian-ness (like Britishness) is still connoted with a particular amalgamation of Christianity and non-religion. In addition, like respondent Linda alludes to above, other world religions are not uncomplicated in a nationalist narrative. Islam, for example, tends to be seen as problematic in a way Christianity (and particularly) non-religion is not. Cora Alexa Døving (2011) writes that

Religion’s centrality in media does not mean that the population has become more religious, but it means something. A partial answer is probably in religion’s increased signification as a symbol in a context of identity politics. Religion, as it appears as a phenomenon in the public, is often politicized, and has to do with borders between groups. The historically new religious pluralism and the high level of attention Islam gets in general, forms the backdrop to the increased occurrence of religion in media (Døving 2011, 26, my translation).

Neither Therese nor Linda mentions the question of pluralism and Islam openly. However, in Therese’s views on religion parts of Døving’s (2011) analysis are explicitly reflected. For Therese it has to do with identity politics (*Am I Christian or not Christian?*) and borders between groups (*It’s just grouping things, right. Like, I’m better than you and we are opposites, right? ... then we put ourselves in boxes*), and it is politicized and nationalistic. For Therese, traditional religion seems constituted by close-mindedness and othering. Christianity especially, but also other religions) has slipped away from their roots, and from what it is supposed to do for people. Strife and competition between religious identities

renders religion itself less authentic, and something that limits human experience as people putting themselves in boxes.⁹⁴

7.6.6 The nones

As I showed in the beginning of the chapter, the nones are a significant portion of the material. Few of the non-religious respondents merge their non-religion with other religions/spiritual paths. The words none or not applicable are almost ubiquitous in the material, although there are examples where respondents detail their journeys from (for example) childhood SCL status to a grown-up none status. However, in the YQ most nones provide little extra information on the content of their non-religion, or their identity as non-religious. As I see it there are two core reasons behind the relative lack of data on nones. The first one is cultural.

In the introduction to her 2015 volume on non-religion and subjective secularity, Lois Lee writes that “[b]eing ‘secular’ has become one of the most common things a human being can be and living a life that is shaped only indirectly by religious cultures and beliefs is one of the most widespread” (p. 2). This is an important reason why YQ respondents that self-define as nones provide comparatively less qualitative data than those with attachment to (or interest in) religion and spirituality. Being secular is so normal that at first glance there seems to be little to say about it. Status or identity as a non-religious person is not particularly present in respondents’ self-narration or self-understanding. Unlike those who actively criticize religion, many nones are indifferent to religion and not interested in defining themselves in opposition. At best, in a sense, a none-respondent will answer something like: *None, not part of the Christian church anymore either* (YQ item 25).

The other problem is connected, and both theoretical and methodological. What I do not ask for, I do not get. Regarding theory, Lee (2015) states that compared to religion(s) or spiritualities there is less tradition for research on secularity. Secularization has of course been a theme in the study of religions since the inception of the field. Early research in sociology of religion all dealt with secularization and non-religion in their way, mostly assessing that

⁹⁴ The linguistic metaphor of boxes, as well as other limiting terms, also appear in the questionnaire. One respondent says, in response to Item 38; *I am everything. Don't like this boxes [sic.]*.

secularization was a fad that would not remain (Lee 2015, Campbell 2002 [1972]). However, non-religion has proven the opposite of a fad. Rather it is an option in a pluralized society (and increasingly *the* option, at least in the Nordic countries). There is still debate on what secularity and secularization really means, how widespread the phenomenon is, and not at least on what we know about “[...] those lives in which religion is conspicuously absent or conspicuously ‘othered’” (2015, 3). Therefore, attending to non-religion as an option in contradistinction to religious options (Lee 2015) makes sense when looking at the empirical material.

Non-religion emerged clearly in the empirical material, even though I did not specifically ask about it. Beginning the project, I worked on a hypothesis that revolved almost exclusively around new and/ or alternative religion and spirituality. My preconceived notions about yoga practitioners’ religious/ spiritual identities deeply influenced the questionnaire design. The YQ asks respondents to write about (and emphasize) their religious attachments and identities. However, if I in the questionnaire had highlighted that I was as interested in respondents’ perspectives on non-religion as well, the qualitative data input would have been different.

That said, to some extent I can flip the script from the section on Christianity to reflect on the nones. Questions of childhood socialization, friends-and-family, and self-authority provide the same answers, only on the other side of the religious spectrum. Non-religious socialization functions in the same way as any other forms of socialization. However, in this questionnaire, the answers and life stories among nones are less diverse than the rest – as the quote from this YQ respondent attests to: *Have no thoughts about [what happens to the soul after death].*

7.6.7 Summary: religious and non-religious positions

This chapter has examined both non-religion and traditional organized religion in the YQ and interview material. The text does not fully capture the diversity (and individuality) in respondent positions towards Christianity but gives an indicator towards a few possible models. As I have shown in this chapter, religion and no religion cannot be seen as a simplistic dichotomy (Lee 2015). The material opens to the idea that there are many ways to be Christian, and there are many ways to be non-religious (although non-religious diversity is more difficult to see in the material). I have also found interesting middle positions that are neither fully Christian nor non-religious. Rather, middle position respondents identify with or

are inspired by religious/ spiritual/ philosophical currents but engage with them in a secular fashion.

A little over 50 respondents have indicated they have been raised within the Norwegian state church. A few of these have grown up combining two or more religions/ spiritualities, and some have been raised combining state church Lutheranism and no religion. Almost forty respondents have been raised as Other Protestant (with similar combinations as the SCL respondents). Together these categories show that a small majority have been socialized into some form of Christianity in their childhood. Even though the parents of many respondents are baby boomers (the first fully secularized generation born after WW2, for whom organized religion remains largely irrelevant), respondents have still learnt about religion at school, or undergone confirmation – sometimes at the behest of a religious grandmother.

Peers and friends are important in religious socialization (or non-socialization) as well. In the chapter I present a story where Nadia, who grew up in the US, became involved in fundamentalist evangelical Christianity through high school friends. In comparison, few of the Nordic respondents point to becoming involved in Christianity through friends. Most likely the pattern is reversed: in the secularized Nordic countries non-belief is the default option. Christianity is often socially coded as uncool and mildly shameful. Leaving organized religion behind completely as a youth or young adult is in this material more common than staying in.

The other half of respondents, approximately, have been raised with no religion. Many of these (particularly the triple-nones) have not changed their non-religious positioning as adults. This is different from the respondents who have been socialized into Christianity as children: most of them have moved away from organized religion in adulthood. Except for the few open critics of religion, Christianity has a neutral or positive valuation for many YQ respondents, even those who have not been socialized into the tradition. Respondents who have grown up Christian often have an attitude of relative openness. They see their Christian background as a positive force in their lives and say in the questionnaire that their parents did not speak much about religion, or never taught their children “that something was wrong or bad.” Rather, the material suggests that respondents’ parents were balancing the religious/ spiritual aspects of family life with a wish to not overly influence their children one way or another.

That respondents in this project have few negative emotions towards organized Christianity does not necessarily mean that they have many positive emotions either. Bangstad (2011) argues that even if the (Norwegian) public (still) belong to the Church of Norway, the folk church has entered so many

[...] historical compromises with liberality and modernity that it no longer represents a threat for the hegemonic secular. These days, State Church Lutheranism garners very few negative emotions in the Norwegian opinion. This could mean that it is seen as fully compatible with the indifference towards religion that characterizes our relationship to presumed liberal and secular forms of religiosity today (Bangstad 2011, 51).

It seems that liberal and secular religiosity is present in the YQ material as well. Many respondents have been raised in an environment where thinking for yourself is a virtue. One of the most interesting features of the religion material is attitudes towards organized religion on one hand (ranging from positive to highly critical), and personal, subjective beliefs and practices on the other.

A grey area of subjective, personal affiliation with a (relatively secular) philosophy or a religious figure – be it yoga, Buddhism, or Jesus as a guide – is common in the material. For the respondents who affiliate with Christianity, this can be called undogmatic religiosity. One example is the YQ respondent who notes that she finds Lutheranism really narrow. She rather chooses to emphasize other, more personal themes that opens for a belief in Jesus along with a reverence for nature and Eastern themes such as karma. Another respondent calls themselves Lutheran with a twist, choosing to emphasize ethical or value-based aspects.

The pattern of openness and a non-dogmatic approach to religion and spirituality can be likened to what Gilhus and Mikaelsson's (2000) term the *multireligious actor*. For the multireligious respondent traditional Christian values are important, but they have also shifted the language and horizon of understanding towards the East, the self, and new age terms such as universal love. In examples from the YQ, respondents report that Jesus can function as a guide on how to live a good life, and Christian belief is possible to combine with attunement to intuition, karma, or nature. In the data, it primarily seems that *if* belief is present, it is individualized and non-dogmatic.

The importance of individuality and choice is the same whether the respondent is a folk church member or a none. Not being too influenced by others and exercising personal choice are key motifs for Nordic yoga respondents in contexts where religion is involved. An ethos of thinking for yourself can also be (one of the) reasons why there is a current of skepticism and religion critique in many respondent answers (or if not direct criticism, at least indications to why some left their childhood religion behind and selected either no religion or a different religious/ spiritual outlook).

Individual religious, spiritual, or philosophical affiliation can be mobilized in a critique of organized religion, like in the example from the interviews above where Therese speaks about yoga and the Yoga Sutras. Therese takes the debate down to an individual level, saying how yoga can influence people and how the practice can function like an antidote to the problems of organized religion. In my interpretation, part of the background of her statement has to do with the fact that Therese has extensive *experience* with the practice, philosophy, and psychology of yoga (which she probably does not have with traditional religion). Traditional religion becomes a closed or bounded category, which (to some extent) is othered by yoga as an open, individualized experience.

In the empirical material an open and undogmatic aspect of Christianity is present, and inside it (or connected to it) is a (perhaps more implicit) stance *against* a particular interpretation of traditional, organized religion. This attitude casts religion as a political and partisan issue, in the sense that (unspecified) actors use it for divisive and oppressive purposes. Statements like Therese's open a possibility of questioning *why* there in addition to openness towards religion and religious pluralism in the material also is a very present skepticism.

Christianity is still seen as the very definition of organized religion among Nordic yoga respondents.⁹⁵ In the YQ material there are still traces of resistance to the (once) hegemonic position of the Church and its doctrines. Respondents like Therese and Nadia engage with this

⁹⁵ Historically speaking, the hegemonic status of Christianity as *religion* is not surprising. However, the judicial history of the Nordic countries with ongoing separation between church and state point to a process of strong secularization. The dismantling of dissenter laws, total religious liberty, and the transition from state to folk churches are structural developments that undoubtedly have influenced citizen (and YQ respondent) perspectives on what the concept of religion entails (Thurfjell 2015).

type of attitude, and with a basis in individuality and freedom of choice they criticize what they experience as strict doctrines, literal interpretation of central Christian tenets, unquestioning belief, and insider, communal, or nationalistic attitudes. Like Lynn Schofield Clark's (2007) American 'not-so-religious' teens, respondents in the yoga project also "[...] define *religion* in terms borrowed from the Enlightenment as the opposite of open-minded and tolerant [...]. In rejecting "religion," then, [they] are taking their cues from a cultural narrative shaped by antagonism between Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy" (Clark 2007, 77).

A little over half of the YQ respondents and several of the interviewees balance on the (porous) boundaries between the inside and outside of religious institutions. They are briefly discussed in this chapter as believing and not belonging (Davie 1990) or belonging but not believing (Botvar 2001).⁹⁶ A clear division between religion and non-religion does not necessarily work with the empirical material. Attitudes, beliefs, and belonging tend to be more entangled and ambiguous than a questionnaire (or an interview) can catch.

Religious change happens not only in the wider society, but also within the biography of the individual. An important aspect in religious change is respondents' long-term development and the diversification of their religious/ spiritual beliefs and/ or activities. In this chapter, I have examined changes in religious attitudes and belonging from childhood until adulthood. I have also looked more closely at some aspects of respondents' attitudes towards organized religion (which in a Nordic context is almost synonymous with state church Christianity).

Respondents' current religious affiliation can be measured on a continuum stretching from the overtly religious, to the semi-religious (or semi-secular, as Ann af Burén (2015) perhaps would call it), to the totally non-religious. While Christianity emerges as the dominant position in respondents' childhood, non-religion becomes the majority position once respondents have reached adulthood. As such, the yoga respondents are part of a general Nordic pattern of secularization on both a macro- and a micro level (Thurfjell 2015, Bangstad 2011). Respondents' self-positioning ranges from a minority position of active engagement in organized religion or an atheistic opposition to Christianity and organized religion. The

⁹⁶ For some (silly) reason did not ask respondents about adult membership in the CoN. It would have been interesting to know more about respondents' membership and attitudes.

majority perspective, however, is one of relative disengagement in religious matters with neutral or positive attitudes towards organized religion. Neutral or positive attitudes does not, however, disqualify respondents from explicitly (or implicitly) criticizing aspects of religion they find to be at odds with their values and worldviews.

A critical view of organized religion resonates both in the alternative/ subjective spiritual milieu more generally,⁹⁷ and in various expressions of non-religion. However, an interesting find is that Christian yoga respondents are mostly multireligious actors. They tend to combine Christianity with other religious or spiritual paths, and generally have a perennialist attitude towards religion. In the data, it seems that *if* belief is present, it is primarily individualized and non-dogmatic. This is also the case in the following chapter, which presents respondents' subjective spiritualities.

⁹⁷ For example, in 'tenets' such as self-authority and anti-dogmatism (Heelas 2008).

8 Subjective spiritualities

8.1 Introduction

This chapter presents respondents' subjective beliefs, practices, and attitudes in relation to three main categories: yoga spirituality, modern, western Buddhism, and alternative New Age activities. This focus means a move away from worldview expressions that entail a (strong) form of consensus. Consensus, a similarity in respondents' perspectives and attitudes, is more easily found in institutionalized and traditional religion. Respondents, for example, agree on the contents and teachings of Christianity. The general attitude to Christianity, however, is neutrality or irrelevance. As Hasselle-Newcombe (2005, 312) phrases it, organized religion is "something dogmatic and dead."

In this chapter I present spiritual expressions and ideas that come across as quite dissimilar and subjective. A working and pragmatic model of what I am looking for is found in Sutcliffe and Bowman (eds., 2000), as they write that

Individual religion or spirituality in the modern world can be a very personal package, and this must be taken into account in formulating a useful model of religion. One such working model (Bowman, 1992) understands 'religion' as the sum of 'official', vernacular or folk, and individual cultural forms and expressions. It is a dynamic interaction of beliefs, practices, attitudes, rationales, narratives, perceptions of efficacy and personal experience (2000, 7).

This model is highly relevant for yoga respondents. Official and vernacular religion does exist in the yoga context, but it is less relevant than "individual cultural forms and expressions." Relevance is measured in terms of usefulness (or efficacy) and personal experience, particularly when it comes to yoga, but also in terms of modern, westernized Buddhism and New Age-connoted practices and activities.

I begin with presenting some perspectives on yoga spirituality in the material, and then move on to a presentation of (some of) the extensive data on alternative religion in the empirical material. I revisit some of the YQ items that have been discussed in previous chapters (as well as some new ones) and pay particular attention to aspects of *spirituality* in them. The items revolve around beliefs and convictions, self-definitions, and attitudes, and to some extent which spirituality-related items, ideas and activities respondents consume and identify with.

The subject matter of the following chapter is a field of rhizomatic, unorganized, and highly individualized spirituality. Spirituality is notoriously difficult to define, and in the survey and interviews, I have not attempted a strict definition. Rather I have, like Hasselle-Newcombe (2005, 312) “[...] decided to see primarily how much this term resonated with respondents [...]” and explore their involvement with various activities and attitudes that are familiar in the New Age field. This includes the idea of spiritual seekership.

8.2 Yoga spirituality

Yoga is the basis of this study, and the practice that respondents have in common. In this chapter I engage relatively little with *yoga spirituality* as such – and focus on occurrences of so-called alternative spirituality in the material (that is, techniques, therapies and beliefs that are not directly connected to yoga). However, there is no doubt (as previous chapters also attests to) that modern postural yoga is a prism for spirituality in the life of many respondents, and that is why this sub-chapter exists.

Subjective spirituality expressed through yoga practice is (probably) not an option for the 42 respondents who see yoga “just” as physical exercise.⁹⁸ However, 77 respondents look at yoga as a mind-body practice, 34 as a part of their own spiritual path -- and 73 respondents think that yoga can be all three alternatives simultaneously. In the monograph *Yoga in Britain: Stretching Spirituality and Educating Yogis*, Suzanne Newcombe writes that

Practitioners often emphasise an experience of greater integration, relaxation and concentration as essential elements to yoga. The experience of these qualities are sometimes, but not always, perceived as relating to the divine. Most often, these elements were united with the ideas of health and happiness, but delineated from any specific theology. While most presentations of yoga emphasised that spiritual beliefs were not necessary to benefit from the practices, many practitioners believed that their practice was somehow ‘more’ than physical. For the majority of those engaging with yoga, specific doctrine or description of the divine was largely left up to the individual (2019, 190).

Newcombe’s (2019) description is without a doubt relevant for respondents in this project, as the chapters on yoga conversion also make clear. As YQ item 6 points to, most respondents

⁹⁸ YQ item 6: “Do you see your yoga practice as part of your personal spiritual path, as a mind-body practice/therapy, or “just” as physical exercise?”

think that yoga is somehow more than physical exercise, but as Newcombe (2019) points out, the individual respondents decide on the contents.

In interviews, I find rather different perspectives on being in the world. “Specific doctrine or description of the divine” (ibid.) varies as much as respondents themselves. Sara, for example, has gained a new perspective on spirituality since she started practicing yoga (both Kundalini and Ashtanga) – but emphasizes that she keeps an open mind.

I think this sentence is lovely ... that we are spiritual beings who are on earth to gain a human experience. Because ... trying to become enlightened and all that, trying to become spiritual or are you spiritual enough ... that you turn it around, you already are.

The process that Sara describes here is quite common in yoga discourse. The human experience is constant development, and yoga practice can be an integral part. However, for respondents like Sara the goal is not necessarily to become a better or perfect spiritual person – because being spiritual and enlightened is the default option. Sara is among the respondents who conform most to what is socially coded as spiritual and/ or alternative in common parlance. She brings up themes such as the possibility of reincarnation (of a particular kind inspired by Sikh/ 3HO teachings, which includes hundreds of thousands of rebirths and the soul’s residence in a so-called ‘blue ether’), and the idea that all people share a *citta*, a universal consciousness which ties everyone together and facilitates intuitions and sharing/ raising energy.

Both Sara who teaches Kundalini yoga and Simon who practices and teaches a tantric, Buddhism-aligned form of meditational yoga belong to yoga brands that are (to some extent) sectarian. Teachings within these brands tend to be explicitly metaphysical, to an extent that goes much beyond what a practitioner will find in styles that are focused on *asana* and physical contortionism. Simon, when he explains the core teachings and practices in his tradition, says that

Guru yoga is the core, but not with a physical guru. We use meditation deities ... or, we call it gurus. They are not physical gurus, but historical beings who have reached the highest yoga. [...] Singing mantras, for example, is the main method we use. You have a mantra that involves the guru’s name, and then you tune in by singing the mantra. Afterwards, which is

just as important but often overlooked, is that you have to engage with what happens in the body after the mantra.

Meditation deities and mantra singing are common occurrences in many of the religions that stem from the Indian sub-continent. However, what is interesting about (and perhaps particular for) the western, yogic approach is the turn inwards, as Simon describes at the end of the quote. The devotion to the deity is as such not the primary focus; rather, the goal is the effect the technique has on the practitioner.

Simon also speaks of what will be affected by the practices, namely the subtle body. He describes the three bodies his tradition works with, which comprises of the physical body, and energetic body, and an absolute body. To describe the absolute body, he moves his hands over his head and around himself, saying *the one that is here, that openness. Open presence, you do not need to work on it because it is not something that can be cultivated, but it is here. You just must remove the things that are in the way.* The practices in Simon's tradition seems to be focused on the energetic body, to open the way to the absolute body. Through meditation, breathing techniques, and chanting the practitioner works on *chakras* and *nadis* (energy centers and lines as parts of the subtle anatomy) to release blockages and ensuring the movement of energy in the body. Then, Simon says, *people can experience what it feels like when it just flows freely*, and he goes on to explain how it feels to experience a flow of *shakti* energy rising through the spine.

Perspectives on different energetic bodies and subtle anatomy are quite common in some forms of yoga – and particularly in Kundalini and tantric meditation. Elizabeth De Michelis (2005) would perhaps categorize these brands within modern denominational yoga (MDY) and modern meditational yoga (MMY) respectively (see typology 2005, 188), as they are both more sectarian and more focused on mental/ energetic practices than is common in the postural-focused forms of yoga (MPY). These “*prana*-focused” styles (De Michelis 2005) are socially coded as quite alternative, and while ideas of the subtle body are not uncommon in the yoga scene, some of the other interviewees (particularly those who practice the intensely physical Ashtanga vinyasa style) would probably not subscribe to ideas that have such an explicitly esoteric direction.

In most forms of modern postural yoga (MPY) that put greater stress on physical practices the focus on esoteric ideas is correspondingly less. As De Michelis (2005) phrases it; practitioners “[...] limit themselves to very basic and polyvalent suggestions concerning the religio-philosophical underpinnings of their practices” (p. 187). This, to some extent, explains why the interviewees who fall strongly within the MPY category tend to be less explicitly spiritual in relation to yoga. Ashtanga yoga teachers Linda and Therese, for example, are not particularly interested in mixing spiritual and/ or esoteric ideas with the practice and the concrete physical and mental benefits it can provide. Therese and Linda agree on the benefits of familiarizing oneself with yoga philosophy, but rather than moving the discussion towards the esoteric / spiritual, they turn towards how the practice of yoga can be useful in everyday life. Linda says *it is just a way of approaching life. It is not as if you get rid of anything, but you learn to handle what comes much better*. Therese replies,

It is much more practical than other things I have experienced, definitely. But it demands that you dive into it and keep it up. That you cultivate your practice, and ... a lot of it is about just breathing better. Breathing better in different situations, even though it is really hard. You can shake it off if you have that distance.

In the MPY perspective some of the interviewees hold, esoteric or metaphysical content seems to be almost invisible. While subjectively spiritual ideas are present (Nadia and Karin, for example, are both influenced by Buddhist ideas and ethics), the concerns are more concrete, physiological, and psychologically oriented.

Whether respondents hold an esoteric/ metaphysical perspective on the yoga body or the language they use is more concrete and psychophysical, yoga offers a framework within which practitioners can interpret ideas and experiences. Despite different starting points the aims are in many ways similar: improving life for the individual practitioner. Although what yoga practice implies for the individual varies (based for example on spiritual needs and the discourse within the practitioner’s chosen yoga brand) there is close to absolute agreement that the practice does something. This ‘something’ is generally positive, and generally experienced as meaningful.

8.3 Self-definitions

The core of the subject matter in this chapter is what I would call alternative or New Age-y aspects in the material. These are beliefs, practices, techniques, and therapies that go beyond yoga practice and yoga spirituality and that are familiar from the wider cultic milieu (Campbell 2002 [1972]) or New Age milieu (Hanegraaff 1996). That I in a project on yoga have chosen to focus on so-called alternative spirituality does not sit easy for all respondents. Defining what they do as alternative is problematic for some respondents. Nevertheless, many respondents self-define as spiritual (and to some extent alternative) and have had experiences that can be construed as meaningful, or for some mystical and transcendent.

8.3.1 A spiritual person?

In the chapter on Christianity and non-religion, I presented a self-definition pattern which resembles a bell curve. A few respondents are actively religious, and a few are strongly atheist. The majority, however, are somewhere in the middle. The same pattern is found in this chapter, where a majority of respondents to some extent define themselves as spiritual. Take the example of item 38 in the Yoga Questionnaire (N=170), which asks respondents to pick from a list of self-definitions. Whereas only five respondents define themselves as a “religious person,” 35 respondents define themselves as “A spiritual person,” 24 as “Both a spiritual and a religious person,” and 39 as “A spiritual but not religious person.” In comparison, 48 respondents selected some sort of negation ranging from “not a spiritual person” to “a convinced atheist,” and 16 respondents do not know.

The self-definition alternatives show that the middle ground, open, and spirituality-connoted alternatives were the most popular. This is a familiar pattern from earlier chapters, for example in respondents’ attitudes towards organized religion. The various categories in item 38 say little in themselves. The comments offer some clarification, but also largely reiterate the middle position. One YQ respondent notes that *I am everything... don't like these boxes...* while others state that they are *Spiritual to some extent*, or *I'm all of the above at times, some at others and none of them sometimes...* Respondents who comment are unsure where they belong or need to qualify their selection – and it is clear already here that spirituality is a contested term.

Suzanne Hasselle-Newcombe (2005) did a survey on British Iyengar yoga practitioners with questions from the British RAMP survey (Religious and Moral Pluralism), which made it possible for her to compare her sample to the general population. Hasselle-Newcombe finds

that her 188 respondents are less likely to describe themselves as strictly religious or non-religious, compared to the general British population (religious, but not spiritual: 1% compared to 11%, neither spiritual nor religious: 16% of yoga practitioners compared to 44% of the general population). The YQ data tallies with Hasselle-Newcombe's (2005) survey in the case of religious people – they are few in both populations. However, the YQ shows a much higher number of non-religious/ atheist respondents than the survey on yoga practitioners in the British questionnaire does, but comparable to the general population.

Further, Hasselle-Newcombe (2005, 312) notes that “[s]ignificantly, the yoga practitioners were much more likely to describe themselves as having a spiritual life: 83% compared to 45% of the general UK population.” In the YQ, 98 of 170 (well over half) respondents categorize themselves as spiritual, religious and spiritual, or spiritual but not religious. The numbers are not as high as Hasselle-Newcombe's (2005) Iyengar practitioners, but higher than the general UK population.

8.3.2 Spirituality as a choice for adolescents and adults

Item 23-25 that were frequently referred to in the chapter on religion and nones give some insight into respondents' positions and attitudes in the borderland between religion and secularity, where most of the spirituality is located. Few respondents had much contact with spirituality or alternative ideas as children. In item 23 (a multiple-choice item asking about respondents' childhood religion) only one or two respondents note that their parents had a deep connection to alternative spirituality. However, as several respondents note that they have parents who were yoga teachers and/ or practitioners, it is possible that (yoga) spirituality has been present (without the children recognizing it as such). Nevertheless, alternative spirituality is an almost negligible part of item 23.

Item 24 and 25, however, which asks about respondents' worldviews in their youth and recently/ currently, tell a different story. In the chapter on Christianity, I showed that many respondents who identified as Christians (or with Christianity) also felt connected to or inspired by other religious and spiritual traditions. The same can be seen with a portion of the vocal nones, where non-religion is mentioned along with other inspirations or interests.

This pattern is familiar also from Hasselle-Newcombe's (2005) study. Of her 188 respondents, 60 identified as having no religion and 53 as belonging to some Christian

denomination. What is interesting is that she has a relatively high number of respondents (N=29, 15 %) who chose not to affiliate with a single faith (or non-religion), rather circling several options in the questionnaire. The combinations of “shared sympathies with disparate faith systems” (2005, 315) are familiar from the chapter on Christianity and non-religion. In the YQ I have found combinations such as Hinduism and Catholicism, or Protestantism, Buddhism and Hinduism. While some respondents were raised in one religion and later adopted another, this is generally not the case. Rather, YQ respondents act in a way familiar from the literature: “These yoga practitioners were actively exploring and were interested in several religious traditions within the context of a dedicated practice of *asana*. In this way, many of the practitioners appear to be interested in exploring religious traditions generally, without feeling a need to commit to any particular religion” (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 315).

This is particularly interesting considering the status of Hinduism in both questionnaires. In the YQ, no respondents identified solely with Hinduism. In the British questionnaire, less than 2%. This was for me a surprising find, due to yoga’s (philosophical) roots and the ubiquity of Sanskrit terminology and ideas in yoga pedagogy – as well as the high prevalence of yoga and meditation practices in neo-Hindu or Indian-oriented New Religious Movements (see Tøllefsen 2017a, 2017b). Hasselle-Newcombe concludes that most of her Iyengar practitioners are “[...] thus not participating in a neo-Hindu project per se” (2005, 314). Rather, both Iyengar practitioners’ and YQ respondents’ religious/ spiritual and philosophical ideas are drawn from a variety of sources.

Many of the yoga practitioner in my study are what I would call subjectively spiritual. They have religion or non-religion as one of several options (where non-religion tends to be the most popular in both samples). In addition to their yoga practice, they are interested in or inspired by a variety of religions, philosophies, people, or practices. In the comments to items 24 and 25 some of the variety shows. One respondent says that s/he has *No religion*. However, right afterwards the respondent lists *Oneness, the books from yoga and Eckhart Tolle. Patanjali*. Another respondent lists ‘alternative’ interests first, and at the end qualifies his or her interest by mentioning atheism: *Some form of new religiosity, theosophy, anthroposophy, also atheism*. One respondent note that s/he is a *None, partly eastern orthodox*, and another is a *Human-etiker*, the Norwegian equivalent of a Humanist. Another example of a respondent’s open relation to matters of religion and spirituality is found here: *I believe that everything has a purpose, but I don’t follow one religion*.

Hasselle-Newcombe (2005) finds similar data in the comments section of her Iyengar questionnaire. Despite a high number of respondents feeling affiliated to “no religion,” it turns out that (as I also showed in the previous chapter) these respondents are not always as secular as they appear.

For example, one respondent wrote “No religion—but I feel I am interested in the best of them all”. Another wrote, “No religion—but I respect all religions—I wish there were just ONE”. Other practitioners communicated affiliation to Secular Humanism or secular-based ethics more generally. It is important, however, not to read too much into these intriguing responses—most of the “No religions” did not choose to comment further. Undoubtedly, a number of practitioners do consider their practice simply a series of physical exercises (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 314).

It makes sense to differentiate between respondents having a religion *per se* (which the respondents above do not have) and being inspired by or feeling an affinity with philosophies, movements, people, or ideas. This affinity can be seen in what one respondent writes; *I have been inspired by the Hare Krishna movement but never a follower. Also I've been inspired by Rudolf Steiner. S/he says nothing explicit on non-religion (or spirituality for that matter), but her choice of wording, using 'inspired' rather than for example 'practicing' or 'believing,' and clarifying that she has never been a follower of a movement or a person, speaks to a casual attitude to tradition and an emphasis on individual consumption of spiritual forms of knowledge that is very common among respondents. Based on data from item 24-25, I can conclude that many respondents are inspired by (though not necessarily believers in or followers of) many different practices, movements, and people that I would associate with alternative spirituality.*

8.3.3 Buddhism and meditation as individual spiritual practice – a case study

Christopher Partridge in his 2004 volume *The Re-Enchantment of the West* (Vol. 1) writes that in the turn to the East that is so common in modern spirituality a central point is the “[...] turn towards the experiencing self and away from external authorities. There is a shift away from doctrine to techniques, to the facilitation of experience, and to the growth of the self” (p. 88). In the case of the yoga respondents, Buddhism and (Buddhist) meditation practices are good examples for understanding how experiential spirituality can function. After a short discussion of Buddhist identification in the YQ material, I will discuss meditation as a phenomenon. It is interesting to see how deeply some respondents connect meditation practices with Buddhist philosophy. Modern, psychological Buddhism is a strong force in the material -- despite few respondents identifying solely with Buddhism in the item that measure religious belonging.

8.3.3.1 Buddhist identification

Generally, Buddhism is a tangible presence in the empirical material for this project and something both interviewees and YQ respondents keep returning to. Few YQ respondents have been raised Buddhist or Buddhist in combination with other religions (item 23, N=4). However, when it comes to respondents’ self-selected religions or spiritualities, either in their youth or recently/ currently, the number who mention Buddhism increases. In Item 24, four out of 170 respondents note they have been involved with Buddhism solely, and 11 respondents that they have been involved with or interested in Buddhism alongside other religions/ spiritualities. In Item 25, respondents’ current or recent involvement, 12 respondents report Buddhism involvement alone. Some respondents specify Zen, Tibetan or Tantric varieties: *Currently very interested in Buddhism, particularly Tibetan and Zen*. Other highlight meditation aspects and attending Buddhist courses: *I practice meditation and I have taken some courses in Buddhism*.

Another fourteen respondents note they are involved in, or interested in, Buddhism alongside other religions or spiritual paths. Some examples are:

- *Buddhism Catholic Christianity Hinduism Taoism*
- *I've been interested in Taoism and Buddhism.*
- *Buddhism, New Age philosophy*
- *Buddhism Hinduism*

The combination of Christianity and Buddhism (or Buddhist practices) is something that several respondents mention in both items 24 and 25. One respondent, for example, notes that s/he has moved away from Christianity (although s/he still belongs to the church), towards Buddhism: *I have become less Christian even though I still belong to church. Now I would see my religious [sic.] to be closest to Buddhism.* There is reason to think that yoga and Buddhism/ meditation practice are complementary for many yoga practitioners. However, there are individual differences in whether a respondent wants to self-define as Buddhist or not. One YQ respondent, for example, says, *I have started to attend events at a Buddhist center (doing meditation, listening to talks and participating in rituals) but do not regard myself as a Buddhist.*

Suzanne Hasselle-Newcombe (2005, 315) notes that in her material on British Iyengar yoga practitioners Buddhism is the “most significant single tradition” respondents feel affiliation with. While less than 1 % of the general British population affiliate with Buddhism solely, 13 % of the Iyengar questionnaire respondents do. In the same vein, David Thurffjell (2013) reports that in Sweden (which is directly comparable with the other Nordic countries) very few citizens fully *belong* to Buddhism. However, when measuring attitudes, Buddhism ranks not far below Christianity as a religion many sympathize or partially identify with. This pattern becomes apparent in the empirical material in this dissertation too.

Respondent level of involvement in Buddhism is difficult to determine from a questionnaire. However, in the qualitative material where respondents comment on, they tend to note a form of semi-involvement, stating that they for example are “interested in...” Buddhism, that Buddhism is what they are “closest to” (thus implying that they do not really belong), or that they are “not active” but have an appreciation for the philosophy and the ethics. This pattern is visible also among those respondents who hold some form of Buddhism alignment but fall into a non-religious current. An important point is that among most yoga respondents, Buddhism seems to have a secular flavor – in that alignment with Buddhism and meditation practices does not need to imply anything like belief or belonging.

Buddhism as non-religion is well suited for a Nordic audience. In his chapter in the anthology *Mystik och andelighet, kritiska perspektiv* (2013), David Thurffjell explores why Buddhism is

so well liked among secular Swedes. Buddhism in the west is both *portrayed* and *received* as (relatively) secular. The public image of modern Buddhism is as a life-affirming and health-benefitting personal philosophy (and meditation practice) much more than a variety of eastern institutionalized religious traditions. Buddhism, for secular Swedes, “[...] belongs to a different category than other religions. Buddhism, it is imagined, is not as political, hierarchical, violent and unscientific as other religions, but is portrayed as a purer and more unproblematic form of spirituality than that which can be found in other religions” (Thurfjell 2013, 124). In the yoga material, much of this “pure and unproblematic” spirituality seems to be expressed through meditative practices.

8.3.3.2 Meditation

Spirituality with a focus on the individual experience is something that Hasselle-Newcombe (2005) finds in her British Iyengar questionnaire. She connects experience particularly to meditation as a method of inner contemplation. 37% of Hasselle-Newcombe’s respondents were at the time practicing some form of meditation that they did not relate directly to Iyengar yoga. In the YQ material, I find similar data on consumption of alternative techniques and therapies and spiritual experiences. Item number 54, for example, asks “Which of the following groups, activities or therapies have you tried?”

In this item a cluster of practices, activities and groups are very popular. All of them are on the non-alternative end of the scale, but still have ample room for individual experience. Yoga is the only activity that respondents (N=170) do frequently (N=112). 43 respondents practice regularly, 11 sometimes, 2 rarely, and 1 respondent never practices (but most likely s/he has practiced in the past). Massage (N=168) is also a part of the non-alternative therapies category – only 10 respondents never have tried massage.⁹⁹ However, to return to meditation practices, in the YQ the option in this question was how often respondents have attended a “Meditation group.” Out of the 168 respondents who answered this option, 51 have never attended a meditation group, 35 rarely attend, and 44 sometimes attend. 20 respondents attend regularly, and 18 frequently. The actual numbers for meditation practice (either as a non-related or complementary practice) are probably higher, since not all respondents who do a meditative practice participate in a group setting.

⁹⁹ Rarely N=29; Sometimes N=81; regularly N=39; frequently N=9

Hasselle-Newcombe (2005) note about the Iyengar respondents that

Many people are drawn to a type of simple meditation practice, watching the breath (instead of the more complicated pranayama breathing exercises), reciting a mantra or contemplating compassion. These meditative practices are often drawn from Buddhist or other Hindu traditions, but among this sample, they tend to be used apart from a firm commitment to the original metaphysical framework. It is non-doctrinal practices and techniques, not a ‘belief’, to which these modern yoga practitioners appear to be attaching their loyalties (2005, 315).

This seems to be the case for a portion of the YQ respondents as well. One example is the respondent who reports practicing TM (Transcendental Meditation), a relatively simple mantra-based meditation from a neo-Hindu tradition. Another respondent says that *buddhism and hinduism are part of my life, but just loosely*. While a practice like Vipassana may be understood as essentially Buddhist, respondents do not necessarily self-identify as such. One respondent who previously have been involved in Christianity says, *I have done some Vipassana mediation (10 day courses), which is 'tached' [sic.] as non-religious, however, I perceive it as Buddhist*. The discrepancy between the emphasis of the teaching and the respondent’s own categorization of the practice seems to have led to her having mixed feelings about it. However, later she states that

I am still interested in Vipassana, but not in a 'religious' sense. I want to be open minded and perceive religious practices as an inspiration, not as something to convert to or identify with.

This respondent aims to be open-minded and emphasizes the importance of taking inspiration from religious practices rather than having to belong or strictly identify with them. She might in that sense be categorized as practicing, but not believing or belonging, with similar perennial and open-minded attitudes as most respondents in this study show. Another respondent, much in the same vein, states that *I'm interested in Buddhism as a philosophy and way of living, less as a religion and in the gods*.

Another good example is the case of interview respondent Karin. She is primarily interested in what Hasselle-Newcombe (2005) terms “contemplating compassion,” albeit with an outspoken non-religious viewpoint: *I do not really believe there is a next life. I kind of jump ship at that*. Karin mentioned Buddhism briefly several times in her interview, so I asked what it is about Buddhism that makes it interesting for her.

Buddhism? Erm... lately, the Buddhism I have encountered is especially on how to handle negative emotions. What should I say? I feel it is wrong for me to explain the entire Buddhist mindset when I know so little about it. But I have encountered something called loving kindness meditation, where you kind of... the idea is that you take in all that is negative and experience it, and relax with what is negative, while at the same time send out love and positive emotions. What I see is a tendency for me and everyone... for many others... that as soon as something negative comes up it is uncomfortable, and we shut it out. And then it is like it builds up, when you do not touch it or embrace it, it builds up. It might be the kind of thing that can be stored as stress in a hip or a shoulder because we are not used to dealing with those emotions. And because we are used to having the ideal that everything should be good, positive, we should have happy days and the perfect life, be in a good mood, but... every day is not good. So, it is about accepting that.

Karin's interpretation of Buddhism is on the surface quite simple, but has a complex resonance towards lived, practical, everyday life and how to deal with it in the best way possible. She starts by saying that she knows very little about Buddhism as such and feels reluctant to explain. She decides to go on anyway and says that the Buddhism she has encountered revolves around handling negative emotions. Instead of pushing away negative emotions, Karin is clear that we all should take them in and "relax" with them and learn to accept that life holds bad days as well as good. Karin says she has learnt these ideas through something called "loving kindness meditation."

Searching the Internet for information on loving kindness meditation yields several results. The practice is usually presented in a science-related manner under an umbrella of serious, rigorous scientific methods by researchers¹⁰⁰ connected to world-leading university centers.¹⁰¹ However, at the same time the presentation pingbacks to ancient Buddhist practices. A website on Buddhist practice explains that in *pali* this form of meditation is called *metti bhavana*, where "*Metta* means the emotion or attitude of 'love' (in a non-romantic sense), friendliness, or kindness: hence 'loving-kindness' for short. *Bhavana*, the website

¹⁰⁰ Such as, for example, Emma Seppälä, <https://emmaseppala.com/gift-loving-kindness-meditation/> (accessed 06.03.18)

¹⁰¹ Such as the Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (<http://ccare.stanford.edu/>) or Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (<http://ei.yale.edu/>) (accessed 06.03.18)

explains, means development or cultivation. The most common form of the practice is in five stages”¹⁰² where the meditator focuses on cultivating feelings of love and connectedness.

Karin’s perspectives on the meditation practice and on Buddhism can be understood as a form of popular psychology rather than religion *per se*. Forms of meditation such as *metti bhavana* are interesting in that they cultivate attitudes that are desirable in the modern world, among them understanding and controlling emotions. Karin links the idea-matrix she has encountered in (Buddhist) meditation with non-aggression and non-judgement -- primarily towards the self. She describes bad days and self-judgement (for example in relation to yoga *asana* practice), and how she feels that these Buddhist ideas helps her to go easier on herself in negative situations. Karin also applies the self-acceptance she has encountered in Buddhism to yoga practice.

At the same time, Buddhism is about focusing on non-aggression. You should not seek revenge on people that hurt you; you should be positive and send out love no matter what. That is really what has struck me about the Buddhist mindset. I am sure it is not only Buddhist either, but it is there I have encountered it. Not at least taking things in without judging them. I link that to yoga too. It is easy to, if I feel that today my body is nothing but pain, and then I start judging myself. What have I done now, or why is it like this? It is a bad day, and then the rest of the yoga goes badly and... on it goes. But I want to just take in that unpleasant sensation of pain, without judging it, and without it growing. And just think that OK, this is what it is today, we will make the best of it. But it is easier said than done.

I don’t know, what I feel Buddhism brings, that I have not seen so many other places... it could well be that others have the same type of teachings, that you cannot expect everything to be good all the time. No matter if we have a really good day, we have a tendency to want to catch it and hold on to it. Then next day... there will be a bad day at some point. Basically, we want to hold on to the positive and avoid the negative. Something I have realized only recently is how bad I am at handling what they call impermanence, that things do not last. Nothing lasts. And I just... observe myself, how I want to hold on to everything that is good. Even if it is a yoga poseat... I made it today! Then I expect I can do it the next day and the day after. But it is not like that. The day after I am back to the same old, I could not do it after all. Or in a relationship, or just my mood. So, kind of being able to... that you are engaged in the world

¹⁰² <https://thebuddhistcentre.com/text/loving-kindness-meditation> (accessed 06.03.18).

without being really attached to it, you see? You should be present, but accept that things fly away or change, without you being so attached or it is mattering so much. That is hard to achieve. As I said at the beginning, you are only realizing how limited you are. That is a beginning. So, there is something about you being grateful for success, but you should not demand it. And then try to accept that you can learn something from negative emotions as well. And that... from these Buddhist books I got... I found the thought that worst case, if you do not learn anything else, you learn how to be miserable. Then you get more compassion with people who have experienced that.

Karin also uses some words and concepts that are familiar from a traditional Buddhist context, such as impermanence and non-attachment. Karin frames her struggle within these concepts and works hard to improve. This learning curve and constant cultivation of the self is at the core of New Age or subjective spirituality (Hanegraaff 1996, Tøllefsen 2015). However, what is particularly interesting about Buddhism as popular psychology is the presence of more than just love and light. Suffering and negative emotions are at the core, because (as Karin says) “there is a lot to learn from being miserable,” not at least having compassion for others.

Respondents like Karin use meditation and Buddhist ideas to vocalize, understand and manage emotions. Buddhism in the yoga material seems to function primarily as popular psychology and a this-worldly stress alleviator. Traditional Buddhist ideas of soteriology, anything other-worldly or after-worldly are with a few exceptions absent in the material. One respondent, on the question of current/ recent involvement with religion or spirituality writes that s/he is *Not active, read yoga sutras, try to live as good as I can. Like Buddhism.* Trying to live, as “good as I can, like Buddhism” is important in this context. In previous chapters, existential concerns and living a good life has crystallized as important themes for respondents, and the same pattern is visible with popular Buddhism. As a secular, scientific philosophy and pure and unproblematic spirituality, Buddhism is on some level associated with the good life. Interview respondent Karin has a perspective on Buddhism as a form of psychology, which the individual can use to learn about herself and about the human condition in general. She connects meditation practices to yoga, but they seem to be complementary but different practices.

Hasselle-Newcombe (2005) notes this type of perspective among her respondents as well. “Some Buddhists are drawn to practising Iyengar yoga to facilitate comfortable sitting for

long periods of time during meditation practice. The practices are thus kept in a strict hierarchical relationship: yoga asana supports Buddhist metaphysical beliefs” (p. 315). However, the relationship hierarchy could just as well be the other way around, as is reflected in one of the YQ responses where a practitioner says that *I see Buddhism as my main spiritual path. But I'm influenced by Hinduism too (through yoga and mantra chanting)*. This respondent is quite explicit in connecting Buddhist ideas and practices to a subjectively spiritual perspective. Others, as Hasselle-Newcombe (2005, 315) notes, “[...] intermingle the relationship more idiosyncratically.”

However, it is not given that metaphysical concerns are very important for the yoga respondents. Rather, existential themes are closely interwoven with everyday concerns and Buddhist meditation practice is primarily legitimated through *science*. The primary function of meditation practices seems to be in the modulation of emotional fluctuations, and as a complementary practice to physical *asana* yoga. Scholar of Buddhism Donald S. Lopez Jr. (2012) points out about Buddhist meditation that the practice does not in itself promise any form of salvation. “Meditation in this context refers to practices that focus the mind, overcoming the ordinary state of mental distraction to produce a state of one-pointed concentration on a given object. Such concentration results in states of mental bliss, both in this lifetime and future lifetimes, but does not, in itself, bring about liberation from rebirth” (Lopez 2012, 60).

The different approaches to Buddhism and (Buddhist) meditation practices found in the yoga material are interesting in the light of the reception of and functions of contemporary, western Buddhism (Thurfjell, 2013; Lopez, 2012). Traditional Buddhist practice like Thurfjell’s (2013) example from a Thai Buddhist ceremony in Sweden or as Buddhism tends to be practiced in many places across the globe (but particularly in the East), is a praxis that often is far removed from scientific, self-development oriented non-religion. Traditional Buddhism contends with supernatural beings, violence, hierarchy, and gender issues – topics that are effectively invisible in the popular western discourse on Buddhist as a philosophy and as an ethical system.

The way Buddhism is portrayed and received in contemporary Scandinavia stems from the historical portrayal of Buddhism in Europe, and the development of Buddhist modernism. Donald Lopez Jr. (2012) notes that Christian missionaries as early as the 16th century aligned

their own religion with scientific progress and civilization through colonialization. Missionaries' general view on Buddhism (and non-Christian religions) was as "primitive superstition" (2012, 11). The scientification of Buddhism by Buddhist elites in the late 19th and early 20th centuries came about as a direct response to the missionaries' threats. Lopez (2012) notes that after WW2 the 'original' Buddhism from the Pali canons, conserved in the Theravada tradition, was still regarded by some as hegemonic Buddhism. However, as culture changed and Buddhism became popularized, soon Japanese Zen Buddhism became the most fashionable tradition. In the early nineties Lopez (2012) asserts that Tibetan Buddhism took the throne, displacing Zen to "[...] become the chief referent of Buddhism in the Buddhism and science dialogue, largely through the influence of the fourteenth Dalai Lama. And over the past decade, Buddhism has been identified with "mindfulness," a practice said to benefit the brain" (Lopez 2012, 13-14). Popular, modern Buddhism has gone through several phases, and it is interesting to see how responses to the YQ reflect these in part. Some of the YQ respondents mention Zen Buddhism in particular, and another is primarily interested in Tibetan Buddhism.

Lopez (2012) also highlights how Buddhism slowly became the modern, scientific opposite to Christianity.

Christianity has a creator God, and Buddhism has no God; Christianity has faith, Buddhism has reason; Christianity has dogma, Buddhism has philosophy; Christianity (at least certain kinds) has public ritual, Buddhism has private reflection; Christianity has sin, Buddhism has karma; Christianity has prayer, Buddhism has meditation; Christ is divine, the Buddha is human. And it was this human, this Asian, this Buddha, who knew millennia ago what the European was just beginning to discover. Some even went so far as to declare that Buddhism was not a religion at all, but was itself a science, a science of the mind. (Lopez 2012, 11).

This discourse is commonly found in popular culture, and conversely, in the reception of contemporary western Buddhism. It is also familiar from the YQ material, although respondents are less explicit in their attitudes. However, as several respondents say that they have moved away from Christianity towards Buddhism it could indicate that Buddhism has a role that Christianity is unable to fill. However, what respondents mean by Buddhism is a non-religious, science- and psychology oriented, humanist philosophy with distinct ethical

overtones. This YQ respondent summarizes the modern, western perspective on Buddhism quite well, saying s/he has an

Interest in Buddhism, starting to learn now. Completed a 6 week introductory course two weeks ago. Goes with my values; they are also vegetarians (not harming animals) and meditate (spiritual development).

As Thurfjell (2013) notes, Buddhism is seen to belong to a different category than other religions, and it fits reasonably well with respondents on different sides of the religion-no religion continuum. Buddhism, in the material, seems for many of the respondents to serve a specific function, namely making the everyday, this-worldly existence better and easier to handle.

8.3.3.3 Summarizing Buddhism

Interview respondent Nadia tells a story of encountering Zen Buddhist meditation about the same time as she started practicing yoga in the early 1990s. A friend gave her a book that resonated with her at a particular point in her life.

Then I started reading... around the same time I started practicing yoga a friend of mine in Minneapolis gave me this book 'Everyday Zen', and it was an introduction to meditation. And [...] that was, you know, when I discovered that, it was such a relief in a way. It was sort of like... just reminding myself of what I already knew. So it has felt like, spiritually, I guess I could say I had... it has been more of an evolution through my whole life.

Nadia describes her encounter with meditation as a relief, and the book she was given as a reminder of something she already knew. For Nadia, Zen Buddhist meditation has (along with yoga) been a part of her spiritual development or evolution. It is deeply connected to her experiences and practices and is not separate from her everyday life. Nadia combines meditation with her yoga practice, and to some extent, so does Karin. This recalls one of Hasselle-Newcombe's (2005, 315) Buddhist yoga respondents, who simply say, "Buddhism and yoga fit brilliantly". Hasselle-Newcombe further writes that

Within the long history of yoga, it is clear that the same yogic techniques were used as means which lead to many different metaphysical ends. However, it is likely that what unites yoga and Buddhism in modern Britain is an emphasis on personal experience. For both traditions, the final goal is very distant (if not unrealisable) in ordinary modern lives. However, both

traditions offer methods of inner contemplation and the potential for individual ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual experience’ (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005, 315).

Buddhism is particularly relevant in this dissertation due to its Indian origin and a close relationship with the development of yoga. It is relevant because it is popular among the respondents in this project, and because Buddhism holds a very special position for the otherwise secularized Nordic public. Modern, western Buddhism is often understood as a philosophical and existential worldview that aims towards tolerance, non-violence, and positive ethical perspectives. In the material, meditation leads to well-being (in much the same way as yoga does). Meditational practices are often perceived as connected to Buddhism, but most respondents who are involved with Buddhism or Buddhist meditational practices do not (apart from the few initiates) feel it is necessary to self-identify as Buddhists. Rather, the process is the same as Lola Williamson (2010) finds in her book on Hindu-inspired meditators. For Williamson’s respondents “[...] the world becomes an enjoyable place to “evolve” because meditation helps them to maintain peace and compassion while performing their duties” (p. 213). The outcome is similar, whether meditators have chosen a monastic life within a Himm,¹⁰³ or if their duty is raising a family, going to work, and performing everyday life. The same thing is the case here – respondents predominately live their everyday lives, and *asana* yoga and meditation is a part of that life.

¹⁰³ Hindu-inspired Meditation Movement; Williamson’s case studies are the Self-Realization Fellowship, Transcendental Meditation, and Siddha Yoga.

8.4 What can it mean to be spiritual? An occultural lingua franca of beliefs

Some of the interview respondents has interesting things to say about spirituality. As becomes particularly clear in the interview data, respondents have their own definitions of the term spirituality and place themselves within the category in various ways. “Sara” is in her late twenties and has been a Kundalini yoga teacher for a couple of years. She practices other forms of yoga as well, in addition to studying and working. When I interviewed her, she used the word ‘spirituality’ – and I asked her what she means by it. Sara’s explanation is quite complex:

Yes, that... is really difficult! I become more and more confused the more yoga I do. But I like this sentence I heard; that we are spiritual beings who are here on earth to have a human experience. Because then... that you are trying to become enlightened and all that, that you are trying to become spiritual, or are you spiritual enough... you turn it around. You already are, and you just must go through all these human experiences, many very different experiences, and just learn. In that sense, it is very simple. Even if it is hard to go through. So that is kind of where... I used to stop there, or else I become really... [laughs] I become really confused about the soul and all that. I think we have a soul; I am sure about it. But it was ... I had proof that is good enough for me. I saw a deceased person for the first time. I knew this person well, but it was not there. The body was there, but the person was not there. And then I thought, that is the soul. There must be a spark inside... the energy of the person is the... personality. So, I think that must be the soul. And there are certain things you think is exciting and fun, and certain things you have no interest in, and I think that comes from the soul place. Of course, we can trick ourselves and have mental reservations without knowing we have it, but when you really experience joy, or when there is something that feels completely out of place... that must come from the soul. In my head, that is the only explanation [laughs].

To Sara, it seems like no one must strive or work hard to become spiritual or enlightened – we already are. The default mode is the *spiritual being*, and the human experiences are the learning curve everybody will have throughout their lives. The experiences may be enjoyable or difficult, but they seem to be part of the larger pedagogical project of life. According to Wouter Hanegraaff (1996), the pedagogy of the self (which entails both positive and negative aspects) is an important part of New Age ideas and imagery, and furthermore has become an integral part of mainstream culture as well. It is of course not given that the “spiritual being” concept is common, but the idea of people’s lives as an ongoing self-development project

certainly is. Self-development comes about through experience, often the experience of suffering, and the journey to reinterpret or overcome the suffering (or negativity in general) seems to be key (Tøllefsen 2015). From Sara's material, my interpretation is that she feels that the spiritual being is humanity's true nature. However, she seems reluctant to explore the theme further.

Spirituality is a murky concept. There is no wonder that thinking about these things too much can be somewhat disconcerting, confusing, or exhausting. Pondering these things tend to make people think about what human essence can be, and what happens after death. It is interesting that Sara moves seamlessly from talking about spirituality to discussing the concept of the soul, and that she so quickly connects it to an animating force. Sara uses several concepts to describe what she thinks the soul is, such as a spark, energy, or personality. She also uses a negation term in relation to death; "the person was not there." These conceptions are common in the yoga material, as several respondents (as I will show below) use similar terminology. Sara's perspectives on humanity's inherent spirituality and the soul leads me to a short presentation of one of the few YQ items that are explicitly otherworldly, asking about respondents' views on the afterlife.

8.4.1 The Afterlife

In the spiritual milieu concerns about the afterlife are not absent, but alternative practitioners and practices tend to be more focused on this-worldly concerns. In YQ item 46 (N=167), I asked respondents to select the option closest to their view on the Afterlife. I assumed that since modern physical yoga has its philosophical roots in Hinduism a high number of respondents would opt for reincarnation alternatives. In the item reincarnation is, interestingly, the least popular of the alternatives with only 27 respondents checking it. However, there is no alternative that stands out as particularly popular and respondents distribute themselves evenly. 41 respondents believe in the "conscious survival of the soul/self in some other realm," while at the other end of the scale 48 respondents believes in "no individual, personal afterlife of any kind." 35 respondents chose the alternative where "some part of the person survives and merges into the cosmos". 35 respondents chose the alternative "other," where they were asked to specify. Most write that they do not know what to think about what happens after death.

However, some of the responses give insight into the wide variety of respondent positions. Several of the respondents who comment note things like *[s]ome part of us, the soul, continues on in a different form*, or that the *[...] soul does not die, reincarnation possible*. This, along with the 27 respondents who have selected reincarnation as a response alternative, seems reminiscent of a neo-Hindu approximation of afterlife – complete with the one respondent who answered that this issue comes down to *karma*. Two respondents note a slightly more Buddhist orientation towards the afterlife. One says s/he believes in *[r]ebirth - not reincarnation; there is no self to reincarnate*, while the other says that the *[n]ature of mind is pervasive and beginningless. Rebirth happens constantly*.

I was surprised to see that reincarnation as such is relatively less popular. However, it may be that the idea of reincarnation is connoted to a traditional Hindu or Buddhist understanding of karma and rebirth, which may seem too determinative to the self-authoritative respondents. Reincarnation is in many ways a foreign concept in the Nordic context. Nevertheless, it seems like the reincarnation beliefs that are found in the yoga material primarily is of a New Age inspired type that focuses on ideas like energy transference (Heelas 2007).

Looking at the data from the chapter on Christianity and no religion, it makes sense that there is an almost equal division between respondents who hold theistic-like beliefs in an afterlife on the one hand, and respondents who do not believe at all on the other. Not everyone is preoccupied with the survival of the self, soul, or mind, and some of the “other”-box respondents comment along these lines. One says s/he has *no strong beliefs on this one*, another says s/he *haven't made my mind up about this*, one is agnostic, while another notes that none of the alternatives fit.

Other unsure respondents are more vocal, but still make certain reservations. One respondent highlights uncertainty as a factor; *I do not know and think that I may not be supposed to know. I lean toward an unconscious return to the great force of life that is Everything*. Another respondent focuses even less on the individual person in the sense of a conscious soul, rather quoting energy as what moves on to an afterlife. *We are energy that can never be destroyed, just take on a different form (but not necessarily in "some other realm")*. A this-worldly side of a transition process is also mentioned, where the respondent thinks that yoga practice or philosophy can help in letting go of this life; *It is just a guess. Just hope to leave with some dignity. Yoga is about letting go of this life*. The self-authority aspect that is visible throughout

the material is also present in this item, as one respondent says about the afterlife that *I believe a person decides...what you believe, happens.*

Most respondents believe in (some form of an) afterlife, but among them there is not necessarily agreement on what it entails. There is also little agreement among respondents as to what the essence of the human being is, or whether it is the soul, self, person, mind, or energy that (if anything) moves on. Interview respondent Sara, however, is certain that people have a soul, and that our preferences and experiences come from, or are influenced by it: *...when you really experience joy, or when there is something that feels completely out of place... that must come from the soul.*

8.4.2 Belief items compared to other studies

Above I presented data where about a hundred YQ respondents defined themselves as some form of spiritual person. However, self-definitions do not say much about content. The afterlife is one of a few belief items in the Yoga Questionnaire. At this point it is sensible to revisit YQ item 37 (N=170), which asks “which of the following best describes” a respondents’ beliefs. Options range from believing in a personal god(dess), to more spiritual options, and on to atheistic alternatives. As I showed in the chapter on Christianity and non-religion, there is a pattern of about an equal number of respondents selecting (more or less) religious and non-religious alternatives.¹⁰⁴

In the same way as in item 38 (self-definitions, where about a hundred YQ respondents self-defined as spiritual) the middle ground options in item 37 are most popular. 24 respondents selected “there is a guiding intelligence,” which could be interpreted both theistically and not. However, the most popular option was the alternatives that can be interpreted as most explicitly spiritual. 53 respondents (a little over 31 %) have answered that they believe there is “some sort of spirit or life force.” A further 20 (almost 12 %) agree that “there is something there.”

¹⁰⁴ Only 14 respondents selected the (obviously) theistic alternative “there is a personal god(dess).” The non-religious option on the other side of the scale was chosen by the 26 respondents, who answered “I don't think there is any sort of god(dess), spirit, life force or guiding intelligence.” 19 respondents chose “none of these” which means they did not feel comfortable with any of the options provided.

Unfortunately, in item 37 I did not provide a comments option, so there is little qualitative data to flesh out respondents' beliefs. However, the numbers tally well with the analysis of the data on Christianity from the previous chapter. Traditional, organized religion has been sidelined for options such as self- and life-oriented spirituality, or no religion at all. This is a pattern in several other studies on New Age beliefs as well, where researchers have studied both general populations (see Heelas 2008 and Frisk 2007) and New Age participants (Frisk 2003, Frisk & Åkerbäck 2015). In his 2008 volume *Spiritualities of Life*, Paul Heelas adds a short overview of evidence indicative of inner life beliefs (p. 233) that gives some possibility of comparison.

There seems to be a difference between surveys that account for a whole population, and questionnaires that target a specific participatory demographic (i.e., New Age participants or readers, or yoga practitioners). In Frisk's (2007) overview of quantitative studies on the New Age milieu, it seems that New Age participants across studies score higher on belief items than Yoga Questionnaire participants. Rose, for example, finds that 86 % of the participants believe that God is mostly present in the New Age ideas and activities (Rose 2005, 172), while Frisk finds that 97 % believe in either a personal God or a spirit/life force (Frisk 2003, 244). Corrywright's (2003) small study finds in comparison that only 58 % considered the idea of a God or a Goddess important to their spirituality. The Kendal Questionnaire, which targeted New Age participants in the UK town Kendal (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) found that among participants 57.6 % believed in God, 30 % in a personal God, 51 % in some sort of spirit or life force (which does not necessarily interpret as God, and the answer options are it seems not mutually exclusive).

The numbers on inner life - or subjectively spiritual beliefs are overall much higher in the studies that target a specific New Age participatory demographic than it is in the Yoga Questionnaire. When looking at surveys that target a general population to look for New Age/spirituality beliefs, I find numbers that compare more to the YQ. Heelas (2008) notes, for example, that 44 % of the respondents to the 2000 "Soul of Britain" survey chose the "There is some sort of spirit or life force" or "There is something there" options to determine their beliefs. This is almost identical to the YQ numbers for the same options (close to 43 %).

Heelas (2008) also reports on several studies from the Nordic countries that have used similar options to measure inner life - or subjective spiritualities. In Denmark a 2000 EVSSG

(European Value Systems Study Group) report shows that belief in a personal God remains at about 25 %. Ahlin (2006, 1-2 in Heelas 2008, 233) compares this to other surveys which show that 21 % believe in an “impersonal higher power or energy” and 35 % that “god is something that is inside man rather than outside.” In comparison, Eva Hamberg (2003, in Heelas 2008, 233) reports on change in beliefs in Sweden from the 1981 European Values Study, where 37 % reported believing in “some kind of spirit or life force”, to a later study from 1990 that reports the number of inner life spirituality respondents had risen to 44 %.¹⁰⁵ Heelas (2008) also mentions Enköpingsstudien from 2004, where he compares the numbers to Sweden’s RAMP (Religious and Moral Pluralism, 1998) results. The categories here are comparable to the YQ as well. A little over 16 % of the Enköping respondents and almost 20 % of the RAMP participants believe in “an impersonal spirit or life force,” and a little over 24 % and 36 % respectively believe that “God is something within each person, rather than something out there.”

It is interesting to note that the prevalence of both theistic and inner life beliefs among the Yoga Questionnaire respondents is lower than for comparable New Age participant studies, but (more or less) the same as general population surveys. This could be attributed to a lower engagement in the New Age among yoga practitioners. However, Frisk (2007) writes about the Kendal participants that only about half of the respondents in the study interpreted different New Age activities to have a spiritual dimension. Several of the Kendal respondents were involved in this type of activities for other than spiritual reasons (health reasons is the prime example) and as such do not score higher on typical New Age belief questions. I think this is a reasonable assumption to make when looking at the beliefs of the Yoga Questionnaire respondents as well, seeing as for example health reasons is such an important factor in their practice and conversion stories.

¹⁰⁵ Conversely, Swedes’ belief in a personal God have dropped from 20 to 15 % in the same period.

8.4.3 An occultural lingua franca of belief

Few of the interview respondents speak explicitly on beliefs. But when they do, it is with clear connotation to a Christian (personal) God or to supernatural beings. That, however, does not mean that interviewees do not believe. When describing their own beliefs, they articulate images and concepts that are different from traditional Christianity. Respondents like Tom connote belief (in God) with his grandmother's generation and with the constricting morality of organized religion. He is not particularly concerned with describing himself as anything other than a person who has been searching, and who has found some answers in yoga. However, Tom does not discount the possibility that something else exists, or that there is some form of spiritual power or energy in the universe that influences him in his work. Tom is quite reticent to personify his beliefs – in the same way as the majority of YQ respondents who do not want to identify with a personal god(dess) - but rather speak of an intelligence, life force, spirit or “something.”

Interview respondent Ella, a German who has practiced hatha yoga for about fifteen years and who teaches part-time in addition to her day job has no problem describing herself as a spiritual person when she is asked.

Yes, very much. I think for me it's not this esoteric thing where I believe in angels or so, but I believe in your own experience, and that you can expand your consciousness. So, spirituality in this sense, so at one point you have a larger perception, and on the other hand you're better to deal with everyday life. So, it's a little bit like the feet on the ground and the head in the air, this kind of saying you know. But it's hard to put in worlds because it's very experiential. I can't tell you I'm following this and this, deity or whatever, so it's very... experiential.

For Ella, spirituality clearly does not mean belief in or worship of any form of supernatural being. She negates both deities and angels and deems these to be esoteric phenomena that do not factor into her worldview. For Ella spirituality mainly seems to be a this-worldly concept and something that enables a person to cope with the trials (and monotony?) of everyday life. A “larger perception” can allude to many things. I interpret it as Ella meaning a sense of place and perhaps of sense of purpose in the world, or perhaps in that there is more between heaven and earth than we know. Unlike Sara, Ella does not mention the soul or the afterlife. She rather emphasizes terms like perception, experience, and consciousness. Especially

experience seems to be important, and it is a term Ella uses frequently – not only in this quote but also throughout the interview.

Christopher Partridge (2004) makes some interesting observations about the articulation of belief in the concluding comments to volume 1 of *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, which are applicable to the participants in the yoga project. He notes that Christian language, which was the previous *lingua franca* in the west, is falling out of favor. It is being replaced by occultural images and terminology that reflects people’s own experiences. Therefore, he says, “[...] in seeking to articulate their experiences of the divine, some speak of ‘universal consciousness’, ‘driving force’, ‘divine energy’ and a ‘journey into spiritual enlightenment’, all terms which we have seen are popular within the emerging spiritual milieu” (p. 186). This is something the yoga respondents do as well. How they conceptualize belief varies, but in the articulation, it is clear that respondents take inspiration from their practices and experiences and connect their self-definitions and beliefs with having a wider perception of the world. They aim to expand their consciousness, and (if they are so inclined) commune with “some form of spirit or life force.” They are not very sympathetic (or perhaps, neutral rather) to Christian notions of a personal God, and not to what Partridge (2004, 186) calls the “epistemic and soteriological exclusivism” that traditional theological concepts imply. Rather, spirituality-oriented respondents speak a common language (or belong to a common *occultural*-linguistic community) where softer ideas of the divine that are deeply rooted in practitioners’ individual experiences come to the forefront and are mutually understandable.

8.5 Religious, spiritual, and mystical experiences

In addition to belief items, subjective spiritualities can be examined through the lens of spiritual and mystical experiences. In the YQ a cluster of questions attempt to measure experiences that (to some extent) are typical for people involved in alternative religion/spirituality. Experiences range from lighter or vaguer experiences such as oneness with the universe or nature or experiences of intuition, to experiences that could be called prophetic. In the same way as with self-definition and belief items, the general pattern I find is that soft inner life spiritual experiences are common. Hardcore religious or spiritual experiences such as “hearing the voice of God” is reported by a small minority of respondents.

8.5.1 Item 49 – Have you ever had an experience where you felt like ...

In item 49, a Yes/ No matrix, I asked if respondents have ever “had an experience where they felt that...” The most popular answer alternative was a feeling of being “one with the universe” (Yes N=98, No N=72, Total N=170). This type of experience is, I would argue, common even among the general population – and does not necessarily have to emerge from a spiritual - or a yoga context. Nature is an important part of many respondents’ worldviews, and the experience of oneness with the universe can as well have been experienced in contact with the natural world.

Other alternatives were less popular but not uncommon, such as the experience of being “filled with the spirit” (Yes N=77, No N=92, Total 169). However, I was a bit surprised to find relatively high numbers (between approximately a third and a fourth of respondents) on slightly more religion-connoted and ‘deeply’ experiential alternatives, such as out-of-body experiences; “Have you had an experience where you felt you left your body for a period of time?” (Yes N=64, No N=106, Total N=170), or experiencing a “state of spiritual/religious ecstasy” (Yes N=54, No N=116, Total N=170).

8.5.2 Item 48 – Have you ever had any of the following experiences?

In item 48, experience alternatives get a little more specific. Using a Yes/ No matrix, respondents (N=170) are asked whether they have had any of the following experiences. Already here it becomes clear that some of the lighter experiences are quite common, for example it turns out that a majority of respondents have “had a 'psychic' intuition that turned out to be correct” (Yes N=93, No N=76, Total N=169). The concept of intuition is quite prevalent in the material, and it does not necessarily imply any spiritual alignment or significance. Interviewee Sara, for example says that

It becomes really subtle, that you see clearer what is happening in a situation. Or you notice ... that you get in touch with that intuition. You notice what will happen before it actually happens, you start seeing that pattern. And you wake up your senses as well.

Most interview respondents who address intuition speak of it as something all people have, a form of inborn or intrinsic human quality, that only needs to be learnt or remembered. It could be that respondents consider intuition as part of the “System 1-thinking” or intuitive reasoning that cognitive psychologists such as Kahneman (2011) have suggested is the fundamental way

people relate to reality and decision-making. As such, there seems to be a conceptual difference in what respondents perceive as “psychic” intuition and a more every day, non-mystical form of intuition.

The significance of dreams is also a common theme among respondents. Respondents are almost evenly divided on the item 48 question of whether they ever “Had a dream that later came true” (Yes N=86, No N=84, Total N=170). This is a question formulation that can easily be misunderstood, however, as life goals in often spoken of in the vernacular as a dream. What I aimed for with this question alternative was soothsaying dreams. Nevertheless, both true dreaming and dreams of “spiritual significance” (Yes N=77, No N=93, Total N=170) are quite common among respondents. The high number of respondents who have had experiences of intuitions and dreams seem to support the findings on the inspiration from approach to spirituality. If the experiences are not overly special and can be understood or explained in a sort of commonsense framework there seems to be no problem.

Other experiences listed in the same item were less popular. About a third of the respondents felt that they have “changed profoundly as the result of a spiritual experience” (Yes N=52, No N=117, Total N=169). In this material, I would argue that this is not a particularly high number, since the idea of a spiritual experience to some extent is part of the vocabulary, or a wider yoga discourse. However, if a question like this was posed to the general population rather than yoga practitioners and teachers, I suspect the numbers would be much lower. Something similar can be said about the alternative where respondents state yes or no on whether they have “felt called by God/Spirit to do something” (Yes N=43, No N=125, Total N=168). Here a little less than a fourth of respondents have felt some sort of calling. Even fewer have “witnessed or experienced a miraculous, physical healing” (Yes N=25, No N=144, Total N=169), or have “heard the voice of God/Spirit speaking to me” (Yes N=19, No N=149, Total N=168).

From the YQ items 48 and 49 above, it seems that relatively few respondents have had profound and life-changing experiences usually connoted with traditional religion, such as prophecy, direct communication from divine beings, or miraculous healing. However, a small minority have. The alternatives that are most popular among respondents are the less profound, more everyday experiences of unity, intuition, and dreams. Experiences of being one with the universe, being filled with the spirit, or having had intuitions or dreams that later

came true are so popular that half (or more than half) of the respondents report having had them. I assume that most respondents have a common-sense understanding of which type of experiences these items ask about. The answers are anchored through surrounding items, such as the items below, and overlap with the frequency of paranormal beliefs and experiences.

8.5.3 Item 47 – how often have you had the following experiences?

YQ item number 47 goes into even more detail regarding experiences, using a scale of 1-4 (5) asking how often the mentioned experiences have occurred (if ever). The item specifically asks, “how often have you had any of the following experiences?” and provide answer alternatives ranging from [1] Never in my life; [2] Once or twice; [3] Several times; [4] Often; [5] I cannot answer this question. 170 respondents engaged with the item – but not everyone answered each question within it. However, under ten respondents per alternative selected the last option “I cannot answer this question.”

Some interesting patterns appear that are consonant with the connected items above. Again, the lighter experiences are by far the ones that respondents have experienced most often. The one experience that a large majority of respondents agreed on having was the option “A sacred experience of nature”. Only eight respondents could not answer this question. While 34 respondents never in their life have had one, 45 respondents have experienced it once or twice, 40 respondents several times, and 43 respondents have often had a sacred experience of nature.

This question provides numerical backing for the respondents who in their open answers or comments have mentioned nature as an important part of their worldview and/ or spirituality. The Nordic countries are rich in nature, and outdoor activities and sports are a part of the cultural fabric - even for city-dwellers. This is a point that Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014) also makes in their survey of Danish yoga practitioners. Although many reside in urban environments their value matrix involves a reverence for the natural world, and an affinity for outdoor activities. As such, that experiencing nature as sacred is quite common among the YQ respondents is not a surprise. This, I would argue, is also an experience that is like the most popular option in item 49, where many respondents felt they had been “one with the universe.”

A couple of questions in item 47 deal with mild, everyday forms of precognition. These are also quite popular among respondents. The question asking how often respondents have “Felt as though you were in touch with someone when they were far away from you” had a total of 170 responses, and only five could not answer the question. While 43 people have never experienced such a thing, 51 have had this feeling once or twice. 46 respondents have felt like they were in touch with someone far away several times – and all of 25 respondents have experienced this often. Further, the question “How often have you experienced that you thought you were somewhere you had been before but knew that it was impossible” have a similar distribution. Of the 168 respondents who chose to answer this question five could not say, and 54 have never had such an experience. However, 47 respondents have experienced this once or twice, 43 several times, and 15 have experienced this often.

The option of having had an experience once or twice is quite popular in the question of whether respondents have “Felt as though you were really in touch with someone who had died” (N=169) as well. While 78 respondents have never felt this, 51 respondents have – once or twice in their life. 24 have experienced this several times, and 12 often, while only four state that this is a question they cannot answer. These three items are quite similar in tone to for example the question of psychic intuitions from item 48, where a majority of respondents answered in the affirmative. It seems that spiritual connections to other people (both living and dead), dreams, intuitions, and déjà-vu experiences are a cluster of common, everyday extrasensory experiences that many respondents claim to (to various extents) have had

Another set of questions in item 47 connote somewhat stronger mystical or extrasensory experiences. In the following three questions, 68 respondents note that they have never had experiences like feeling “as though you were very close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself” (N=170), an “Extra sensory perception of someone else’s thoughts” (N=169) or an experience of a “pattern of events in your life that convinces you that they were part of a plan” (N=170). The remainder of the responses show similar distribution patterns: respectively, 42, 40, and 35 respondents have had these experiences once or twice; 33, 34, and 34 have experienced this several times; while these somewhat stronger mystical experiences are something that 17, 25, and 28 respondents have had

often.¹⁰⁶ A fourth question can be placed in the same mid-level experience category. While three respondents could not answer the question, 88 respondents noted that they never have had “An accurate precognition of future events” (N=170). However, a relatively high number of 47 respondents have seen the future once or twice in their lives, and 24 respondents have done this several times. Eight respondents state that they often can predict the future correctly.

The final set of questions in item 47 concern the type of life-altering experiences that are most often portrayed in popular culture or in religious texts (or, to some extent, in the field of psychiatry). The set deals with precognition, visions, or prophecy. Here it is clear that most respondents have never had this form of experience, which also tallies well with the low prevalence of answers to hard core spiritual options from item 48 and 49 above.

111 respondents have never “Received prophecy, visions, or messages from the spirit world” (N=170), while 25 have once or twice, and 15 several times. 14 respondents experience this often, while five cannot answer the question. The fact that 14 respondents note having this experience often is surprising. However, respondents did not have the option to expand on their answers, so I know very little about what such an experience may entail for the individual. However, if compared with the yes/ no items above, where I asked whether God or the spirits had called respondents to do something or heard the voice of God/ spirit speaking to them, these numbers make sense. The two remaining questions in this item are similar as to where respondents place themselves on the answer curve. 123 and 125 respondents respectively have never had “A near-death experience” (N=169) or “Seen events at a great distance as they were happening” (N=170) – which says something about how rare and potentially life changing such experiences are. Again, it is hard to know what respondents would include in the categories. Nevertheless, 31 respondents (in both categories) had experienced these things once or twice. The numbers for the several and often categories are very low – respectively six and three respondents, and five and two respondents¹⁰⁷ -- which shows that there are a few respondents in the data set who are deeply, personally familiar with this type of spiritual experience.

¹⁰⁶ Respectively, nine, three, and five respondents have noted that they cannot answer this question.

¹⁰⁷ Six and seven respondents, respectively, could not answer this question.

8.5.4 Summary

This far, a pattern begins to emerge. Many respondents self-define as spiritual of some sort (although at the same time many also call themselves non-religious). Of those who respond positively to having a belief the majority connect the divine with the individual, as a form of inner life – or self-spirituality (Heelas 2008) rather than a personal God.

Spiritual or mystical experiences follow the same pattern. The same number of respondents who self-define as spiritual (about a hundred) also have, at some point, felt “at one with the universe.” Most respondents have at some point had a spiritual experience with nature, and mild precognition and déjà-vu experiences is something about two thirds of respondents have experienced once or more. Over half of the respondents claim to have had intuitions that proved to be correct. Whether this is primarily everyday intuitions (intuitive reasoning) or explicitly paranormal, psychic intuitions is not completely clear. However, I assume that the former is (much) more common than the latter. Both true dreaming and dreams of spiritual significance are popular (half or little under half of respondents). However, the stronger an experience gets, the less popular it becomes. As such, out-of-body experiences and ecstatic experiences are reported by less than a third of respondents. Stronger mystical experiences such as hearing the voice of God or receiving miraculous healing are uncommon, reported by only a tenth of respondents.

8.6 Consumption of media, techniques, therapies, and techniques

Another aspect of inner life - or subjective spirituality is the consumption of therapies, activities, groups, and media/popular culture. The New Age field is commonly described as a supermarket or a smorgasbord (Roof 1999; Kraft 2011), where actors can shop around for what they feel inspired by and find out what works for them.

Yoga and meditation are ubiquitous in the material, a given since the respondents are yoga practitioners. However, in this section I go somewhat beyond yoga and into other New Age items. I begin with presenting consumption of yoga- and Buddhist-oriented media, and then move on to some YQ items where respondents report on spiritual/ occulture topics they have researched and used. I end this section with presenting respondent consumption of alternative activities and items. Respondents are also asked to determine which activities “really have been of help to them.” The responses vary widely, but the general pattern is that the use of

yoga – or Buddhist literature and websites is common, and that yoga and meditation are activities that respondents find familiar. Low-intensity alternative activities (such as astrology) are popular, while high-intensity activities such as astral travel is uncommon in the material.

8.6.1 Book, websites, and research topics

In YQ items 41, 42, and 43 I asked respondents to list a few alternative books/ authors, websites, or magazines that have been influential for them. Between a quarter and a third of respondents have not listed anything, or written that they either do not read, or that this question is non-applicable to them. Among the rest, it is not surprising to see that much of what respondents list are yoga – and Buddhist-oriented authors and literature. Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* are popular among these, along with a variety of classic yoga literature, such as this respondent exemplifies. *Yoga Sutras of Patanjaly, Bhagavad Gita, Hatha Yoga Pradipika. Also Yoga Mala, Light on Yoga and books from senior practitioners.*

The *Yoga Mala* is K. Pattabhi Jois' yoga manual, and *Light on Yoga* is one of Iyengar's best-selling books and a book that is widely used across the yoga scene. The YQ material also includes a variety of other well-known yoga teachers/ gurus, such as Yogi Bhanan, TKV Desikachar, Paramahansa Yogananda, Swami Janakananda, and Jiddu Krishnamurti – in addition to several books used in teacher training in various styles of yoga. Of current senior practitioners whose books/ websites respondents engage with are people such as Eddie Stern, Donna Farhi, Petri Räsänen, and famous social media personalities (and authors) such as Tara Frazer and Yoga Girl (Rachel Brathen). Respondents also read yoga books in their own languages, some in translation and some from Nordic yoga teachers.

While some of the respondents may to some extent be familiar with *sanskrit* (much of the yoga terminology such as concepts, chants, and *asana* names will be in *sanskrit*), most of the literature is either written in or translated to English. The same is visible in the case of Buddhist literature. Above I highlighted just how important Buddhism is in the yoga material, and this shows in the consumption of books as well. The majority (if not all) of respondents are not familiar either with *pali* or any living Eastern languages in which Buddhist sutras or other core literature may be written. Thus, the three respondents who mention having read the most known Buddhist *sutras*, (*All Buddhist sutras; Collections of the Buddha tales and lotus*

sutra; *The Heart Sutra*, *The Lotus Sutra*, *The Lankavatara Sutra*) have most likely read translations.

The authorship of popular yoga gurus and Buddhist teachers have been key in the translation (and indigenization) of eastern philosophy, and there is a market for spiritual literature that yoga respondents make use of. Like with the yoga personalities there is great variety among the popular Buddhist teachers and authors. Four respondents mention Dalai Lama as an inspiration to them; two respondents mention Chögyam Trungpa (founder of the Shambhala organization). A few respondents also mention authors like Sogyal Rinpoche, Shunryu Suzuki (author of famous *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, published in 1970), Vietnamese monk and peace activist Thích Nhất Hạnh, and female lama Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche. Western-born teachers and authors are also mentioned, some of whom have taken monastic vows and new names. Most are male, such as Ngakpa Chögyam, Lama Surya Das, Ajahn Sumedho, Vajragupta, and Sante Poromaa. However, several respondents mention the female American-born nun Pema Chödrön, student of Chögyam Trungpa. Her own website states that as a [...] “Beloved Buddhist teacher, author, nun and mother, Pema Chodron has inspired millions of people from around the world who have been touched by her example and message of practicing peace in these turbulent times.”¹⁰⁸ Several other Buddhist or Buddhist-oriented western-born teachers (who have kept their western names) are also mentioned, such as Andrew Holecek, Matthieu Ricard, Jon Kabat-Zinn, and Jack Kornfield. Looking back to Lopez’ (2012) short history of Buddhist fashions, the various periods are reflected in respondents’ literature choices. Relatively few are occupied with traditional canonical Theravada Buddhism. However, (near-) contemporary popular Zen – and Tibetan Buddhist authors are quite widely read, and western propagators of practices such as Mindfulness are present in the material. As we have seen above, popular Buddhism in the west is mediated through the consumption of (meditation) courses, self-help books and websites.

In addition to yoga and Buddhism, respondents read and engage with several authors that I would place in a New Age or alternative category. Several respondents mention Rhonda Byrne’s 2006 self-help book *The Secret*. The book proclaims that through the “law of attraction” a person can change one’s life through “power of thought.” This idea is not new in

¹⁰⁸ <https://pemachodronfoundation.org/> (accessed 28.02.18)

the alternative scene. It closely resembles New Thought, a metaphysical belief system originating in early 19th century America with progenitors such as Phineas Quimby and Mary Baker Eddy. Dawn L. Hutchinson (2014) highlights that New Thought writers agreed that “God is Mind,” and that by adjusting one’s thought processes towards healing or prosperity the divine would manifest that reality. New Thought ideas has profoundly influenced mainstream culture in areas as diverse as business and popular psychology.

Another and even more popular New Age author in the yoga material is German-born Eckhart Tolle, most famous for his 1997 book *The Power of Now*. From Tolle’s own website one can learn that “[h]is teachings focus on the significance and power of Presence, the awakened state of consciousness, which transcends ego and discursive thinking. Eckhart sees this awakening as the essential next step in human evolution.”¹⁰⁹ Respondents also mention subculture staples such as Alan Watts, Rudolf Steiner, and Helena Blavatsky, as well as a wide variety of popular authors and/or spiritual teachers such as Byron Katie, Louise Hay, Marianne Williamson, Paulo Coelho and Herman Hesse.

It is interesting to note that about half of the respondents do not follow any websites or social media in relation to yoga or alternative beliefs. Those who do, however, range from having an *Endless list :-)* and *I check in regularly* to visiting one or a few websites – often in connection with yoga. Spiritual magazines (either online or in printed form) are even less popular, where most respondents do not engage.

Several other items from the YQ are useful in contextualizing the data from items 41-43. In YQ item 51, I ask respondents if they have “ever read a book, consulted a Web site (more than casually), or researched the following topics?” 113 respondents answered this item, which is quite low. The 58 respondents who have not answered can most likely be interpreted as ‘extra no-s’ – which overall means that not many respondents spend time reading and researching esoteric or pop-occultural topics.

The least popular options are typically pop-culture topics such as “Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster” (N=23) or “Ghosts, apparitions or haunted houses” (N=26), closely followed by

¹⁰⁹ <https://eckharttolle.com/about/> (accessed 19.03.21)

“The prophecies of Nostradamus” (N=27), and “UFO sightings or abductions” (N=28). While most people will have been exposed to these stories and ideas through films and other forms of media as part of a general occulture (Partridge 2004/5), they seem to hold relatively little interest for the YQ respondents. 32 respondents have more than casually read or researched “Mediums, fortune-tellers or psychics,” while “Conspiracies and 'conspiracy theories'” have caught the interest of 34 respondents.¹¹⁰ “Paganism or Witchcraft” and “Rituals and Magic (not 'stage magic')” have been researched by 41 respondents each, while 53 respondents have shown more than casual interest in the “New Age movement in general.” These latter four are topics that are a little more serious, and some of them are also academic fields of study. The academic connection gives the topics some legitimacy beyond pop culture and increases the credible sources for reading and researching.

8.6.2 Astrology and other forms of divination

The topic in item 51 that is most popular is, unsurprisingly, astrology. 76 out of 113 respondents have researched the topic. However, fewer have found astrology to be a real help for them (Item 52, N=163) – only 27 respondents. I conclude that among the various forms of divination I have presented to YQ respondents, astrology is the only one with a significant foothold.

Even so, as I present below, most respondents have little or no interest in astrology. A minority, ranging from about a third and down, have more than a passing interest. Few of the respondents, generally below ten, are active and personally engaged in astrology (as more than a consumer). Most respondents have had no help from other forms of divination, but among those who have, Tarot is as common as astrology. Both these forms of divination are well-known from popular culture, and that may be the reason respondents have chosen to engage with them instead of more unfamiliar or alternative forms such as I-Ching, numerology, or palmistry.

YQ item number 53 asks specifically about consumption of astrology-related activities. Here the same tendency appears as in previously presented data – the low-intensity or low-involvement options are the most common. 50 respondents say that they have “Read a teach-yourself-astrology book” (No N=114, total N=164). Having “Had a friend draw up a chart for

¹¹⁰ For more info on conspiracy thinking in the yoga material, see Dyrendal and Tøllefsen (forthcoming).

free” is not unheard of (Yes N=37; No N=129; Total N=166), and neither is having “Purchased a computerized horoscope reading” (Yes N=34; No N=133; Total N=167) or having “Visited an astrologer for a private consultation” (Yes N=30; No N=136; Total N=166).

For the respondents who are somewhat involved in astrology it is not only about consumption but also individual behavior. As an example, one question in item 53 asks “Have you ever altered your behavior based on your horoscope, a rune reading, Tarot reading, or other form of divination?” to which 30 respondents answered yes (No N=133; Total N=163).

As seems to be the rule for most experience – and engagement items in the YQ, only a minority are deeply involved in anything other than yoga. This is the case with astrology as well. Only 20 out of 165 respondents have “Drawn up your own astrological chart” (No N=145). The even more high-intensity options are selected only by a small minority. Six respondents have “Taken an astrology course in person or on-line” (No N=159; Total N=165), and only nine have “Given an astrology reading” (No N=156; Total N=165).

In the YQ, I have also looked for engagement with other forms of divination than astrology. Item 52, briefly mentioned above, asks respondents to tick off which “[...] of the following have you found to really be of help to you?” (N=163). Most respondents (N=110) selected the option “none,” which I would argue render the concept of divination (beyond casual interest in astrology) irrelevant to them. Among the remaining, 27 respondents noted they have been really helped by Tarot readings, and 13 have been aided by psychic readings. Eight respondents have been helped by I-Ching (or *yijing*), known in English as *The book of changes*, an ancient Chinese book of divination based on 64 hexagrams accompanied by short texts. Numerology is less popular, selected by only five respondents. Two respondents each choose runes and palmistry.

8.6.3 Acupuncture and astral travel

Item 54, which I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter in connection to yoga and meditation, also contains a longer list of therapies, activities, or groups. Respondents were asked to fill out a Likert scale from never to frequently, asking how often they have used the therapies. It varies how many respondents have answered each question within the item, from N=169 to N=161.

Acupressure, acupuncture, aromatherapy, chiropractic, and homeopathy are therapy forms that I in this context would categorize as quite popular. They are (fairly) non-invasive, and in the Nordic context they are not socially coded as very alternative. Only 43 respondents have never tried acupuncture (total N=168), 62 respondents have never gone to a chiropractor (total N=165), 63 have never tried aromatherapy (total N=166), 92 have never tried acupressure (total N=164), and 95 have never tried psychotherapy (total N=165). The most common usage frequency varies between sometimes and rarely. It is possible that respondents seek out these therapies when they need them, but do not integrate these in their everyday practice. Alternatively, respondents may have tried these therapies, but after gaining some experience deciding to let them go.

Tai Chi (No N=105; total N=160) and Qi Gong/Chi Kung (No N=115; total N=163) are practices that to some extent fall into the same overarching category of body work as yoga and meditation. Most respondents have never tried either, which is not particularly surprising as respondents have chosen yoga as their primary body work activity.

From here on out on the list of techniques and therapies, the numbers drop bit by bit.

Techniques become less popular the more they are socially coded as alternative.

It seems that the prevalence of a therapeutic ethos in both mainstream culture and in the yoga material, which includes a willingness to explore what works for the individual, makes several mid-level therapy forms worth trying. A fair number of respondents has tried the practices in the mid-level category, but few engage in a sustained fashion.

Form of therapy (mid-level)	Not tried	Total
Healing / spiritual healing	100	169
Osteopathy	110	165
Herbalism	113	164
Flower essences therapy	110	163
Nutritional therapy	122	165
Reiki healing	123	165
Reflexology	127	164
Shiatsu	131	164
Cranio-sacral therapy	133	164
Kinesiology	134	163

Table 1 Mid-level forms of therapy

Most of the therapies and activities listed at the end of item 54 are socially coded as highly alternative. They are partly sectarian (in that they belong to a particular group), or the

techniques can be viewed as “particular” even within a New Age/ alternative framework. Unsurprisingly these are not popular among respondents. However, that 12 and 11 respondents respectively (at some point) have engaged with forms of therapy that are alternatively connoted as rebirthing and astral travel speaks to the fact that among the respondents there is a small minority who are deeply engaged in an alternative milieu.

Form of therapy (high-level)	Not tried	Total
Hypnotherapy	142	166
Naturopathy	144	163
Universal peace dancing (Sufi dancing)	150	161
Polarity therapy	154	161
Alexander technique	154	163
Rebirthing	153	165
Astral travel	153	164

Table 2 High-level forms of therapy

8.6.4 Summary

Heelas (2008, 5) notes that “[i]n western settings, mind-body-spirituality *activities*, in the hands of *spiritual practitioners* [...] have grown fairly rapidly, especially during and since the counter cultural sixties” In this section, I have primarily focused on research on occultural topics and consumption of media, and the use of divinatory systems and spiritual healing techniques and therapies. The aspect of *active* choice of consumption is important in this section.

The YQ material shows that the practice of yoga (and meditation) has a particular position compared to other techniques and therapies. In question 6 “Do you see your yoga practice as part of your personal spiritual path, as a mind-body practice/ therapy, or "just" as physical exercise?” the 170 respondents are divided in their opinions. 77 respondents see yoga as a mind-body practice, 42 as exercise, and 34 as a part of their own spiritual path. 73 respondents think that yoga can be all three alternatives simultaneously.

As one respondent comments to the following question: *My postural practice is mostly mind-body / physical exercise, but I do consider yoga on the whole a part of my spiritual practice.* In that sense, it is possible that yoga respondents do not feel like they need other techniques and therapies. Except for yoga, meditation and generalized massage, respondents are quite conservative in their use of body work techniques and therapies. Apart from a few quite mainstream, non-alternatively connoted therapy forms such as acupuncture and chiropractic, the majority of YQ respondents either do not, or seldom engage. The numbers drop further

the more alternative a practice or therapy form is, which makes activities such as rebirthing and astral travel marginal.

When it comes to the use of divinatory practices, most respondents do not engage at all. While more than half of the respondents have researched astrology at some point, only a little over a fifth have found that astrology has been of real help to them. The pattern is once again that low-intensity and mainstream systems such as astrology and tarot are the most popular, while other alternative divinatory systems are less popular.

There seems to be a difference between engaging in (physical) practices/ therapies and activities, and actively researching topics and consuming media. Looking at the topics respondents have researched and engaged with, general occulture items familiar from popular fiction and media are of relatively little interest. New Religious Movements or milieus such as generalized New Age culture, Paganism and Witchcraft, and Rituals and Magic are a bit more popular – about a third of the respondents who answered this question had researched these topics at some point.

Most of the respondents are active readers – which is unsurprising based on their high education level. However, respondents engage with books much more than with magazines (online or physical) or websites. Yoga is the most common topic for readers, and the yoga philosophy classics are well represented. Respondents also read a variety of yoga manuals and teacher training material, depending on their preferred style(s) and aims. Yoga is also the most popular topic when it comes to websites, but generally respondents are much less active on the internet and reading magazines than engaging with literature. The same pattern is visible in the engagement with Buddhist media, where Zen-, Tibetan-, and Mindfulness authors from both the east and the west are well represented.

Respondents engage less with New Age/ alternative literature, but authors like Eckhart Tolle and other positive thinking/ self-development providers are relatively popular.

The popularity of inner life spirituality publications is something Heelas (2008) sees as perhaps the most significant point of popularization. In the UK, bookstores (or shops that have a book section) sell “[...] something in the order of four times more mind-body-spirituality publications than those devoted to traditional theistic world religions. And in newsagents, magazines and newspapers contain increasing amounts of material on mind-

body-spirituality” (2008, 73). I assume that yoga respondents in the Nordic countries consume inner life spirituality literature from similar outlets. However, one may wonder if mind-body-spirituality provisions have become so mainstreamed and conventional (in the respondents’ circles) that (these) consumers do not categorize their purchases as alternative. It is also not a given that even if respondents are engaged in inner life spirituality beliefs, experiences, or activities they see these as alternative, or that they consider themselves to be involved in the alternative scene.

8.7 Attitudes towards alternative spirituality and healing practices

Defining the New Age, or more precisely, what should be included in the concept alternative religion and spirituality is notoriously hard. As George D. Chryssides (2007, 5-6) writes

At an intuitive level, many readers would claim to recognise the ‘New Age’ when they see it. It manifests itself in shops that specialise in Tarot cards, crystals, incense, alternative remedies and books on ley lines, the paranormal, astrology, and eastern and esoteric spirituality. It appears in the form of magazines [...] and in local directories providing advertisements and addresses for the services of Reiki healers, yoga teachers and various psychic consultants. It has its centres, either in practitioners’ owned or hired premises, or in renowned towns such as Glastonbury or Totnes. There are also characteristic events, such as Mind-Body-Spirit festivals and psychic fairs.

This common-sense observational analysis of what (alternative or New Age) spirituality connotes is useful. As Chryssides (2007) notes, we know it when we see it. From the material, it seems that respondents share an intuitive level of understanding (approximately) what alternative spirituality connotes, and they are aware of public discourses on the alternative. However, their own attitudes towards defining what they believe, practice, or are involved in as *alternative*, or defining themselves as alternative (providers or practitioners), vary widely. As the previous chapters suggest, respondents do not necessarily balk at a delineation between religion and non-religion. However, the terms spirituality, alternative and New Age are much more problematic. The fact that respondents so readily question and criticize terms and categories is something that highlights their social and cultural capital and the importance of spiritualities of self-determination in a yoga milieu.

8.7.1 Involvement in alternative spirituality

YQ item 7 (N=170) asks respondents to describe their involvement with (so-called) alternative spirituality. Already here it becomes clear that the concepts spirituality and alternative are by no means the same for respondents. Although well over half do not hesitate to self-define as spiritual of some kind, it turns out that over half the respondents do not see themselves as involved with anything alternative. However, the majority of those who *are* involved in something alternative seem to approach involvement primarily as inspiration.

Item 7 was worded “Do you see yourself as involved in alternative spirituality - whatever that means to you?” and answer alternatives ranged from minimal or casual, to deeply involved. 91 respondents described their involvement in alternative spirituality as being minimal or casual, and many of them note in the comments section that they have not been involved at all.¹¹¹ 46 respondents were pretty regularly involved with alternative ideas and practices. 19 respondents ticked the box for being deeply involved, and 10 respondents self-define as providers of alternative services – offering spiritual guidance, coaching, therapy/ therapies and/or products of some kind. These ten providers (and possibly also the 19 respondents who style themselves as deeply involved in alternative spirituality) align with the number of respondents who in previous items have had high-intensity experiences such as receiving visions or messages from the divine, have had out-of-body experiences, or are engaged with non-mainstream techniques and therapies such as Reiki healing, rebirthing, and astral travel.

As is usual with this kind of question, the comments section is the most interesting. When I analyze the comments, they fall on different places on an alternative continuum. The category of respondents who empathically do not see themselves as alternative or spiritual tend to comment along the lines of, *I am not alternatively spiritual at all*, alternatively *I am an atheist*, or *I am an atheist, critical, and well-educated. It is impossible for me to join in with talk of angels and chakras etc.* Another response came in answer to a different question on spiritual experiences. The respondent, clearly irked, replies

¹¹¹ The comments here point to a methodological (or pre-conceived notions) problem, where I assumed yoga practitioners were much more comfortable and involved with the ‘alternative’ than they are. In hindsight, I could have provided the answer option “not involved” to this item and several others that ask about alternative spirituality.

I thought this Questionnaire would be on yoga. It turned out to be a complete mix of anything related to being "alternative". I find it hard to take this survey seriously, as you have thrown everything in here. A lot of the things here I cannot relate to at all, even if I practice yoga and meditation daily, as I do not consider myself spiritual or alternative.

Responses like this highlights that for a significant portion of the yoga respondents, any connection to the perceived alternative or New Age-y is completely outside their realm of experience or interest.

Most commenters to this item are in the in-between category. Some do not question my use of the word alternative and have for example commented that they do things like *reading and meditation*, or [...] *study kabbalah*. One respondent also [...] *provides reiki-healing, which is an energy treatment*. Others tend to make a note of what they are involved in, but at the same time they question that some practices or activities are considered alternative or resent being placed in an alternative or spiritual category altogether. Typical comments here are things like

This was quite a tricky question. But as a Christian I use yoga and meditation to connect and talk to God, which for me feels very spiritual. I also practice some ayurveda, which some people consider alternative, but for me just makes sense.

Another Christian respondent writes that s/he is *[n]ot sure what alternative means. What is not included here. I'm a Christian, but I do hug trees :)*, and yet another one states that *I do not consider my spiritual practice "alternative" (prayer, chanting, meditation)*.

Another respondent questions the concept of spirituality. *For me there is nothing called spirituality. I don't feel at home with that "Box". Either we are all spiritual beings or none of us are...*

One respondent, who is a provider of alternative services is an interesting example. S/he also explains what alternative means to her/ him, and here it is clear that there is some discrepancy between what Chryssides (2007) in speak of as a intuitive understanding of what alternative or New Age spirituality is, and respondents' own self-understanding. The provider writes that *I'm an Alexander teacher and musician. I don't really teach any alternative spirituality, unless alternative means giving space for people to make up their own minds*. Here, again, the notion of self-authority and choice comes to the fore.

The Buddhist-aligned or inspired respondents in the material have also commented on item 7. Most can be placed among those who have a spiritual practice or worldviews, but who would not necessarily call themselves alternative. Buddhism is an important part of many respondents' subjective spiritualities. Their comments, however, says something about their lines of demarcation between Buddhism and the alternative. One respondent, for example, says about her involvement in alternative spirituality that s/he *[d]on't know. I have been a Buddhist for 30+ years, but don't usually call this alternative.* Another says, in the same vein, that *I don't know what "alternative spirituality" means in this context. If it is western, new age mix of eastern philosophies than I am not involved, but I truly appreciate Tibetan Buddhist teachings.*

The tendency of not associating Buddhist teachings with New Age or alternative spiritualities seems to be a point of agreement among the Buddhism-aligned respondents. For some, like the respondent below, Buddhism is a deep and long-standing interest (in this case considered a change of religion) of a very subjective and personal kind.

I study Zen Buddhism, but do not consider this alternative spirituality, as I study through original texts and have no group affiliation or interest in typical "alternative" pastimes (healing, group meditation, readings, alternative therapy). I practice meditation on my own. I was raised in the Lutheran Christian faith and consider my studies a change of religion, but this interest predated yoga (study of eastern religions 20 years, yoga practice 16 years).

It seems to be a common understanding among Buddhism-aligned respondents that neither traditional Buddhism nor more modern, western Buddhist-inspired types of meditation are to be 'lumped together' with New Age types of spirituality. As one respondent states, *I don't understand "alternative" here. I teach Zen Buddhist meditation, but also MBSR and Mindful Self-Compassion 8-week courses.* Another respondent of the Buddhist persuasion writes that *Buddhism interested me philosophically even before yoga. New age kind of activities has never interested me much.* This seems to be a common perspective among the Buddhism-aligned respondents; their meditation practices and Buddhist philosophy is a worldview or "life art" more than it is religion and or alternative spirituality. New Age activities are, for the majority, not very interesting.

A fascinating group of respondents is those who have commented that they are not involved in alternative spirituality, but who explain their perspectives. This group is skeptical towards alternative/ spiritual terminology or the “grouping efforts” often they see inherent in the alternative scene. However, they are to some extent interested in the alternative from the outside in. The respondent below is particularly interested in the nexus between people, nature, and culture – and the wider New Age movement seems to be included.

I have always been both interested in and skeptical to the alternative movement. I am fascinated by the connection between nature and culture – between nature and people, and I think there are people who are more receptive towards what exists between heaven and earth, than others. Nevertheless I am not involved in any form of spirituality.¹¹²

This ambivalence towards the alternative movement and alternative people, and what amounts to a more academic than personal interest, is also reflected also in the quote below, where the respondent writes about her own involvement in spirituality, that

I didn't really. I am interested in it because of what I study, but on a personal level I am not really interested in the spiritual side of yoga. I do my yoga, say my namaste and that is about it. If I am involved in alternative perspectives/healing/spirituality it is more because I am fascinated by people involved in it than me being interested in it on a personal level.

It is interesting that these respondents delineate clearly between an outsider – and an insider perspective. That several respondents have an academic interest in the alternative/ New Age movement is not surprising due to their high education levels.

An YQ item that simultaneously offers similar answers and highlights the same issues as Q7 is Q35, which asks “Please describe how and why you became involved in alternative perspectives/healing/spirituality.” 135 respondents answered this open-ended – but relatively problematic – question. Those who have answered in the affirmative (N=65) bring forth topics that resonate with much of the other material: health issues, meetings with special people, media, or a longing for more meaning in life. 34 respondents have answered no to them being involved in spirituality and/ or anything alternative, and 36 respondents have refrained from answering. The problems respondents have with the ‘alternative’ (whether it is

¹¹² My translation

practices, a milieu, or a category) are reflected in the comments to this item in the same way as in item 7.

8.7.2 Summary

Overall, respondents are divided when it comes to the idea of the alternative. Some embrace the term and engage deeply with various ideas and practices, and a few respondents note that they are providers of spiritual guidance, coaching, therapy/ therapies and/or products of some kind. A higher number (46 respondents) self-define as pretty regularly involved with alternative practices.

However, a little over half of the respondents are ambivalent or negative to the idea of being categorized as alternative practitioners. Some just say they are not involved, while others firmly state that they do not see their own practices as alternative at all or question what the alternative label means in various contexts. The comments in particular point to how individualized respondents' attitudes towards the category is. Many can probably recognize Chryssides' (2007) observations of alternative or New Age content, and a minority does not seem to mind labeling their activities and attitudes in this way. However, it seems that most yoga respondents hesitate against being categorized alongside psychics, healers, and providers of "crystals, incense, and alternative remedies" (ibid., 5-6).

8.8 “All my life I have searched for meaning.” Seekership in the yoga material

Many respondents see themselves as spiritual, but non-religious and non-alternative. Another aspect of respondents’ spirituality is connected to the notion of seekership. Some aspects of seekership were presented in the chapter on yoga conversion as social activity, particularly connected to traveling and meeting spiritual people. This sub-chapter presents responses from the YQ on an item that is more specifically geared towards subjective or inner life spirituality. Yoga will invariably be a large part of respondents’ answers, as the questionnaire targets them specifically.

The question about spiritual seekership is phrased like this: “Many people feel like they are seekers or that they are on a spiritual quest. If that applies to you, how old would you say you were when your seeking began? What prompted your seeking?” Out of 170 Nordic residency respondents, 126 answered the question and 45 skipped it. I take it as a given that these 45 do not see themselves as spiritual seekers. Neither do the 37 who have answered the item but emphasize that they are not seekers, or that this does not apply to them.

8.8.1 Not seeking anything

The 82 respondents who have either not answered the question at all or who have answered no, are about half of the total. These respondents, apart from writing “No” or “Not applicable,” “I am not a seeker” or “I do not feel that way” elaborate with statements such as *Not seeking anything. I am so pleased with my life as it is.*

The none-pattern appears here as well, where most of those who do not self-define as seekers either writes very little or do not respond to the item at all. However, some of the respondents who self-define as non-seekers are clear on having some interest or familiarity with religion, spirituality, or philosophy. Some of these comment with a joke or a half-joke, such as the one respondent who says *I've always found religion and philosophy interesting, but never as a spiritual quest towards some "answer to the life universe and everything" (pun intended).* Another is slightly more acerbic, stating that *my spiritual quest began with reading the Bible at the age of 17. It was so much bullshit there that after that I became an atheist.*

The numbers fall into the same pattern that is visible throughout this chapter: although a small majority of respondents self-define as spiritual of some sort, have tried low-intensity

alternative activities, and had low-intensity spiritual experiences, they are not particularly interested in the alternative – which includes a notion of seekership.

8.8.2 I do not consider myself a seeker, but ...

However, even among the respondents who self-define as non-seekers there is a level of curiosity present. Many of the respondents started wondering about life in their teens or twenties, and respondents in this category would perhaps have defined their younger selves as seekers.

I do not feel like I am a seeker... I know things now I started wondering or asking questions when I was about 13 / 14 years old ... may be younger.

At the moment I don't think this is the case very much, but when I first learned about meditation (at the age of 26) I've been looking into things, thinking there is more to life on the spiritual side than I previously had thought.

I might have been when I was younger, around the age of 12 I was quite interested in religion. I was mostly interested in how religious people view life. However, I was disappointed and realized religion is not my way of viewing life.

Some have concluded that there more to a spiritual life than they thought before, and others have decided that they have no personal interest. However, for the open-minded non-seekers, knowledge and curiosity is a core theme. The idea that there is “more to life” is prevalent, but respondents’ explanatory models are different. Some look more for the spiritual side, some compare and contrast spirituality and science, and some reduce the concept of seeking noting that the search for meaning is inherent to the human brain/ condition. Humans themselves (or the human consciousness) is the creator of meaning.

I do not consider myself on a path of seeking, but I have always been curious on spiritual views, and am still. I think my "seeking" is prompted by curiosity. I keep wondering whether there is more to the world than science.

All my life I have looked for meaning. I also know that my search for meaning is a trailing error of the amazing human brain. We look for meaning everywhere, but it is not a given that this meaning exists as anything other than our consciousness.¹¹³

I don't see myself as seeking. But in my mid-twenties I was reading about eastern philosophies - from about the same age I started practicing yoga. I never felt like joining anywhere though, but liked to 'shop around' for thoughts and ideas that I intuitively felt applied to me. Same thing now, I just don't read anymore.

Another respondent who does not self-define as a seeker explains a journey of self-discovery. She originally started with no knowledge or interest in anything spiritual, but who through challenges in life and experiences obtained through various practices have come to a place where everyday life contains something more.

I've never been a 'seeker of a spiritual quest' - I'd rather say my way into this has been in order to cope with life, everything that gets chucked in my path can somehow be handled through the work gone into this. I started out completely oblivious to anything spiritual, and certainly not interested in spirituality, but have had so many incredible things - life-changing over the years (visions/ epiphanies etc.) happening to me through meditation/ dance/ yoga/ other practices right from the start that I get it now - all the religious beliefs I used to roll my eyes at - I get where it all comes from.

The I do not consider myself a seeker, but... category is interesting. These respondents do not categorize themselves as seekers or on a spiritual quest, but it does not seem like they disagree with the meaning implied in the term. Many relate stories of previous searching and having questions in their youth that have now been answered. Respondents seem to sit comfortable in their atheist or (somewhat) spiritual positions. However, this section highlights how important an aspect of *learning* is (Hanegraaff 1996) even among people who do not define as part of a New Age or alternative milieu.

¹¹³ My translation, in Norwegian: *Hele livet søkt etter mening. Jeg vet også at min søken etter mening er en følgefeil av menneskets utrolige hjerne. Vi ser etter mening over alt, men det betyr ikke at denne meningen finnes som noe annet enn vår bevissthet.*

8.8.3 Spiritual seekers

One way of categorizing the respondents who *did* answer some form of “yes” on the seekership issue (N=89) is to look at age. I divided respondents into several main categories based on when they started seeking; child (under 13 years old), teenager (app. 13-18 years old), young adult (app. 18-30 years old), adult (app. 30 and above). I also included some sub-categories for those who gave reasons for their seeking. In this item, as in most of the open-ended questions, there is significant overlap between the categories as respondents generally do not have one single reason for their actions.

The most popular category (27 respondents) is those who reported that they started seeking as a child – or that they had always been seekers. Several respondents, such as this one who started seeking early, did so at a particular developmental stage of childhood where they were becoming aware of their individuality and personhood and therefore able to start wondering about the world and seeking answers. *I would say around 6 or 7 when I started seeing myself as a separate individual from my mother and facing my own mortality.* Another respondent says that *I was maybe 8-10 years old, and started thinking about life... in my youth I “forgot” about it for a while, but now I am very conscious of it.*¹¹⁴ A third says that *I was a child knowing there was something more to life that I could not see, but feel.* These unformed childhood experiences are interesting in that they tell something about a child’s internal life – at a point in the development where existential concerns become actualized.

There seems, however, to be a qualitative difference between those who write briefly about seeking experiences in childhood, and those who are clear that they have been seekers always. The latter respondents tend to write in a much more religiously inspired language. Some of them mention having a relation to God or the divine or being raised in a church/ religious environment. The question of socialization is actualized for some of the always seekers, who in their post hoc reports note (either explicitly or implicitly) that they have been shaped quite significantly by their family or milieu. The always seeker respondents have often had strong and meaningful spiritual experiences that have prompted their seeking.

¹¹⁴ My translation, in Norwegian: *Jeg var kanskje 8-10 år og begynte og tenkte på livet i ungdomstiden min "glemte" jeg det litt, nå er jeg veldig bevisst på det*

My seeking started as a child. I had experiences which cannot easily be understood inside a non-spiritual world view. I had an urge to understand God, and faith in God being a supreme force of love in many forms. I have also developed internally and was focused in a quite extreme way naturally, so I had also experiences with meditation. I later found that this search and focus could be helped by practices, some of which I stumbled across internally others helped by teachings and teachers. I have continued on this path as it makes sense to grow internally. I am maybe less religious but try more to develop and be open for a higher meaning or just making space in myself for connectedness with the universe or God if you like.

I have always "known" God, but also known that "he" is not the Christian god I was brought up to knowing. I have always known (since I was very little) that God is no judge, and that he loves everyone no matter what. I have also known for a long time (teenager) that all of us "are" God, and that God is not a "person" but more an energy. I feel that I have always seeked, since I was a really small child - but not always known what I was seeking. Still not sure...

I have been on this journey since I was born. I have always felt completely assured of the existence of something higher, a divine power, running through the fabric of all life. I was raised in the church, but also taught by my parents to question and explore, and not assume only one truth or path existed. My family members are all avid readers and take interest in science, cultural practices, arts and philosophy. My leaving the church and finding other ways to think about and honour the higher powers has been gradual, but inevitable. I believe many paths lead to the same divinity and that the journey never ends. I do not seek a meaning or an afterlife as much as explore, expand and learn how to be a better person in this existence.

The always seekers write elaborately about their experiences, and they show a marked preference for inclusive language with roots in Christianity. Although they speak of God, it is not necessarily a Christian personified God. The universe, energy, or a higher power is there for them to connect to. The respondents exhibit a form of religiosity/ spirituality with a high level of openness. In the same way as with the not a seeker, but... respondents above, learning and connecting with themselves and higher powers is a core concern.

Other respondents started seeking as teens or young adults. This is an age where independence and new experiences become important themes. These respondents differ from the always seeker respondents in several ways. The language is much less religious, and respondents emphasize themes like traveling and drug experimentation. The respondent

below, for example, sees his/ her seekership journey as a combination of childhood curiosity, drug experimentation as a teenager, and travel as a young adult.

In some way as a young child, looking into the sky and wonder what can there be more to this life. I was a thinking child and searching child believing something was watching over me. Then in my teenage years when trying drugs to see where the border between life and death and altered states of consciousness. But most clearly when 20 and left my home and country in the quest on what life is about.

Gilhus and Mikaelsson (2000) emphasize travel as a core metaphor for people with a seekership mentality. This metaphor is visible both here and in the yoga conversion chapters. However, travel tends to be complementary to other forms of seekership experience. For three other YQ respondents as well, their spiritual seeking involved experimentation with psychedelic drugs as teenagers and young adults. One respondent note that s/he started seeking at age 20. *Psychedelic experiences*. Another respondent writes that

I was always seeking. But a meeting with a Muslim on a travel at the age of 24 was a catalysator. Smoking dmt at age 25 was a huge catalysator.

A life-long seekership mentality seems to be present for most of these respondents as well. For this small group, however, psychedelic experiences have made continuing a spiritual quest an option. Psychedelics have been an important part of the counterculture since the 1960s. But, since the link between yoga respondents and the alternative is (relatively) tenuous it is not surprising that few respondents write about their psychedelic experiences. However, in the YQ I did not ask about psychedelic/ entheogen experiences directly, so it is possible that more of the respondents have been involved in (at least recreational) drug experimentation.

8.8.4 Seekership and trauma

Many respondents have started their seekership journeys as young adults and adults. In a pattern that mirrors that of yoga conversions, some form of emotional and/ or physical trauma is part of the seekership rationale and experience for many of the seekers. In their (often quite brief) notes, respondents write that their seeking is instigated or exacerbated by existential concerns. The death of a loved one or the birth of a child is among the most common of these.

Around the age of 28, when my father died. (My mother died when I was 6.)

Partly agree. I were [sic.]23 and started seeking after some different experiences I could not find a meaning to, among our two children dying when I was age 23 and 24.

Always been in touch with this. Started for real after giving birth to my first child. Three weeks later was helping out in a car accident, when a boy died. Experienced God in another way...

Seeking help and solace in the face of grief is not unusual, and it seems as though these respondents have turned towards some form of spirituality (or religion) as meaning making or trauma relieving activities. As the yoga conversion chapter also showed, many respondents involved themselves with yoga because of physical pain. A similar pattern is visible among the adulthood seekers, as respondents write things like *[started seeking at] ca 38 years old. Yoga and a serious accident. Another says s/he started seeking by being very sick from ME, burn-out syndrome. Perhaps years before. But as a conscious choice from age 34.*

However, when the topic is spiritual seekership, mental and psychological pain and existential anguish seems to be even more common. Some respondents have answered this item very briefly, with pregnant words such as *Depression, emptiness, or desperation*. One respondent writes *Physical and emotional pain*, another points to *childhood longing, existential crises, personal crises* as reasons for her seeking. Another, *the feeling of being separated from self-love*. The healing factor visible in yoga conversion is also a relevant here. For these respondents seekership and a spiritual quest become part of a journey towards healing, either physically or mentally.

My seeking began when I was 25-26 years old. I had a mental breakdown, the thoughts I had had about myself, my identity and the world around me, they collapsed. In other words, depression came to me, then I got into psychotherapy and through that process I was set on the path of healing. Getting involved in spiritual practices were on the path of healing.

A path of healing seems to be very important for several respondents who self-define as seekers, and who have experienced some form of mental and/ or physical trauma. Therapeutic and healing techniques and practices are a significant part of the spiritual/ New Age milieu, and respondents would have had a choice between any number of these in addition to yoga and/ or meditative practices.

8.8.5 Discussing seekership

In the material it seems that seeking and the idea of being on a spiritual quest comes in many different flavors. Responses fall on the entirety of the scale. Some have not answered this question at all – and others are adamant they are not seekers and that this does not apply to them. I can say little about them, other than pointing out once again that the nones are a significant portion of the material.

Other respondents do not see themselves as seekers, but they are curious when it comes to spiritual matters and the idea of “something more” to life. Several of these respondents have had significant spiritual experiences, but do not necessarily connect them with being a seeker. Of those who identify as seekers, some have done so always, or since childhood. A few respondents have also had psychedelic experiences that have prompted or increased their seeking. Those who seek healing or solace from trauma and pain are a relatively large group among the self-defined seekers, which points to the healing and/ or therapeutic function (both psychological and physical) of various practices that belong in a spiritual milieu. It seems that (particularly in the case of the always seeker and I am not a seeker, but ... categories) respondents have a certain interest in the mystic and esoteric. Some speak a religious language where God is present, but the majority either say little or express vaguer notions of spirituality.

That yoga respondents have an idea of spiritual seekership is predicated on the existence of a New Age/ occultural/ alternative spirituality milieu with certain key characteristics such as “[...] this-worldliness, self-spirituality, immanent divinity, dehierarchization, parascientific or science-fiction based beliefs, loose organizational structure, and ‘pluralism, relativism, probabilism, and pragmatism’” (Cusack 2010, 9). Most of these characteristics are at play in the yoga milieu as well.

One of the deep structures of the alternative spiritual subculture that unifies both seekers and maybe-not-seekers is what Lewis and Utaaker (2017) call “continual growth.” Respondents in the process of seeking look towards self-improvement and development. There is not necessarily an end goal in sight (although some respondents note they have stopped seeking and seem content with where they are). Rather, as respondent Sara says in her interview: the more she learns, the less she realizes she knows. The continual, personal growth experience is

present in the scholarly literature on seekership and alternative religion. Lewis (2014, in Lewis and Utaaker 2017, 245) notes that a “[...] significant metaphor for the active spiritual life is education, and one often hears participants in the alternative spiritual milieu talk about their “learning experiences.” Similarly, Partridge (1999) writes about spiritual progress and Kraft (2011) about evolution as core characteristics of the milieu.

Seekership as a concept has already appeared once in this dissertation, perhaps more implicitly, in the part of the yoga conversion chapter that deals with traveling. As such, Steven Sutcliffe’s (2013) terminology of adventure, search, and journey is familiar in a yoga context. Other images scholars use to describe seekership dynamics also gel with respondent experiences. Hanegraaff (1996) writes about a New Age pedagogy of growth (which includes relating to suffering, various conceptualizations of evil, and healing (see also Tøllefsen 2015). Bowman (1999) also speaks of healing as a core trope. Managing and mitigating suffering has been a theme previously in this thesis and is at the heart of several respondents’ reasoning behind spiritual seeking.

Lewis and Utaaker (2017) note that seekers are people who have a “[...] variety of other spiritual, divinatory, therapeutic, healing and alternative lifestyle interests that they simultaneously pursue – supplementary interests and practices that they nevertheless regard as being an integral part of their spiritual quest (Lewis and Utaaker 2017, 242). The individual quest is the focal point here, the inner longing for something (or the inner knowledge that something exists out there and can be found) translated into a willingness to try (and discard) a number of different ideas, practices, and therapies.

Belief, as such, is not required (Kraft 2011), what matters is if the group/ therapy/ practice/ teaching *works for you*. Additionally, Cusack (2010) notes, the definition of what works is realistic and elastic: if the spiritual seeker does not find what she is looking for in one place, she moves on to something else. Part of the seeker mentality is to demonstrate interest in new religions or novel ideas, and maybe to try one’s hand at several therapies, practices, or activities. However, as the respondent data reflects, full conversion is less prevalent. Respondents are with a few exceptions not very engaged in alternative interests and practices, although many have tried various techniques and (to some extent) found them helpful. Although respondents mostly are dedicated and long-time yoga practitioners, and although

some hold yoga as (part of) their spiritual path/ affiliation, very few are for example devotees of a guru, or part of a guru movement (other than allegiance to one's favored yoga teacher or yoga lineage).

This latter point highlights another core characteristic of seekership mentality that is prevalent in the yoga material (whether respondents self-define as seekers or not). While a good number of respondents *search*, few (or none) of them look for that which Beckford (2001) calls overarching or triumphalist structures. That is, they do not look for a religion that completely frames life and an attitude that one's religious creed is superior to all others. Rather, a common point of view in the yoga material (particularly among those who defined an attitude in favor of spirituality) is that there is no singular truth or absolute certainty. Lewis and Utaaker (2017, 245) calls this "epistemological individualism." What seems to characterize respondents (and which applies not only to those who self-define as seeker) is a form of cognitive humility (Gilhus & Mikaelsson 2000) that creates a climate of dialogue and openness. In the material there is also a clear unwillingness to be a (or speak as an) authority for anyone else than the self. While it is likely that respondents' basic moralities are similar (they are, after all, well-adjusted and productive members of society), the ideal of self-authority and individual truth is very strong. It is, however, significant that the ideal of individual truth does not seem to lead respondents towards conspiracy thinking or other more unsavory aspects of the New Age.

The high number of non-seekers (a little less than half of the respondents) and to some extent also the self-defined not-quite-seekers in the material implies that the idea of seekership or a spiritual quest is not at all a pre-requisite in the yoga milieu in the Nordic countries. However, the respondents who self-define as seekers tend to have been seekers since childhood and have a distinct religious or spiritual outlook on life. Some have started seeking to alleviate mental or physical trauma, as also is evident in the chapter on yoga conversion and health. For the respondents who define themselves as spiritual seekers it seems that their seeking to some extent has culminated in engagement with yoga and/ or Buddhist philosophy, *asana* practice, and meditation techniques. Seekership mentality and dialogue seems to be a common premise for contemporary culture and provides a context for respondents to operate within spirituality in different ways.

8.9 Summary and discussion

I began this chapter with pointing out that while some traditional, institutionalized religions demand a level of consonance or orthodoxy/ orthopraxy from adherents this is not the case within the wider, multifaceted yoga milieu. Yoga respondents practice very different forms of yoga, from meditative Buddhist-inspired techniques to extremely physical ashtanga vinyasa styles – and everything in between. Respondents’ spiritual connection to yoga vary as much as their chosen styles and each respondent have their own individual, idiosyncratic approach to what yoga means. For some, as I have noted in previous chapters, yoga is primarily a form of exercise. They choose not to add anything “more” to yoga or their yoga practice. However, most respondents interpret yoga as a mind-body practice, as part of their own spiritual path – or as all three categories simultaneously.

In this chapter, I have chosen to make a (somewhat) forced distinction between so-called alternative spirituality and yoga spirituality – although I agree with Newcombe (2013) in that it is not entirely correct to analyze yoga and esoteric/ magic influences as discrete phenomena. Given a definition of magic as actions that are ritualistic and that aim to change something (in this case the “internal consciousness of the operator” (Evans 2007, 17)), there is some overlap. De Michelis (2008) points out that since the time of Vivekananda the “religio-philosophical underpinnings” of modern yoga are composed of a syncretic mix of several traditions: Dharmic traditions, Abrahamic religions, modern empirical science, and modern esotericism (p. 23). The influence of Dharmic traditions is impossible to miss, seeing as the yoga scene is permeated with imagery, aesthetics, and philosophy from Indian tradition. However, as De Michelis (2008) also points out, there are distinct differences from pre-modern yoga systems who are “fully rooted in the conceptual universe” of Dharmic religions to contemporary, global forms of yoga that have kept similar ideas – but with different content and interpretation.

De Michelis’ (2008) prime example is reincarnation, where she writes that “[the] internal logic of Dharmic traditions implies that a *samsāric* mode of being is an inescapably limited state, which will thus be understood (though not – and this is important – in judgmental fashion) to be inherently reduced” (p. 23). As I have noted earlier in this dissertation, where notions of reincarnation are present it is generally a positive, life-affirming, and inherently western new age-oriented notion rather than the deeply negative and salvific concept from

Dharmic tradition. A similar development seems to be present in the material when respondents (particularly in interviews) use Sanskrit terminology and concepts such as *karma* and *citta*. Rather than being conceived as traditionally Dharmic, these terms are reinterpreted in a westernized, new age tradition. A similar trend is visible in respondents' Buddhist ideas and practices, where traditionalized Buddhism is close to invisible compared to a modern, western, scientific Buddhist incarnation. The westernization and de-religionification of eastern traditions are so common that it can be understood as (in Partridge's 2004 words) a yogic *lingua franca*.

MPY practitioners in general tend to be less explicitly spiritual and focus more on the physical (*asana*) practice, relaxation, and stress reduction. An example could be the ritualistic, systematic arrangement of *asanas* in some MPY styles, particularly Ashtanga vinyasa and Bikram yoga, but also (with more flexibility) in Iyengar and Hatha yoga. Further, Newcombe writes that "[m]any modern yoga practitioners are interested in effecting a change in their "internal consciousness." For some this might be articulated within a spiritual framework, while others would be more likely to describe the change of consciousness more simply as "relaxation" or a reduction in "stress." (2013, 73). In interviews I find that as a general tendency, respondents tend to be influenced by the style or brand of yoga they practice and how important philosophy/ spirituality is within that brand.

A couple of interviewees, however, do articulate the spiritual framework Newcombe (2013) refers to, as they belong to esoteric or sectarian brands where socially coded alternative ideas on metaphysics and the subtle body are accepted. Norman Sjoman (1999) describes a "symbolic-magic complex" that modern yoga practitioners use, and which seems to be an apt description of the more spiritually inclined respondents' ideas. However, for the average MPY respondent I might go as far as Heelas (2008) does in his description of holistic, life-affirming spirituality. Referring to Hanegraaff (1999) he writes that "[w]hether it be yoga in Chennai or yoga in San Francisco, aikido in Islamabad or aikido in Birkenhead, one will encounter the theme that what matters is delving within oneself to experience the primary source of the sacred, namely that which emanates from the 'meta-empirical' depths of life in the here-and-now" (Heelas 2008, 5).

While yoga spirituality/ philosophy is an interesting and important theme, in this chapter I have been more interested in so-called alternative or New Age practices, that is, ideas and beliefs that do not necessarily belong within a narrow yoga category. The Yoga Questionnaire

has several items designed to measure various aspects of alternative spirituality, ranging from ranging from self-definitions to beliefs, experiences, and consumption of media, activities, techniques, and therapies.

Respondents' spiritual interests are drawn from a variety of sources, and Buddhism is a significant force in the material. Buddhist ideas and ethics is major factor for at least two of the interview respondents. In addition, a couple of YQ respondents are deeply engaged in Buddhist practice (and initiated into some form of Buddhist lineage). The reader may balk at my inclusion of Buddhism in the spiritual and/ or alternative category. In one perspective this is correct, seeing as Buddhism in the material is not the same as culturally coded alternative/ new age practices such as crystal healing or precognition. On the other hand, Buddhist philosophy and practices are adjacent to both yoga and alternative spirituality – and the material shows that there is nothing stopping a respondent from aligning herself with (aspects of) all three.

For most respondents who align themselves with Buddhism it is not the sole identification. *Inspiration* is rather the key theme. Respondents' interest is mostly in particular western, secular forms of Buddhism focused on meditative practices, philosophy, and ethics. In this sense, Buddhism in the material could be analyzed as an aspect of *existential culture* (Lee 2015), in that it is anchored in ethical and existential matters. Buddhism tends to be understood as a positive, secular-spiritual opposition to Christianity, that offers respondents a way of living life better and more mindfully. Partridge (2004) phrases it succinctly, as he says that

[...] within occulture, it is not Buddhism *per se* that people are interested in, but rather the *principles* or *elements* of Buddhism – and as such 'Buddhism' becomes a fungible, detraditionalized concept. [Participants] are not particularly interested in becoming devout Buddhists, but rather want simply to acquaint themselves with elements of Buddhist belief and practice, which can then be merged with elements from other systems in the service of the self" (2004, 70).

In accordance, I argue that being inspired by religions, philosophies, or spiritual ideas in this case is fundamentally different from belief. The YQ contains some belief items, and as a general pattern, DIY spirituality is the new mainstream. Not many respondents believe in the traditional, Judeo-Christian image of God or an afterlife where the conscious soul survives in

a different realm. As Heelas (2008) phrases it, a “transcendent, theistic God” is almost out of the picture. Rather, the majority hold vaguer notions of the divine and the afterlife, some of which focus on energy and unity with the universe, reincarnation, or indicate that the divine may be something that resides inside each person.¹¹⁵ Compared to beliefs items from other studies, especially those cited in Frisk (2007) and Heelas (2008) the numbers I have found tally reasonably well. Both Partridge (2004) and Campbell (2007) also note change in beliefs in western societies, and Partridge suggests that spiritual beliefs and practices that were previously considered ‘unusual’ (socially coded as alternative) are gradually being immersed into the mainstream.

Reincarnation is a good example. In the yoga material about twenty percent of respondents have selected reincarnation as their favored alternative for what happens after death. Partridge (2004) presents data that indicate that between twenty percent to a quarter of Europeans and North Americans believe in some form of reincarnation, which is a number that is significantly higher than some decades earlier. This points to what Partridge (2004, 53) calls a de-exotification of previously fringe or obscure beliefs, and a generalized, mainstreamed re-enchantment process where spiritual beliefs and practices are “[...] becoming accepted as normal and incorporated into Western plausibility structures” (ibid.).

Nevertheless, yoga respondents are not particularly preoccupied with beliefs or anything too reminiscent of otherworldliness. Rather, they focus quite firmly on this-worldly concerns. This is a pattern that is consonant with what Heelas (2008) would call *spiritualities of life* – a focus on the here-and-now, and a focus on improving everyday life. While a process of de-exotification is undoubtedly ongoing, I think that in the Nordic context it is important to keep in mind that several beliefs, ideas, and practices are still socially coded as highly alternative. This becomes clear when looking at respondents’ engagement in respondents’ consumption of media, activities, techniques, and therapies. The New Age milieu has frequently been called a supermarket or smorgasbord, where participants can engage with or discard items as they please. For many reasons, it would not be entirely correct to place yoga respondents within a New Age category. Nevertheless, respondents consume and engage with several things – although not necessarily in a sustained fashion.

¹¹⁵ It is important to note the presence of nones here as well. Several respondents either did not know what to think or found the questions of belief in the divine or the afterlife irrelevant.

Media is also a factor in why some respondents became interested in yoga in the first place. 27 respondents have selected a form of media¹¹⁶ as their primary point of contact, and 24 as their secondary. Among the books, websites and research topics respondents engage with it is not surprising that yoga and Buddhist literature is the most common. Media is a crucial factor in things like yoga conversion and in garnering interest in spiritual themes. Occulture, as Partridge (2004/ 2005) calls it, suffuses popular media, and teaches consumers an “occultural lingua franca” of beliefs and interests. Respondents speak this language, and they learn especially from books. When it comes to themes that respondents have more than casually read or researched the most popular options are subjects like the New Age movement and spirituality in general, which are also legitimate academic fields of study. Websites, social media, or magazines (online and print) are less popular than books, and respondents are quite uninterested in pop cultural topics such as Bigfoot and aliens.

Apart from yoga and meditation, it varies whether other forms of techniques, therapies and activities are popular. Astrology is a good example of an activity that in Partridge’s (2004) words has become de-exotified and quite mainstream, and few beliefs or practices are as widespread in occulture as astrology. Astrology is also the only form of divination with a significant foothold in the yoga material. Many respondents have researched it, but as mentioned above, there is a difference between a passing interest and an incorporation into everyday life. Less than a third of respondents have found astrology to be a real help to them, and for the majority the idea of divination is largely irrelevant.

Relatively few respondents engage sustainedly in practices of therapies that are not yoga or meditation. Nevertheless, the alternative smorgasbord and a therapeutic ethos in both mainstream culture and in the yoga material (which includes a willingness to explore what works for the individual) makes a variety of therapy forms worth trying – at least just once. Acupressure, acupuncture, aromatherapy, chiropractic, and homeopathy are therapy forms that I would categorize as quite popular. In the Nordic context these are not socially coded as particularly alternative, are de-exotified, and incorporated in the mainstream.

The de-exotification and mainstreaming of a certain type of beliefs and practices highlights an important finding in the yoga material. While a small minority engages in what is socially coded as unusual or obscure practices (such as rebirthing and astral travel), have had life-

¹¹⁶ Website, book, public event, flyer/ poster, magazine/ newspaper, TV, or movie

changing, high-intensity, prophetic experiences that are socially coded as highly alternative, and self-report as being deeply involved in alternative spirituality/ healing practices, the majority pattern in the YQ is that lighter, low-intensity beliefs, activities, and experiences that are not socially coded as deviant or particularly alternative are the most popular.

Another important finding is that not all respondents hold positive attitudes to the alternative term. Respondents may agree with Chryssides' (2007) common-sense observational analysis of the contents of the New Age milieu. However, for many it does not sit easy that their own practices (whether it is yoga, meditation, Buddhism, or other techniques and therapies) should be socially coded as alternative or connoted with the New Age. Many respondents state they are not involved in alternative spirituality at all, which is reflected in items on beliefs, consumption, practices, and experiences. For a portion of the respondents, yoga (as fitness and exercise) is the only practice they engage in.

In the material, an entire landscape of religious positions can be found. A small minority of respondents are religious. About half of the respondents are nones, and a few of them are atheists who reject all forms of religion. However, some of the nones also self-define as spiritual, which highlights that religion and spirituality are different categories. Another finding is that spirituality and the alternative is not the same thing. Many respondents who self-define as spiritual in some way can be loosely categorized as *spiritual-but-not-alternative*. Even though over half of the YQ respondents self-define as spiritual, many rejects being labeled alternative. They are willing and able to criticize and debate the terminology and my pre-conceived notions and attempts at categorization.

A similar pattern is visible in another YQ item on seekership, which in a sense is at the core of modern subjective or inner-life spirituality (Heelas 2008). Seekership (Sutcliffe 2000, 2017), briefly sketched as an eclectic pick-and-mix of beliefs and activities, permeates the occultural *lingua franca* (Partridge 2004). (Spiritual) seekers look for something that is significant and meaningful for them. In the yoga context, some respondents have found their way with yoga and meditative practices, and others are on an ongoing spiritual path. A significant portion (about half) of respondents are not receptive to the idea of seekership at all.

Another category is those I have categorized as *not a seeker, but ...* They are interested and curious about a variety of topics, but for some reason they choose not to define themselves as seekers. Some of these respondents prefer not to be "put in boxes" and other have negative

attitudes towards the alternative. As soon as something is socially coded as alternative or New Age-y, they do not want to be associated.

The third category in the material are those who self-define as spiritual seekers. Among these I find several sub-categories. Some respondents note that they have been seekers always. What is particularly interesting about this group is that they use a religious language in their comments and are prone to speaking about God and the divine. They also report having had strong and meaningful religious experiences. Other respondents note having been seekers since they were children. Most seem to remember this time fondly, and to have taken some of that child-like curiosity with them into adult life. For the respondents who have started seeking as a young adult or adult, drug experimentation is a factor for a small minority. However, for most of respondents who are seekers, adult-onset trauma (in the form of loss or sickness) is an important factor in their decision to start seeking.

For those who self-define as seekers, Sutcliffe and Bowman (2000) highlight that

[...] a particular 'spiritual path' might just as easily take in bodywork and psychotherapy as, say, more fully-blown denominational rituals, serially or even concurrently. The determinant factors in each case stem from the interplay between the personal tastes and inclinations of individuals, 'softer' cultural trends, and 'harder' socioeconomic forces. Precisely because of its adaptation to this vortex of influences, spirituality represents not only a pragmatic, but a strategically powerful, resource for mobile individuals in the modern world (2000, 10).

In previous chapters, the interplay between individual taste, trends, and socio-economy has become visible – particularly in the context of traveling. Physical travel is a very concrete expression of seekership mentality, as the outer journey reflects and enhances the inner journey. The strategic and pragmatic aspects of seekership is most visible among the respondents who react to and mitigate traumatic experience.

The interplay between seeking and “host environment” is foundational, as Campbell (1972) points out. Sutcliffe (2017) elaborates on this point. More than the cause, seeking is an *effect* of structural conditions that produce certain dispositions in the individual. That means seekership can be thought of in a Bourdieuan sense as *habitus*, “[...] a particular disposition which in due course becomes naturalised and instinctive as the ‘obvious’ thing to think or do”

(Sutcliffe 2017, 2).¹¹⁷ The seekership habitus is perhaps most visible among the respondents who have been seekers always, and those who do not necessarily self-define as seekers as adults but have searched for meaning since they were children.

Seekership mentality or *habitus* is present in more respondents than those who self-define as seekers. Not only is western culture pre-occupied with the new, but traditional religious institutions have (to some extent) ceased to function. Answers to one's problems and questions must be found elsewhere. Dawson (2003, 120) notes that seekership precedes many conversions, and that people "[...] inclined to be interested in even the possibility of joining an NRM have been reading related religious and philosophical literature and giving some serious thought to the so-called 'big questions' (e.g. What is the meaning of life? Is there a God? Is there life after death?)". This is quite typical for the yoga respondents as well. While not all have incorporated a religious problem-solving perspective there is still a significant portion who in some way re-enchant their everyday life through activities, practices, or experiences.

Lois Lee (2015) notes that the concept of spirituality is often "[...] only made meaningful by being differentiated from religion, as in 'spiritual but not religious' survey categories, or the idea of 'alternative religion' as parallel to 'traditional religion'" (Lee 2015, 26). This is very much the case also in the yoga material. While only a small minority self-define as religious, the label spiritual is much less problematic. Further, Lee notes that alternative or new age-oriented groups and individuals tend to describe themselves in contradistinction to religion. This is the case in the yoga material as well: spiritual respondents "[...] frequently see themselves as less bounded and less dogmatic than religious cultures, and, in view of this, reject the label 'religion'." (Lee 2015, 36). Religion is (at its worst) dogmatic and divisive, and spirituality is subjective, personal, and inclusive.

¹¹⁷ The open-access, peer-reviewed version of this chapter I refer to does not have the same pagination as the print version. Pagination for the print version is 33-46.

9 Nordic yoga practitioners, a summarizing discussion

You are just supposed to go through all these experiences you can have as a human. They are so different; you just must experience them. From that point of view, it is so easy. But it is hard to go through. [...] It is change, there are these little check-in points that come without notice. And I can feel it is the yoga, that is for sure. Keep up, keep up. That is what we are constantly told. Keep up, keep up and you will be kept up. You strengthen yourself and hold on. (Sara, interview respondent)

9.1 Overview and key findings

In this overview I present some key findings in my study, and briefly discuss overarching theoretical themes that I have not touched (much) upon in the thesis and that are relevant for further research. I attempt to connect the findings of the yoga project more closely to the Nordic culture and context, and to research on new religiosity/ spirituality in this area.

9.1.1 Yoga as a female-dominated activity

The yoga respondents are both similar and different. Most respondents are female and middle class, and where I in the dissertation have touched only briefly on yoga as a gendered activity, in the section below I point to a partial explanation of why yoga is a female-dominated activity in the Nordic countries and globally, and how yoga and gender is an interesting route for further research.

In the historical overview of yoga, I traced some continuity back to the Indian Middle Ages and to certain key texts that describes yoga postures. The historic yogi was in many ways a religious specialist. Through the centuries he (for it was often he) has been both venerated and reviled (White 2009). However, in the contemporary world there is vast difference between the wandering yogis and ascetics in the Indian tradition, and globally popular Modern Postural Yoga (MPY). I described how modern *asana* yoga came into being in the intersection between Indian nationalist aspirations and western gymnastics and lean on Singleton (2010) in stating that the primary goal of postural yoga was to create a non-effeminate, masculine Indian body in (subversive) challenge of the colonial powers. What is interesting is that not many decades later the colonizers, many with esoteric and spiritual interests, came to adopt yoga and transform it to a practice that fit western aspirations for fitness, health, and spirituality.

The historical process of postural yoga's popularization in the west can partially explain why it is such a female-dominated activity. Through the story of Indra Devi (*nee* Eugenia Peterson) (Goldberg 2015), I showed how yoga went from being (as Jain 2015 aptly traces) part of an esoteric counterculture to an integral part of pop culture, popularized as a health- and beauty enhancing activity fit for women. Indra Devi was a student of Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, whom can be termed the father of modern yoga – teacher as he was to notable figures such as BKS Iyengar and K Pattabhi Jois. Devi never had the educational impact of Iyengar and Jois, who went on to found two of the most influential brands of modern yoga. However, with her relative fame (and illustrious friends) Devi helped shift the emphasis of yoga from masculine body building to feminine health and beauty. She engaged in an emerging mid-century new age culture that connected health and “salvation” in the form of this-worldly success and well-being. Ever since, a connection to beauty, health, and wellness has been at the core of modern postural yoga (Newcombe 2020).

In the yoga material I find that inspiration from friends and family is one of the major reasons respondents start a yoga practice. An easy explanation of the continued female dominance can be that women recruit other women (friends, sisters, daughters). Without visible role models it is more difficult for men to engage in female-connoted activities. I have briefly touched upon the gender imbalance in yoga in previous chapters and compared it to gender roles in traditional and new religion/ spirituality. Here I make the comparison to modern new religiosity more explicit. Most people who practice modern postural yoga are now women, a pattern that is visible in this dissertation as well. In my material approximately 70 percent of respondents are female. Bjerrum and Pilgaard (2014) note that up to 90 percent of Danish yoga practitioners are women. Steen Haugen's (2016) sample also comprise of 90 percent women. In several studies on the New Age/ spirituality / New Religious Movements, both in the Nordic area and beyond, a similar gender ratio like in the yoga milieu is found (see, for example, Frisk 2000, Ahlin 2007, Kalvig 2013, Tøllefsen 2012; 2016, Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013, 2015). Frisk and Åkerbäck (2015) find that 80 percent of the alternative producers in Dalarna, Sweden are women.

Traditional, institutionalized religion connotes traditional gender roles. Yoga respondents are critical to nationalistic, divisive aspects of Christianity, which also indicates a critical attitude to its gender hierarchies and socially accepted gendered behaviors and feelings. In comparison, yoga respondents (mostly) have positive attitudes towards new religions and spiritualities where gender roles are more modern and relatable. Non-official religion (as

Meredith McGuire 2008 terms it) has both historically and contemporarily offered women roles that have not been available in traditional religion, both as leaders and members. These female-oriented movements and milieus have generally focused on health and healing, emotional problems, and relations (both between people and between people and the sacred). McGuire (2008, 154-155) notes that the relational social role that often has been ascribed to women (socializing, helping, caring, healing) is reiterated in non-official religion. However, as Frisk and Åkerbäck (2015) highlights, even though the participants in their study continue “[...] the traditional cultural role of women, including the traditional female healing culture, at the same time it offers women possibilities for a more powerful religious identity” (p. 49). Löwendahl (2002, 78) writes that the high ratio of females within New Age can be related to a positive valuation of traditional femininity, where intuition and emotions are important aspects of spiritual seekership. She also highlights that the relational, caring social role becomes almost normative, and framed in opposition to masculinity-connoted values such as logic and rationality.

To some extent this analysis works in a yoga context, because “soft power” is valued for both practitioners and teachers. Among other things, yoga functions in the (relatively) gender equal Nordic countries because it on the one hand reaffirms a caring and relational (female) role that is socially approved. On the other hand, yoga offers limitless possibility for self-development beyond traditional roles, but at the same time within a framework that values female-connoted attitudes such as feelings and intuitions (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2015, Löwendahl 2002). That yoga as an activity (or profession) offers a balance between relational and individual values is part of its success. For the predominately female participants, but also for the male, yoga is part of an identity-building process that is fundamentally positive.

Nevertheless, Nordic yoga respondents are (in the few cases where I explicitly have thematized gender, primarily in interviews) loath to (fully) “naturalize” gender roles or traits. Rather, they seem aware that gender is socially as well as biologically constituted. An interesting finding is that yoga respondents are not particularly preoccupied with gender. Because the Nordic countries are among the most gender equal societies in the world, there is not a strong incentive for respondents to thematize or problematize gender in relation to their yoga practice. However, gender is more often implicitly thematized in how the yoga milieu is centered on the body. “Besides its focus on relationships and the self, popular religiosity brings with it a strong focus on the body as a place of spirituality and healing” (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2015, 50). More research on aspects of gender within a Nordic yoga context would

be useful. While it is easy to point out gender differences or imbalances, a thorough and critical reveal of *how and why* this imbalance occurs and how yoga practitioners thematize or problematize gender in relation to their yoga practice, would make for an interesting project.

9.1.2 Yoga as a health-seeking activity: socio-economic factors and public health

Yoga as a health-seeking activity is a theme I have explored in depth in this dissertation. In this sub-chapter I point out how socio-economic factors determine health, and how education is the most important factor. There is little doubt that the yoga *habitus* is also a middle – and upper-class *habitus*. I point out that yoga and meditation (to some extent) can be effective as a individual health intervention and in public health efforts (as physical activity and group socialization). However, while health can be seen as the positive side of yoga, the nexus of health, looks, self-perfection, and consumption can also become a myopic. How yoga practice is influenced by the respondents’ socio-economic privilege and how yoga easily can be co-opted into (or is an intrinsic part of) a modern capitalist consumer logic, warrants more research.

Respondents in this project are mostly very well educated, left-leaning, liberal, and green. Many of the respondents work as yoga teachers, and among those who do not, some plan to teach in the future. Other than (or in addition to) teaching yoga, respondents hold a variety of jobs. The common factor is that for respondents, unlike their parents’ generation, traditional working-class jobs (“unskilled” labor) has disappeared. Respondent demographics point to a class difference in yoga practice in the Nordic countries (or, at least, in the Yoga Questionnaire) where the respondents I have found are those who have time and resources to engage in yoga (either as a profession or as a leisure activity). What little I know about respondents’ travel – and consumption patterns also points to a certain middle-class *habitus*. One of the most telling factors, however, is a connection between respondents’ social class and their attitudes and relations to health.

Respondents engaging with yoga as a health-seeking activity is interrelated with socio-economic factors. The Norwegian Institute of Public Health¹¹⁸ highlights that there is substantial social inequality in health, and education levels is the most significant factor. Citizens with high education (both men and women) have 5-6 years higher life expectancy

¹¹⁸ <https://www.fhi.no/en/op/hin/groups/social-inequalities/> (accessed 19.07.21)

than those with the lowest education. Low social status and income directly increases the risk of contracting almost all diseases, injuries, and disorders.¹¹⁹ Social inequality in health also shows in lifestyle choices, such as diet, alcohol use, smoking, and physical activity.

Physical activity, in this context in the form of yoga, is therefore a salient theme for further research. A useful question is if, and how, yoga can play a role in public health and holistic health interventions (as physical activity and/or as CAM). Biomedical research shows only low to moderate results, and at best yoga and meditation has effect as complementary therapy. However, qualitative research can highlight an individual and experiential perspective on health as something more than absence of illness: there is a social aspect to yoga (as a health-seeking activity).

An interesting finding in this dissertation is that social aspects are crucial in the beginning of/ introduction to yoga practice but becomes less important as respondents becomes more experienced. However, for both nascent and experienced yoga practitioners, being attached to the social fabric of practicing at a center or in a group can make a difference.¹²⁰ In a health-seeking context more research on yoga as a complementary tool in for example trauma – and addiction recovery is needed. Norwegian non-profit organizations such as Gangster Yoga and Back in The Ring¹²¹ offer yoga to inmates and people who recover from addiction. The organizations are very clear that yoga is not a “quick fix” but rather a tool where participants learn physical and mental flexibility, gain insight into themselves, and are enabled to improve their situation. Attentiveness to the cessative functions of yoga (Sarbacker 2005 and 2008) and its perceived benefits for mental and physical health opens for interesting research from a qualitative perspective.

Sarbacker (2008) highlights a conceptual dual logic in yoga traditions, stretching into the contemporary milieu. In relation to health, the cessative aspect of the logic in yoga is prominent. Here, the “[...] removal of either physical or metaphysical illness figures quite

¹¹⁹ However, “[...] the reverse can be the case, that health problems can interfere with education and career, and consequently lead to a low socioeconomic position. Meanwhile, financial and work problems can increase the risk of health problems and disease” (<https://www.fhi.no/en/op/hin/groups/social-inequalities/>, accessed 19.07.21).

¹²⁰ Studies on all sorts of group activities from singing to horticulture show that inclusion in a group and (physical) activity in that group fosters well-being and decreases social isolation and exclusion (see for example Kwan et al. 2014, Fieldhouse 2003, Clift and Morrison 2011).

¹²¹ <https://www.backinthering.no/> (accessed 19.05.21)

prominently, given the fact that it offers a spectrum of possibilities that range from physiologically rooted problems (such as diabetes) to ultimate questions of teleology (such as suffering and liberation from it)” (Newcombe 2013, 74). This perspective on yoga explains why many respondents engage in the practice. However, an important difference I find in the yoga material is that the “removal” aspect is less prominent. Yoga is not perceived as a *cure* for sports injuries, chronic illnesses, or addiction. Rather, respondents use yoga to manage, mitigate, or respond to illness and suffering. Especially those with chronic diseases are fully aware that yoga cannot cure them, but the practice becomes an endeavor that allows them to live a more active and meaningful life.

In a public health perspective, “[l]ifestyle habits are primarily a result of the environment and living conditions. Factors such as economy, education, and living and working conditions may therefore affect health and the risk of disease, both in a positive and negative way”.¹²² However, attentiveness to yoga alone does not address the root issues of socio-economic and health inequalities in the Nordic countries. At best, without structural change, yoga can only become a psycho-somatic-spiritual band aid.

9.1.2.1 The lucent, commercial yoga body

Health, gender, and aesthetic issues are explicitly and implicitly communicated and socially coded in the yoga milieu and in media. Lars Jørn Langøien (2013) notes that his informants, who are Ashtanga practitioners, tend to associate the ‘yoga ideal’ (the strong, skinny, and perceived healthy body) with having both bodily and mental discipline, and along with that, spiritual progress. Holistic activities (yoga included), Liina Puustinen and Matti Rautaniemi (2015, 50) say, “[...] thus act to justify focusing on one’s own body, health, looks and experiences” – a justification that is further bolstered by how the ideal yoga body is presented in magazines and social media, and the commodification that to some extent constitutes the modern yoga scene.

This points to an interesting aspect of the yoga milieu that I have only briefly touched upon in this dissertation. Several authors, particularly Singleton (2010) and Jain (2015), write about the neo-liberal trappings of MPY where practitioners consciously or unconsciously engage

¹²² <https://www.fhi.no/en/op/hin/groups/social-inequalities/> (accessed 19.07.21)

with the logics of modern capitalism. Singleton, in his 2010 volume *Yoga Body, The Origins of Modern Postural Practice* (p. 174), perhaps says it best:

Today, the yoga body has become the centerpiece of a transnational tableau of personalized well-being and quotidian redemption, relentlessly embellished on the pages of glossy publications like *Yoga Journal*. The locus of yoga is no longer at the center of an invisible ground of being, hidden from the gaze of all but the elite initiate or the mystic: instead, the lucent skin of the yoga model becomes the ubiquitous signifier of *spiritual* possibility, the specular projection screen of characteristically modern and democratic religious aspirations. In the yoga body – sold back to a million consumer-practitioners as an irresistible commodity of the holistic, perfectible self – surface and anatomical structure promise ineffable depth and the dream of incarnate transcendence.

In this quote, Singleton summarizes a focal point and a critique of the globalized yoga scene for which I have not found room. However, that does not mean that these perspectives are absent in the material, or in other forums for discussion. Both locally and internationally many practitioners and teachers are deeply critical of how yoga is portrayed – and the commodification and commercialization of what some see as a sacred (or at least deeply meaningful) practice.

It is interesting to note this paradox in the yoga scene. Practices and therapies like yoga and meditation are on the one hand meaningful and helpful to practitioners. On the other hand, the global yoga scene (particularly visible in social media) is *also* deeply intertwined with consumption and the branding strategies of big corporations. As Christine Lavrence and Kristin Lozanski (2014, 1) note, brands like Manduka or Canadian megabrand lululemon profit greatly on “[...] branding practices [that] appropriate yogic practice into a consumerist model of discipline and self-care [...] linked with neoliberal hyperindividualism and broader self-help discourses that define health and wellness as a personal and moral achievement.” The strong, supple, and capable (female) body is, perhaps, a bigger motivator than what respondents are “allowed” to speak explicitly about. Yoga as fitness (and yoga as a

performance of health and morality) and its connections to contemporary cultural issues such as *image*¹²³ and modern consumer capitalism. is a topic that warrants more research.

Therese, one of the interviewees, calls the yoga portrayed in mass media a glossy “surface yoga,” thus indicating that there are possibilities of deeper engagement (see also Wiel 2020). Another of Hanegraaff’s (2007) New Age tenets revolve around developing alternatives to the “basic, accepted values of modern western society” (p. 38). Connected, Heelas (2008, 231) writes that the “[...] languages and experiences of spirituality, it might be said, serve as a vehicle for critical reflection, with humanistic ‘secular’ usage also entering the picture by affirming non-materialist experiences or values [...].” Many of the yoga respondents would agree that there are difficulties or challenges in the modern, western way of life – particularly when it comes to consumerism, inequality, or environmental issues.

However, rather than breaking away from mainstream society, as has often been done in New Age or NRM culture, yoga respondents operate without friction within the system – perhaps due to their high levels of education and conventional competence. On the one hand, yoga respondents influence society through voting, “mindful” consumerism, and attitudes to social issues, etc. On the other hand, respondents seem to express an alternative vision in terms of *interior techniques* such as yoga or meditation (to shift their own mind-body in a positive direction), or through ethics-oriented philosophies familiar from yogic and Buddhist thought. This latter point of a strong orientation towards ethical living, and yoga practice as a form of moral and spiritual compass, is an important aspect of the material. I have not found a place for this discussion in this dissertation – but consumption and ethical lifestyle in the yoga milieu, and the yoga practitioner as a moral actor, are salient themes for future research.

¹²³ In the yoga scene propagators and practitioners have since the inception of modern yoga been preoccupied with the *image*, and it can be argued that there is a thread of yoga imagery connecting early bodybuilders to supple bodies in practice manuals, and on to the contemporary tsunami of social media yoga “celebrities.”

9.1.3 Nordic secularization, individualism, and identity

Yoga practitioners on the crossroad between religion/ spirituality and secularization is a core theme in this dissertation. In this chapter I expand on some important themes, place the findings in a Nordic context, and point out some avenues for further research.

Christianity is a factor in Nordic cultures, and it has shaped how respondents look at and speak about religion. Respondents fall on a wide spectrum when it comes to positions on religion. The self-defined religious respondents are primarily liberal, and they talk about themselves as “open-minded” Christians who are not very engaged in church life, and who find yoga and other techniques/ therapies/ beliefs fully or partly compatible with their religious worldview.

Generally, respondents have been connected to organized religion (the state church) as children, in school or in the family. However, as adults they have moved away from organized, traditional religion and most can be categorized as *neither believing nor belonging*. Respondents are not necessarily negative to religion as such – but their own beliefs, practices, and engagement are deeply subjective.

9.1.3.1 Secularization and relativization of religion

Most respondents are therefore either secular (no religion)¹²⁴, spiritual, or both. To some extent respondents’ individual processes of secularization and disengagement mirror wider societal processes. The cultural foundation of the Nordic countries is one of deep-seated secularization along with social solidarity, which supports welfare societies. Social community and strong individualism are present at the same time (Iversen 2006). Furthermore, Iversen writes, “[...] the present cultural situation is characterised by individualism to the extent that the only choice you do not have is not to choose. It has become culturally illegitimate just to do as your family always used to do. Everybody has to be the responsible editor of his or her own CV” (Iversen 2006, 82-83). In the contemporary cultural landscape traditional, organized religion has stopped being a viable alternative for YQ respondents. Rather, yoga is just one of many activities individuals can choose from in their fashioning of self.

¹²⁴ A small portion of respondents are actively atheist and critical of organized religion. Apart from practicing yoga, they do not engage in religion – or spirituality-connoted activities, techniques, or therapies of any kind, and have had few to no spiritual or religious experiences.

Personal, individual responsibility for moral and religious/ spiritual issues (privatization of religion) is an important aspect of a Nordic ethos. According to Frisk and Åkerbäck (2015) they can partially be explained on a background of globalization. A self-reflective approach (Giddens 1991) towards religion is (partially) predicated on enmeshment in a global world where a society, culture, or religion is one of many and valued (relatively) equally.

In the yoga study I find traces of many of the same aspects as Frisk and Åkerbäck (2015) find in their study of popular religious milieus in the Swedish Dalarna region. Both YQ respondents and interviewees are quite explicit in saying that one religion is not necessarily truer than another, and that boundaries between religions are not particularly important. In the YQ I find very little of a so-called *particularistic* response to religion (2015, 164), which focuses on constructing, reviving, and maintaining identity (for example nationalistic identity). Rather, respondents are critical to what they perceive as divisive aspects of traditional religion (particularly Christianity). Yogis tend to embody a response to religion/ spirituality that focuses on “[...] global culture as such and that relativizes cultural, personal, and religious identities, the *universalistic* response” (ibid. 164-165).

However, in addition to relativization and universalistic notions in the material, I find a current of *devaluation* of religion. Many YQ respondents self-define as nones, so that Christianity (along with other religions) has relatively low credibility is not surprising. Universalistic and devaluing responses to religion exist side by side in the yoga material. Further research would perhaps reveal more on how these seemingly different attitudes can be incorporated in the same (yogic) worldview.

Frisk and Åkerbäck (2015, 164) further note not only devaluation of religion, but all forms of belief. This is apparent in their questionnaires as well as mine, with a high frequency of answers such as “don’t know,” “somewhat,” or “maybe.” YQ respondents are vague when it comes to traditional belief items such as deities and the afterlife, and much more engaged in items concerning practice and this-worldly involvement. This points to how the ideological dimension (in contemporary popular religiosity) has become

[...] less significant, whereas orientations to other aspects such as experience, feelings, and practice dominate. These aspects are also clear in popular religiosity as a whole. Examples discussed in earlier chapters were yoga and mindfulness, which are activities that can hold different kinds of cognitive understanding, but where the focus is on experience and corporeality. The world here and now, belonging to the domain of experience, is stressed at

the expense of existence after death, which has more of a place in the sphere of belief (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2015, 164).

Experience in the here and now is key not only to respondents' practice of yoga and mindfulness/ meditation, but also to their attitudes to subjective spirituality.

9.1.3.2 Subjective spirituality and new age thinking

Over half of the respondents (98 of 170) self-define within a spiritual framework of some sort (spiritual/ spiritual-but-not-religious/ spiritual-and-religious). The numbers are comparable to Hasselle-Newcombe's (2005) British Iyengar respondents. Few respondents grew up with or were socialized into spirituality as children, and interest in spirituality is in the material the provenance of adolescence and adulthood.

In the material, spirituality does not have the same connotations as religion. This has to do with spirituality being perceived as subjective, individual, and belonging to the "inner life" (Heelas 2008). When it comes to the contents of respondents' spirituality frameworks, the picture is one of relative diversity, where yoga spirituality/ philosophy and Buddhism are the most popular options.

Depending on the brand of yoga a respondent practices it varies how important spirituality (and esoteric conceptualizations of the yoga body) is. While the structure of the MPY practices session tends to be the same across the board (preparation, practice with instruction, relaxation) there are variations in style, place, and theoretical/ philosophical emphasis. It varies greatly how esoteric or metaphysical styles of yoga are, even within this small study, and among practitioners goals can be everything from immediate embodiment to long-term subtle or spiritual refinement. There are, however, some overarching similarities. De Michelis (2005) highlights that in addition to its "fitness and de-stressing applications" yoga offers an "[...] experiential access to the sacred, epitomized by the 'secular ritual' of the MPY practice session [wherein] the key agenda remains the eminently occultistic attempt to harmonize and connect tradition and modernity, revelation and rationality, the sacred and the profane" (De Michelis 2005, 250-251). More research on yoga as a secular ritual would be useful, particularly in a context of otherwise secularized Nordic societies.

Buddhism is more important to respondents than I had expected. In the material Buddhism is primarily a this-worldly, life-oriented philosophy connected to meditation practice. Most Buddhism-aligned respondents subscribe to a particular western interpretation that is secular, science-oriented, and complementary to the practice of modern physical yoga. More research

would be useful to evaluate complementarity and competition in MPY and Buddhist meditation practices. Also, increased knowledge on how practitioners indigenize and interiorize concepts, attitudes, and beliefs from yogic and Buddhist traditions would be useful. One example may be how respondents apply yogic or Buddhist concepts to their everyday lives and use these to position themselves as moral performers.¹²⁵ For future research it could also be worthwhile to investigate if and how Nordic yoga practitioners implicitly or explicitly connect yoga (and meditation practices) to place (localization) and to “Nordic values” such as outdoor life.

In the chapter on subjective spiritualities I also pay attention to so-called alternative beliefs, experiences, and practices/ techniques/ therapies that are not necessarily connected to yoga or meditation practice. Respondents’ conceptualizations of the divine and the afterlife vary considerably, and positions of uncertainty and boundary crossings are quite common. On spiritual experience, it becomes clear that every day, low-intensity, and low-commitment experiences are by far the most common, such as experiences of nature and oneness with the universe. However, a few respondents have had what I would call prophetic and out-of-body experiences. Items detailing consumption of practices, techniques, and therapies show a similar pattern. A few respondents engage deeply with alternative ideas and practices, and a couple are providers of “spiritual guidance, coaching, therapy/ therapies and/or products of some kind.” For the rest of the respondents, the activities that are not socially coded as particularly alternative (such as massage, acupuncture, or chiropractic) are quite popular, while therapies coded as highly alternative are conversely much less popular.

The YQ material holds an interesting paradox, and that is a difference in attitude towards two different categories: the spiritual and the alternative. In everyday parlance the terms tend to be conflated, but in the yoga material it is evident that they are not the same. Almost a hundred respondents self-define as spiritual, and 89 respondents confirm that they are a spiritual seeker of some sort. There is much more ambivalence towards the *alternative* term than the spiritual. 91 respondents self-report being minimally or casually involved in anything alternative. In the comments a many write that they are not involved at all and are either ambivalent or negative to being categorized as alternative. Respondents state that they do not see their own practices as alternative or questions what the idea of “the alternative” even means. *Spiritual-but-not-alternative* is a category that fits YQ respondents well, and the fact that there is ambivalence

¹²⁵ Tøllefsen forthcoming 2022

and outright skepticism towards what is socially coded as alternative is one of the more interesting findings in this project.

As a group and as individuals, yoga respondents balance their experiential, non-religious, and non-alternative spirituality between secularization and sacralization in a Nordic cultural context. In some ways the yoga respondents confirm Colin Campbell's (2002 [1972]) thesis that traditional, institutionalized religion loses its relevance in the modern world (secularization), but at the same time sacralization (or re-sacralization) in the forms of spiritual or mystical religion (worldviews) become significant. Therefore, as Partridge (2004) says, secularization and sacralization happen at the same time. Frisk and Åkerbäck (2015) describe this process as a "[...] shift from what is objectively revealed to subjective experience, from what is exclusive to what is inclusive and relative, and to a process where what once belonged to the religious field is being increasingly decoupled and reaching a wider public. This results in spiritual beliefs becoming more accessible and also to their being interpreted and used in completely secular ways" (2015, 168 referring to Partridge 2004, 42-50). Spirituality and mysticism have become enmeshed in popular culture (occulture, as Partridge 2004/2005 calls it). In this process it is relevant that yoga and meditation practices (along with a wide variety of techniques, practices, symbols, and beliefs) have become mainstream and accessible.

While these previously have been deeply connected to an Indian (Hindu/ Buddhist) context, they can now be practiced with "[...] few or no explicitly religious elements and without thought given to these, since the question of whether it is religion or not has lost its significance" (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2015, 169). Respondents in this project are divided when it comes to categorizing yoga as religious or alternative at all. Indeed, a sizable portion would hesitate to add anything spiritual to the practice. As Wiel (2020) notes, it is possible to practice yoga postures, meditation, or breathing techniques without any interest in spirituality. Engagement with or belief in eastern philosophy is not a prerequisite for practicing yoga and experiencing effect from the practice.

9.1.3.3 Modern postural yoga: a healing ritual of secular religion

Frisk and Åkerbäck (2015) note that healing elements pervaded their study of popular religion in Sweden, and I find the same in this yoga study. In the Swedish material the authors are careful to highlight how forms of popular religion and spirituality are influenced by secular trends such as psychology and therapy. This pattern is also evident in the yoga material. The

fact that everyone, based on his/ her preferences or attitudes can infuse modern postural yoga with the desired amount of health orientation, therapy, self-development, and/ or spirituality, is the key to the popularization of this holistic mind-body activity.

De Michelis (2008) is very clear that therapy, mind-body medicine, and well-being and fitness issues are all important contexts in which yoga is a “visible player.” There are two main foci in the medicalization discourse. On the one hand, attentiveness to biomedical research and the clinical, therapeutic applications of yoga is an important legitimizer of the practice. If modern yoga were portrayed as entirely unscientific, the foundation of the practice’s popularity in contemporary Nordic society would be severely weakened. On the other hand, yoga is understood as therapeutic in a more general sense. De Michelis (2008) calls this an existential sense, in that yoga becomes a “[...] “holistic” tool that teaches how to live a better life and cope with difficulties” (p. 25). The way it is presented in contemporary western culture, it is clear that “[...] physical yoga can be used for stress reduction, a tool for better health, and as an aid in increasing concentration so as to perform better at sports, studies, or work” (Wiel 2020, 12). Most of the respondents would not hesitate to agree with Wiel, and throughout the data material respondents refer to holistic [helhetlige] perspectives and describe yoga’s psycho-social-physical effects. While it varies from individual to individual which ideas, beliefs, or attitudes are included in the practice, Wiel (2020) notes that a basic understanding of yoga as connecting body and mind is shared across all physical yoga styles, whether they aim towards athleticism, anatomy, relaxation, or esoteric perspectives: “Through moving the body, one can move the mind. Through experiencing physical power and strength, one can become mentally stronger. Through dissolving physical tension one can open up for emotions” (p. 135).

Some aspects of New Age thinking such as a focus on holism, healing, and spiritual growth (personal development) are foundational also in the yoga milieu. There is widespread agreement that the human is an integral whole, which includes both the body and the psyche, and that can heal and improve in various ways. In some instances, as the material shows, this would add a spiritual element to the healing process – which could include things such as energy blockages or other modern yogic conceptualizations of the gross and subtle body. An important aspect of New Age thinking is learning and experience (Hanegraaff 1996) and allowing for positive life changes. The data for this dissertation is infused with a notion of learning, and implicitly or explicitly respondents (even though many are long-time

practitioners and/ or teachers) communicate that they are in the process of learning. For some, this is *asana* yoga, meditation, and different forms of philosophy related to their chosen yoga styles. For others it is learning to know themselves or figure out how to live with and mitigate “evil” in the form of chronic illness, a mental health issue, or addiction. Cultivating and maintaining the practice, and through that cultivating and maintaining a positive and meaningful attitude to life, seems to be the key.

What I have commented above approximates Sarbacker’s (2008) idea of the “cessative” aspect of yoga practice (that is, yoga in a health context). However, there is (as some respondents phrase it) something more to yoga than ‘only’ a somatic activity. Sarbacker (2008) calls this aspect of yoga “numinous.” This concept can be used to highlight magical thinking that goes beyond biomedical science. Authors like Newcombe (2013) write that

Despite the frequent appeals to medical science to elucidate the mechanisms of exactly how āsana practice might improve mental and physical wellbeing, many āsana practitioners would also affirm that there is something to the transformative experience of yoga practice that cannot be reduced to biomedical “scientific” mechanisms. If we understand “magic” as a practice that tries to effect change based on an individual’s will” (and “will” being taken to mean “higher will” related to an individual’s feeling of greater meaning and purpose to life) then there are a number of ways that the contemporary practice of yoga can be considered to be magical, even without the practitioners self-identifying their practice as such. (Newcombe 2013, 75).

The numinous aspect is visible in how many respondents talk about yoga in relation to spirituality and philosophy, even though it is articulated primarily within secular structures, and in a surrounding secular cultural landscape. Individualism is a core feature of the secular-spiritual site that is yoga, and person-centered subjective-life spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) with a focus on health is at the very center of yoga practitioners’ chosen approaches. As I have shown in this dissertation, there is not necessarily agreement towards what the sacred is and what it contains. However, a good pointer to what the sacred is in secular religion can be found in the *self*. Authors like Wiel (2020) touch upon something similar when describing yoga as an exploration of the self. Yoga is obviously something that the practitioner does, but at the same time, she says, “[...] yoga is not primarily about doing, but about being. The paradox of yoga is that yoga is both the end and the means, both activity and calm” (p. 10). Further research on Nordic yoga practitioners’ conceptualization of the self

in a secularized society, how the prevalence of magical thinking in (the ritual of) yoga practice, and how yoga can be further conceptualized as a healing ritual of secular religion (De Michelis 2005), could be worthwhile.

9.1.4 Conclusion

In this dissertation I have aimed to complement and expand the research on Modern Postural Yoga (MPY) in the Nordic area. The background for this dissertation was my interest in Nordic yoga practitioners, who they are and why they do what they do. The research design and the data material provide me with a multifaceted image. On the surface, it may seem that yoga practitioners in the Nordic countries is a homogenous group. However, inside the respondent group I find a multitude of attitudes, motivations, and worldviews. I have not been able to present every respondent's perspective on yoga or religion. But by focusing on practitioner demographics, conversion stories, and religious, non-religious, and spiritual belief and activities I have been able to find some patterns that tentatively can be applied to the wider yoga milieu.

In this dissertation I have explored who Nordic yoga practitioners are, why they have started (and continued) a yoga practice, and their attitudes and alignment to traditional religion, non-religion and subjective spiritualities. In the contemporary popular view, yoga is typically associated with *postural* yoga, “[...] a fitness regimen that engages the physical body, mostly from the neck down”. (Jain 2015, 36). However, yoga, as it emerges in my material, encompasses everything from sitting meditation to intensely physical *asana* practice. Respondents conceive of yoga as everything from a completely secular, exercise-oriented activity to an expression of intense, personal devotion. Modern postural yoga is generally understood as a mind-body practice that connects the mental and the physical (and perhaps spiritual) aspects of a person in a way other forms of exercise do not. This view connects to another common idea – that yoga is *good for you*. Popular culture presents yoga as a health-promoting activity which enables the individual to better withstand stress, and as an aid in a culturally mandated quest for self-development and self-improvement.

For the respondents in this project, the holistic, psycho-social-physical (mind-body) aims of yoga is in a sense the key. Dawson (2003) writes, in the context of NRMs that they “[...] provide a safe haven for social and psychological experimentation with various new ‘rites of passage’ in order to defuse the anomie generated by a pervasive sense of moral ambiguity in modern culture” (Dawson 2003, 125). There is no reason why this analysis could not be

applied to the practice of contemporary postural yoga as well – as a healing ritual of secular religion.

Jain (2015) summarizes the main goals of modern postural yoga as follows: “[A] non-dualist metaphysics concerned with the union of mind-body-spirit, a concern with enhancing the body as a part of self-development, an approach to healing and resolving suffering that privileges modern biomedical discourse, and the disciplining of desire for the sake of health and beauty, again defined according to modern conceptions” (p. 162-163). These aims coincide with those of the respondents to this project: female-majority, adult, well-educated Nordic yoga practitioners, for whom yoga is an important aspect of everyday life. Becoming involved in yoga gives respondents a yogic *habitus* and social capital (Bourdieu 1986) through becoming part of a (relatively) exclusive group. A (skilled) practitioner holds embodied cultural capital, which is actualized as social capital through the membership in a collective/ group (socio-cultural entity) of other practitioners.

Jain (2015) further notes that modern postural yoga has shifted from being counterculture to an integral part of mainstream culture. In the process, yoga has become commodified and commercialized, branded, and aestheticized. Some critics would argue that this is antithetical to the “essence” of yoga. However, because practitioners of contemporary popularized varieties of postural yoga shape the practice as a cultural product to shifting contexts, its location within late capitalism is inescapable. That, however, as Jain (2015) points out, does not mean that yoga is only a commodity. Postural yoga is specific to a social context, “[...] and just because that social context is consumer culture does not mean that they do not have idiosyncratic meanings and functions beyond utilitarian and hedonistic ones” (Jain 2015, 160).

In addition to better health and quality of life, modern postural yoga offers respondents a religion-like, ritualistic framework and an ethical orientation that fits remarkably well into contemporary culture. Frisk and Åkerbäck (2015, 178) perhaps summarize it best: “The focus is on personal experience, on corporeality and presence, on aesthetics and the creation of places and activities that are meaningful, individualistic, and social.” Yoga *does something* for practitioners. In this dissertation, I have attempted to shed some light on who the practitioners are and what these things may be.

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Appendix

Request for participation in the research project

”Bodies of Spiritual Practice? Perspectives on Modern Yoga in the West”

Background and mission

This project is a doctoral study at the Department for History and Religious Studies at UiT, The Arctic University of Norway. The project will primarily examine connections between modern postural (*asana*) yoga and spirituality among yoga practitioners in Norway and USA.

Is postural yoga just exercise, or is it a part of the practitioner’s spiritual path? The study also wishes to examine gender issues (among them demography), self-spirituality and *bricolage*, and spiritual consumption patterns among yoga practitioners.

What does study participation imply?

Participation in the study can imply:

- Face-to-face interviews (approximately an hour length)
- Email interviews
- Electronic questionnaire. The questionnaire will not gather and store directly identifiable personal data, or IP-addresses.

The interviews will include questions about practitioners’ motivations, experiences, religious self-definitions, etc. The interviewees will also be encouraged to talk about gender and mystical experiences, as well as concerns regarding health, healing, and trauma (if respondents finds this to be a comfortable topic).

The interviewer will be conscious of the potentially personal nature of some questions, and will inform the participant about this at the beginning of the interview. The interviewer will refrain from asking these questions if the respondent indicates that he/ she feels uncomfortable. The respondent can withdraw his/ her consent to participate at any time (see below).

The questionnaire includes questions that are very similar to those asked in the interviews, and is aimed at practitioners the interviewer cannot reach, or that lives in other parts of the world. By adding an online questionnaire component, the project affirms the global scope of yoga.

Questionnaire data will be registered online, and interviews will be recorded by audio and notation.

What happens to the information about you?

All personal information will be treated confidentially. Only the PhD-candidate and her supervisor will have access to the data. Possible personal information will be coded and stored separately, on a password-protected hard drive. The hard drive will be stored in a lockable cupboard to which only the PhD candidate has access.

If a participant partakes in email interviews, upon conclusion of the interview the PhD candidate will store the interviews on the password-protected hard drive, and permanently delete the conversation from her institutional email.

Regarding the online questionnaire, in the 'raw' data material respondents may, in some cases, be indirectly personally identifiable.

However, when the research is publicized, participants will NOT be recognizable.

The project will be concluded 1. June 2018. After the project has ended the data will be stored at NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data, or on secure servers at the University of Tromsø. The PhD candidate and supervisor will still have access to the data after the project has ended, and other researchers may be given access to the data sets after an application process. The data will be stored to 1. June 2023.

Voluntary participation

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can withdraw your participation at any time, without giving a reason. If you withdraw, all information about you will be anonymized.

If you wish to participate or have questions about the study, please contact

PhD-candidate: Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen, inga.bardsen.tollefsen@uit.no, (+47) 41219859/ (+1) 832-4542647

Supervisor: Professor James R. Lewis, james.lewis@uit.no, (+47) 77623226

The study is reported to NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data (<http://www.nsd.uib.no/nsd/english/index.html>).

Consent to study participation

I have received information about the study, and consent to participate in

Face-to-face interviews []

Email interview []

Online questionnaire []

(Signed by project participant, date)

The Yoga Questionnaire, information page (NSD project nr. 48456)

The Yoga Questionnaire

Dear Sir/Madam:

I am a PhD Candidate of comparative religions (religionsvitenskap) at the University of Tromsø in northern Norway.

I am conducting research on modern yoga (primarily postural (*asana*) yoga) and how yoga practice may or may not connect to (alternative) spiritualities. If you in some capacity practice yoga, I would appreciate your taking the time to complete the following questionnaire.

You might find a few of the questions odd. This is in part because the survey builds on studies of other spiritual milieus. Some items from prior questionnaires are included in this survey for the purpose of comparison. Yet other items are drawn from the General Social Survey and from the Baylor University Survey, which permit certain comparisons. This has resulted in the survey being somewhat long -- I deeply appreciate your taking the time to complete it.

If you are wondering about me, I have been studying the alternative scene (and particularly Hindu-derived spirituality) for a while. I wrote my MA thesis on the Art of Living Foundation, and I have since written several articles and chapters on Art of Living, Indian new religious movements in the West, gender, and the New Age. I am also a co-editor of several anthologies. I also have a page on academia.edu that you are welcome to look into.

Categories found in questionnaires like this one frequently do not do justice to the complexities of real life. For this reason, a number of open-ended items have been included that allow for more nuanced responses. Though I prefer ENGLISH, you can, alternately, answer OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS IN ANOTHER EUROPEAN LANGUAGE. You are also welcome to contact me directly at inga.bardsen.tollefsen@uit.no

If there are items you are uncomfortable answering, it is possible to skip questions.

The survey is designed in a particular way. Invariably, there will be questions that do not 'fit' you or your worldview. If so, you can make a note of this either in comments (where available), or in the very last item. I deeply appreciate all answers, also if you consider yourself not religious/ spiritual, agnostic, atheist, or otherwise.

The questionnaire will NOT gather and store directly identifiable personal data, and will NOT store your IP-address.

Informants may, in some cases, be indirectly identifiable in the 'raw' data material. However, informants will NOT be identifiable in publications/ the PhD thesis.

PLEASE NOTE: If you know that you are inclined to be really thorough (a trait I deeply appreciate), this questionnaire will likely to take some time to complete. Unfortunately, it is not possible to 'park' the questionnaire and return to it later. What you might want to do instead is to look through the questionnaire, note the questions you think will require lengthy responses, and then compose your responses in a word-processing program. After you have finished, reopen the questionnaire, and cut-and-paste responses to relevant questions.

Thanks for your help.

Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen
University of Tromsø
Tromsø, Norway

Preview of the survey:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/?sm=wBsE6M67ZCFGDCLKI2C4k5laGKEIHCZJRvYPOnrhrpc_3D

The Yoga Questionnaire

1. Country of Birth

2. Country of current residence

3. Which form(s) of yoga do you practice?

4. How long have you practiced?

- I have recently started a yoga practice
- Less than 2 years
- 2-5 years
- 5-10 years
- Over 10 years

Other (please specify)

5. Do you teach yoga? If so, which form(s), and how long have you been a teacher?

6. Do you see your yoga practice as part of your personal spiritual path, as a mind-body practice/ therapy, or "just" as physical exercise?

- Part of personal spiritual path
- Mind-body practice
- Physical exercise
- All of these
- None of these

Other (please specify)

7. Do you see yourself as involved in alternative spirituality - whatever that means to you?

- I might describe my involvement in alternative spirituality as being minimal or casual
- I am pretty regularly involved with alternative ideas and practices

- I am deeply involved with alternative ideas and practices
- I provide an alternative service or services -- in other words, I offer spiritual guidance, coaching, therapy/therapies and/or products of some kind.

8. Year of birth

9. Biological Sex

- Male
- Female

10. Do you have a different gender orientation than your biological sex?

11. Sexual Orientation

- Heterosexual
- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Other

12. Current Marital Status

- Single; Never Married
- Live with life partner
- Committed Relationship
- Married Legally
- Divorced
- Separated
- Widowed
- Divorced and Remarried
- Widowed and Remarried

13. Number of Children (please list 0 if you have none and include all your offspring whether minors or adults)

14. Highest Degree (Highest Level of Education Completed So Far)

- Doctoral/law degree
- Masters
- Bachelors (BA/BS)
- Technical Diploma
- One Year of College/University
- Two Years of College/University
- Three Years of College/University
- High School Diploma
- Less Than a High School Diploma

15. If you are currently a student which of the following are you attending?

- Advanced Degree (MA or PhD)
- Medical/Law School
- Seminary
- BA/BS at a University/College
- Technical Training
- High School/Pre-college
- Not Relevant (not currently a student)

16. Years of military service (please list 0 if you have not been or are not now in the military).

17. Occupation of your Primary Income-Earning Parent or Guardian when you were growing up (Drop-down menu: Student, Computer Science professional, Editor/ Writer, Homemaker, Teacher/ Professor, Artist, Graphic Artist/ Designer, Counselor/ Therapist/Psychologist, Medical doctor, Registered nurse, Other health professional, Administrator/ Manager, Administrative assistant/ Secretary, Sales personnel, Chef/ Cook, Self-employed/ Business owner, Librarian/ Archivist,

Accountant, Social worker, Engineer, Technician, Legislator or elected government official, Lawyer or other legal professional, Military, Statistician or other mathematics professional, Architect, Cashier teller, Travel attendant, Housekeeping or restaurant service worker, Personal care worker)

18. Your Current Primary Occupation (same menu as above)

19. In political matters, people talk of “the left” and “the right.” How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking?

- 1 Left**
- 2**
- 3**
- 4**
- 5**
- 6**
- 7**
- 8**
- 9**
- 10 Right**
- Don't know; Non-Political**

20. Political Participation

Never, Occasionally, Sometimes, Frequently, Very Frequently

Vote

Sign Petitions

Participate in special events (e.g., marches, rallies)

Participate in town meetings, hearings, forums and open meetings.

Serve as active spokesperson for causes of personal concern

Call, write, and/or email local authorities and/or national legislators

Give money to a political party either as membership fee or donation

21. Should the government cover:

Fully, Mostly, Partially, No

The expense of sending one's child to day care/pre-school?

The health care expenses of its citizens?

The higher education costs (tuition, books) of its citizens?

Financial support for unemployed citizens?

22. Social Activism

Yes, Sometimes, No

Would you consider yourself an environmentalist?

Do you regularly recycle?

Would you consider yourself a feminist?

Would you consider yourself pro gay rights?

Would you consider yourself pro animal rights?

23. What religion(s)/religious denomination(s) or spiritual paths were you raised in (religion of parents/guardian)? Please check all that are appropriate.

- None
- Hindu
- Buddhist
- Muslim
- Druze
- Sikh
- Jain
- Baha'i
- Chinese Traditional
- Jewish

- Catholic
- Orthodox (Eastern Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc.)
- State Church Lutheran
- Other Protestant (any Christian church that is not Catholic or Orthodox is Protestant)
- Pagan (Neopagan)
- Some Form of New Religiosity
- Other (Comment box)

24. Religions, spiritual paths and the like that you were involved in in the past. NB - this would be religion(s) you chose, NOT the religion(s) in which you were involved in as a result of your parents' religious choices. However, your answer could be the same as your parents/ guardian's religion.

25. Religions, spiritual paths, spiritual practices involved in, either now or recently.

26. Are you currently an initiated follower of a guru, or involved in a group led by a guru or other spiritual leader?

27. Many people feel like they are seekers or that they are on a spiritual quest. If that applies to you, how old would you say you were when your seeking began? What prompted your seeking?

28. Number of years since you became aware of -- and interested in -- yoga?

29. Number of years since you became aware of -- and interested in -- alternative perspectives/healing/spirituality?

30. How old were you when you first became interested in yoga?

31. How old were you when you first became interested in alternative perspectives/ healing/ spirituality?

32. How did you initially become involved with yoga? Specifically, what was your initial point of contact? (The next two items allow you to expand upon your answer to this question.)

- Friend
- Partner/Spouse
- Relative
- Co-Worker

- Professional Contact
- Student group
- Encounter with someone involved in alternative spirituality
- I was seeking healing/better health
- Website
- Book
- Magazine; Newspaper
- TV or Movie
- Flyer; Poster
- Public Event
- Spiritual Experience
- An Experience of Healing

33. Out of the same set of options, were any of the following a secondary factor in your initial involvement?

- No
- Friend
- Partner/Spouse
- Relative
- Co-Worker
- Professional Contact
- Student group
- Encounter with someone involved in alternative spirituality
- I was seeking healing/better health

- Website
- Book
- Magazine; Newspaper
- TV or Movie
- Flyer; Poster
- Public Event
- Spiritual Experience
- An Experience of Healing

34. Please describe how and why you became involved in yoga practice.

35. Please describe how and why you became involved in alternative perspectives/healing/spirituality.

36. Do you think that your involvement in yoga was at least part of what led you to become (more deeply) involved with alternative ideas and/or practices?

37. Which of the following best describes your belief?

- There is a personal god(dess)
- There is a guiding intelligence
- There is some sort of spirit or life force
- There is something there
- I don't really know what to think
- I don't think there is any sort of god(dess), spirit, life force or guiding intelligence
- None of these

38. If you had to pick from the following list, you would describe yourself as being:

- A spiritual person
- A religious person

- A spiritual but not religious person
- Both a spiritual and religious person
- Not a spiritual person
- Not a religious person
- An agnostic
- A convinced atheist
- Don't know

Other (please specify)

39. If you have a partner or spouse, how does s/he relate to your spiritual path?

- Not relevant (no mate/spouse)
- Completely shares your orientation
- Partly shares your orientation
- Does not share, but is sympathetic
- Does not share, but is tolerant/indifferent
- Does not share and is antagonistic
- Does not know

40. Please list any yoga teachers or other spiritual teachers who have been especially influential for you.

41. Please list any books that have been particularly influential for your spiritual development or understanding

42. Please list any Websites, Blogs, Discussion Lists or other Internet Groups that have been particularly influential for you. Do you continue to visit any of these on a regular basis?

43. Do you subscribe to -- or regularly read -- any Alternative magazines, either online or otherwise? If so, please identify.

44. Have you ever...

Never, Once or twice, Sometimes, Frequently (e.g.a few times a week), Every day

Visited a yoga center/ ashram

Attended a yoga retreat

Purchased special clothing specifically for doing yoga

Purchased a special yoga mat

45. Approximately how much money (in your local currency) do you spend on yoga-related activities and products in a year (retreats, classes, workshops, gear etc.)?

46. Which best describes your view of the Afterlife?

- No individual, personal afterlife of any kind
- Some part of the person survives and merges into the cosmos
- Reincarnation
- Conscious survival of the soul/self in some other realm
- Other (please specify)

47. How often have you had any of the following experiences? [1] Never in my life; [2] Once or twice; [3] Several times; [4] Often; [5] I cannot answer this question

Thought you were somewhere you had been before, but knew that it was impossible.

Felt as though you were in touch with someone when they were far away from you.

Seen events that happened at a great distance as they were happening.

Felt as though you were really in touch with someone who had died.

Felt as though you were very close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself.

Received prophecy, visions, or messages from the spirit world.

A pattern of events in your life that convinces you that they were part of a plan

Extra sensory perception of someone else's thoughts

An accurate precognition of future events

A sacred experience of nature

A near-death experience

48. Please indicate whether or not you have ever had any of the following experiences.

Yes, No

Had a dream that later came true.

I had a dream of spiritual significance.

I witnessed or experienced a miraculous, physical healing.

Had a 'psychic' intuition that turned out to be correct.

I felt called by God/Spirit to do something.

I heard the voice of God/Spirit speaking to me.

I changed profoundly as the result of a spiritual experience.

49. Have you ever had an experience where you felt that...

Yes, No

you were filled with the spirit?

you were one with the universe?

you left your body for a period of time?

you were in a state of spiritual/religious ecstasy?

50. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements. [1] Strongly Agree, [2] Agree, [3] Undecided, [4] Disagree, [5] Strongly Disagree

Ancient advanced civilizations, such as Atlantis, once existed.

Some alternative treatments are at least as effective as allopathic, modern medicine.

Some people have the ability to heal by means that are not scientifically proven

It is possible to influence the world through the mind alone.

It is possible to be clairvoyant

It is possible to communicate by means of telepathy

It is possible to communicate with the dead.

Dreams can sometimes foretell the future or reveal hidden truths.

Everyone has non-human guides (angels, spirits, power animals or the like)

Some UFOs are probably spaceships from other worlds.

Extraterrestrials intervened in human history in the distant past.

Stones and crystals can have magical powers

Wearing rings or other jewelry made out of certain specific stones or crystals can positively influence the wearer's health

Astrology impacts one's life and personality.

At least some astrologers, palm readers, fortune-tellers, and psychics can foresee and predict the future

We accumulate karma as a result of our thoughts and actions

Past actions, either in this lifetime or in a previous life, can have karmic effects on the present

We are reborn on Earth after we die (reincarnation)

The divine is within yourself

We are approaching an entirely new age that will radically change our view of science, spiritual knowledge, or humanity.

The biggest problem humanity faces is a lack of love and solidarity

"Modernity" -- in the specific sense of a purely scientific worldview, secularization, urbanization, etc. -- is a problem

All spiritual paths are of equal value

51. Have you ever read a book, consulted a Web site (more than casually), or researched the following topics?

- The prophecies of Nostradamus
- Astrology
- UFO sightings or abductions
- Mediums, fortune-tellers or psychics
- New Age movement in general
- Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster
- Ghosts, apparitions or haunted houses
- Paganism or Witchcraft

Rituals and Magic (not 'stage magic')

Conspiracies and 'conspiracy theories'

52. Which of the following have you found to really be of help to you?

Tarot

Astrology

Runes

Palmistry

Numerology

I-Ching

Psychic readings

None

53. Have you ever done any of the following?

Yes, No

Purchased a computerized horoscope reading

Visited an astrologer for a private consultation

Had a friend draw up a chart for free

Drawn up your own astrological chart

Read a teach-yourself-astrology book

Taken an astrology course in person or on-line

Given an astrology reading

Have you ever altered your behavior based on your horoscope, a rune reading, Tarot reading, or other form of divination?

54. Which of the following groups, activities or therapies have you tried?

Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Regularly, Frequently

Acupressure

Acupuncture
Alexander technique
Aromatherapy
Astral travel
Chiropractor
Cranio-sacral therapy
Flower essences therapy
Healing/ Spiritual healing
Herbalism
Homeopathy
Hypnotherapy
Kinesiology
Massage
Meditation group
Naturopathy
Nutritional therapy
Osteopathy
Polarity therapy
Psychotherapy
Qui Gong/ Chi Kung
Rebirthing
Reflexology
Reiki
Shiatsu
Tai Chi
Universal Peace dancing (Sufi dancing)

Yoga

55. Do you practice meditation or some other form of spiritual technique?

- Often
- Regularly
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Comment (optional)

56. Which of the statements below best summarizes your opinion of professional astrologers, psychics, palm readers, and other people who claim to foresee the future?

- At least some really have the power to foresee the future
- May believe they can tell the future, but are deluded or mentally ill
- Know they cannot tell the future and are simply lying
- I have no opinion or don't know

57. Have you ever read any of the following?

- The Celestine Prophecy by James Redfield
- The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown
- The Spiral Dance by Starhawk
- Drawing Down the Moon by Margot Adler
- Be Here Now by Baba Ram Dass
- Autobiography of a Yogi by Paramahansa Yogananda
- Any book by Deepak Chopra
- Any book by Louise Hay
- Any book by Wayne Dyer

- A Course in Miracles
- Any non-fiction book by L. Ron Hubbard (e.g., Dianetics)

58. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements. [1] Strongly Agree, [2] Agree, [3] Undecided, [4] Disagree, [5] Strongly Disagree

Evidence of extraterrestrials is being covered up

Many important secrets are being kept from the general public

There are agencies that keep extensive files on certain government critics, and that also keep such critics under constant observation

Certain diseases, drugs and new technologies have secretly been tried out on the general public (or on certain specific sub-populations)

A small, secretive group of people has a significant influence on the world economy

Knowledge of -- and/or progress toward -- a cure for cancer, AIDS, and other profitable diseases is deliberately being hindered by Big Pharma

New and better technologies are being suppressed by people whose businesses would be challenged by them

The mainstream media makes sure to report only certain information

59. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements. [1] Strongly Agree, [2] Agree, [3] Undecided, [4] Disagree, [5] Strongly Disagree

It would be good if all groups could be equal

Group equality should be our ideal

All groups should be given an equal chance in life

We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups

Increased social equality is beneficial to society

We would have fewer problems if we treated people more equally

We should strive to make incomes as equal as possible

No group should dominate in society

60. Do you buy organic foods?

- A. Only - I would not use commercial foods

- B. If available, I prefer them
- C. Only for some items
- D. Not an issue for me one way or another

61. Are you a vegetarian, vegan, or on a raw food diet?

- no
- vegetarian
- vegan
- raw foods
- I used to be, but not at present

62. Would you mind describing any particularly meaningful 'spiritual experiences' you have had?

63. If there is anything else you would like to add, please do so below, or email me directly at: inga.bardsen.tollefsen@uit.no

