

The Everyday Urban Spiritual: Placing Spiritual Practices in Context

Project Summary



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Purpose of the project

Large numbers of people in the UK participate regularly in some form of 'spiritual' practice, and particularly significant are those practices named as '**spiritualities of life**' or simply '**new spiritualities**' (e.g. yoga and meditation), which of course draw on 'very old' spiritualities in other parts of the world.

With only a few exceptions, there has been little research that asks what these new spiritualities mean to the individuals involved, for example with respect to their health and well-being or spiritual and religious beliefs.

Using **Brighton and Hove** as a case study, this project looked in detail at how ordinary people incorporate practices of **yoga** and **meditation** into their everyday lives. It considered the extent to which these practices are actually experienced and understood as spiritual and focussed on how, and to what extent, the practices impacted upon other aspects of a person's life and/or work.

Religion and Spirituality in the UK: The Bigger Picture

The religious landscape of contemporary Britain is being radically reshaped. Survey after survey reveal that we are becoming progressively less religious, if by religious we mean belief in, and adherence to, the tenets, instructions and organised forms of worship set within an institutional ('Churched') framework. Rather than pointing to an ever increasing secular society however, this decline is being accompanied by a very significant turn to *alternative* forms of religion, what authors are calling 'spiritualities of life'.

'life as religion'	'spiritualities of life'
Life lived according to external rules and expectations (family roles, employment status)	Life lived according to ones inner experience (feelings, emotions, capacities)
Higher/external authority	One's own authority
Transcendental otherworldly meaning to practice	Immanent worldly meaning to practice
Knowledge: scripture, dogma, rituals (directing one to a higher truth)	Practice: direct experience ('just do the yoga')

What did we do?

- We asked 28 people who practised yoga and/or meditation to keep a 'time-space' diary on the days that they practised. We wanted them to record their feelings during and after the practice; and reflect on the impact/s the practice had on their day.
- We interviewed 14 diarists, 20 yoga and meditation teachers and 6 centre managers/administrators.
- We observed and participated in a number of yoga and meditation classes; we recorded our observations and experiences in a research diary.



... we moved on to the 'body scan' meditation: a 40/45min led meditation in which we are guided through various body parts, slowly moving from our toes to our head and bringing awareness to sensations throughout. We got equipment ready to lie down: mats, blocks, blankets, cushions. I wasn't sure exactly what would be most comfortable but I knew a cushion of some kind under my knees would probably be a good thing

Extract from research diary

11.00-13.00	Meditation Session at centre 11.50 - 12.50	TriKarna Buddhist centre Titchborn St Brighton
13.00-15.00	Park	Old Pier Brighton



Yoga and meditation in Brighton and Hove: A brief overview

During the period of study we identified a number of commercial or charitable venues where yoga or meditation took place on a daily or weekly basis. These included designated studios or centres which offered yoga (for example, Brighton Natural Health Centre, Evolution, Revitalise, Anahata Health Clinic, Aloka, Unit 4, Natural Bodies, Bikram Yoga, Yoga Haven); Buddhist centres and other meditation centres which offered meditation drop ins and/or courses (for example, The Buddhist Centre, Bodhi Garden, Bodhisattva Kadhampa Meditation Centre, The Diamond Way Buddhist Centre, and the Transcendental Meditation Centre); gyms and health clubs (such as LA Fitness and David Lloyd) which included yoga as part of their class timetable; and an eclectic but highly significant group of venues which included community centres (e.g. Hanover Community Centre, Cornerstone Community Centre), dance studios, church halls, schools and colleges (e.g. Steiner School, BHASVIC), and shops/cafes (e.g. The Mad Hatter Café) which all rented rooms to yoga teachers and, to a far lesser extent, meditation teachers or groups.

While our division between yoga and meditation was intended to be merely a convenient basis for organising our findings, it became clear during the research that there was indeed a practical and spatial distinction to be made between (modern) postural yoga (such as Iyengar Yoga, Ashtanga Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Scaravelli Yoga, Bikram Yoga/Hot yoga), which may incorporate periods of meditation, and dedicated seated meditation classes. Postural yoga was predominant within the commercial sector, whereas seated meditation tended to occur within designated Buddhist centres, Buddhist groups, or within 'secular' therapeutic contexts (informed by Buddhist mindfulness practice). There were very few commercial centres which offered meditation alone and a key reason given for this was the availability of meditation through Buddhist centres and through portable and digital media.

"So much choice, there is a demand for it, it's just about every other person, every third person who I see now is doing some kind of yoga."

"I think also with meditation you can Google it on the internet and do it in your own home [...] with the privacy of your own home, with your mat on the floor."

A spiritual revolution in Brighton and Hove?

We cannot tell from this qualitatively based piece of research how many individuals in Brighton and Hove practice yoga or meditation, or the extent to which these practices are tied to designated spiritual paths (such as Buddhism or Vedism). What we discovered was that the religious or spiritual biographies of individuals who practice yoga or meditation are complex and the relationship with key religions multi-faceted: both students and teachers conceive their practice as either integral to, complementary with, or wholly separate from their chosen spiritual, religious or secular paths. A significant number fit into what authors have called the 'fuzzy faithful': that is they possess no great conviction in any specific (religious) belief-system, indeed in any particular God, but nonetheless retain a spiritual orientation as opposed to being straightforwardly secular. On the whole we found that the sector largely enables, if not encourages, spiritual questioning, ambiguity, and openness. This is a finding which complements the 'spiritualities of life' thesis above.

"I do meditation because it's helpful, I don't particularly see it as a spiritual thing, I see it as toilet training for my mind if you like, not... my spirituality's kind of separate to that sometimes"

"Yoga is something I do and my [Christian] belief is something else. So it doesn't... there's no crossover in that sense at all."

"Yeah there- there is that [spiritual] side to it [yoga] I think uh achieving a certain peace, achieving a certain relaxation and from that achieving a sense of gratitude towards something that is universally more intelligent than we are. That's what I can say generally about it..."

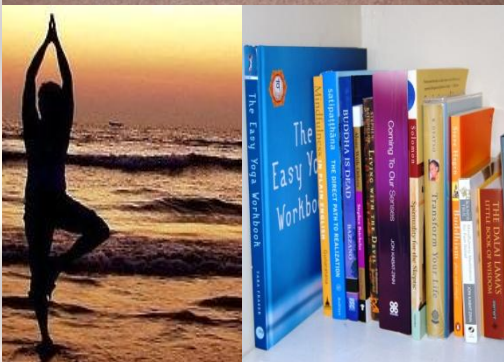
So, I mean I'm around people who are, you know, in Brighton so they are people who are 'spiritual', air quotes there, and a lot of it is just airy fairy talking crap and a lot of it is quite...it plays into the, you know, Westernisation of language and words and hearing the sound of your own voice I think; and actually to me what it means is just connecting to the world around us, to nature, you know, I think going for a walk in the park and going for a walk in the country is as much a spiritual experience as sitting round talking about Gaia".

"Mindfulness [meditation] is not just a practice; for me it is a way of living. Living with peace, love and happiness. Living in freedom – free from my own afflictions – fear, anxiety and sorrow. So that's how central it is to me"

The urban context

A lot of the academic research on 'new spiritualities' focuses on 'heightened' spiritual spaces, such as rural retreats, with the assumption that a rural setting facilitates processes of stillness, peace, and relaxation. While this may be the case, we found that for our participants the urban context was conducive, and often helpful, to their ongoing practice of yoga or meditation. It enabled a density of networks, friendships, and facilities to develop, and offered ample opportunities for individuals to discover new things. For some teachers and centre managers the urban context did bring challenges, however, with increased competitiveness and commercialisation surrounding yoga affecting its sustainability and authenticity over time (what some referred to as 'yoga wars').

While there are clearly a number of **formal** sites for participating in classes or sessions of yoga and meditation, we also uncovered numerous **informal** sites for practicing. These included the momentary transformation of home-spaces and the use of outdoor spaces when walking, swimming or simply 'being' with nature.



'Swimming in sea for me is like yoga/meditation. I find it really rejuvenating and an instant tonic. Today nice waves to play in. Feeling great after swim, but cold.'

"I currently practice in the top where I sleep which is like in an attic room, and there's just enough room for my mat and any equipment that I need, but it's not ideal for work against the walls like full-on balance and headstands; you can just about do a headstand but you know it's just not per-- it's not great but it's okay ((laughs))".

"I think it is also to do with having space to do that, um, so now we've had our loft converted it is a very quiet space and it does feel very, um... it's a lovely place to be, it's very quiet, it's very calm. And so when there are lots of people in the house it's actually a place I can go up and I can shut the door and that's quite nice. And I think having a place to go has made a big difference".

Yoga / meditation and everyday life

Formal and informal sites for yoga and meditation clearly interweave with, and impact upon, individuals' everyday lives. We found that impacts ranged from subtle adjustments in individual time-space routines; to immediate benefits in terms of decreased stress or increased productivity at work. For some dedicated practitioners, taking up yoga or meditation had resulted in major, largely positive, long-term changes in their life-styles or ways of life.

"It's like, kind of, basically it's changed my life, you know. I have a completely different life now to before I started this practice [of Ashtanga yoga]. Um, it's, I mean my whole, my whole kind of lifestyle, my whole schedule has changed because I go to bed at half past nine every day and get up at half past five every day"

Stillness in a fast paced world

As might be predicted, a desire for stillness, peace, calm or relaxation was a key motivation for practicing yoga or meditation. Carving out appropriate sites or times for the requisite 'slowness', 'stillness' and 'focus' was nonetheless far from easy. One reason given was simply the busyness of everyday life, but there were other far greater hindrances, which included: a lack of routine; lapses in motivation; and the difficulty of altering old (negative) mind/body habits. Conversely once these hindrances had been overcome, even if only for a short while, 'finding the time' to practice seemingly became easier. Awareness of negative habits extended into the practices themselves, with yoga and meditation teachers seeking to illuminate, either subtly or explicitly, habitual negative mind/body states in their classes.

Health and wellbeing

A key finding of this research is that many individuals, both teachers and students alike, take up yoga or meditation during a time of transition or crisis, particularly in relation to mental or physical health. Even for those who started the practice due to an initial curiosity, the health and wellbeing benefits became evident through practice. For some, yoga and meditation offered a niche where Western medicine had failed them or reached its limit. Some examples here include conditions such as chronic fatigue syndrome, arthritis, chronic stress or anxiety, irritable bowel syndrome, and back pain. All of our participants felt that yoga – even in its most energetic forms – was different from conventional exercise in terms of relaxation benefits; the non-goal orientated approach; and the

holistic or integrated approach to the mind/body. Nevertheless, some still felt that it was difficult to shake off drives to be competitive or personal concerns about body image and appearance.

"I first began Yoga (Hatha) whilst in my first year of 6th Form College in response to acute anxiety and panic attacks that I was experiencing at that time. Yoga helped with breath control, relaxation and feeling less dissociated and more grounded in my physical body".

"I feel really healthy, I feel really strong, I feel like my immune system is much better than it used to be. Um, and then, and there's all sorts of other ways that it's affected me, like my digestive system used to be quite bad and that's, it's been so much better since I started practising. Um and I sleep better, um my hair and nails grow quicker. I know that's really weird but it does happen".

"I mean I've got a GP down here who was very enthusiastic about me doing yoga, while I'm not sure that GP would've been as enthusiastic just 10, 15, 20 years ago, do you know what I mean? So I'm really pleased it's all come out".

"I used to be quite competitive and now it's more like whatever I do is okay, and it's about respecting where I am in that moment [...] whereas before I had to be as good as the teacher or better, or you know, it was a real kind of, I didn't see that yoga was not about being, perfecting each move. And now I kind of see it's about me being in union with my body".

"I tried it [yoga] and um (laughs), there's a very superficial reason for why I didn't continue with that and it's to do with me being over weight and the fact that I just realised that I couldn't follow the exercises as well as I would have liked to and I didn't feel comfortable being overweight"



Spiritual authority?

We found that students and teachers of both yoga and meditation display a critical or questioning attitude towards gurus and spiritual leaders. While some teachers and students were vigilant in respecting lineages, the immediate role of a 'teacher' was to be understood as a guide and a facilitator; with the added component of suspending judgement over a student's ability or progression.

"I think it's to do with the approach; kind of encouraging and attentive maybe. That's what's more important for me with a teacher. [...] just sort of individualising it and not just saying that everybody has to be able to do this but looking at your strengths and limitations and working with you." (yoga student)

"A good meditation teacher? Yes, that's difficult. Its...erm...I think if the meditation teacher can inspire me to get me to think more about a different life but without forcing it onto me." (meditation student)

"[A teachers role] is to facilitate [that's] the most important thing. It's not to push people into the perfect pose. It's to facilitate them on their journey to get there." (Yoga Teacher)

"I think that this is very, very important to me, to not feel there is someone above me who knows better [...] That is the main issue for me, not to feel intimidated." (meditation student)

"I mean in the class, I don't believe in...I don't like hierarchies. I don't believe in gurus and all that type of stuff. So um, you know, I think you earn your respect in the class by the ability to teach, and your ability to transmit your ideas, and to give people confidence, um, and to enable people to learn how to do things." (Yoga Teacher)

What might our findings mean for urban policy?

Our research discloses how much yoga and meditation are valued by practitioners as sources of physical and mental well-being, offering empirical evidence to confirm the appropriateness of moves to bring such practices more fully into alignment with national health strategies (for instance, by continuing to introduce 'mindfulness' into mental health therapies and broader terrains of counselling).

A further practical lesson, which ought to be more fully heeded by companies, politicians, even urban planners/designers, is that

efforts should be made to create dedicated times and spaces for yogic, meditative and related activities, as 'oases' of calm - but also energising and rejuvenation - within the maelstrom of busy urban daily routines. Arguably, there is a lesson here about how we should be recalibrating the pace, multi-facets and sensory overload of the contemporary urban realm, so as to allow time-space for 'new-spiritual practices' to breathe.

There also strong messages emerging from the research that the advocates/managers of formal religions, especially but not exclusively Christianity, should arguably be less dismissive about an assumed fickle 'pick and mix' approach to spirituality pursued by practitioners such as our participants. There is much that is genuine in the questing for alternatives to secular individualism or materialism. This signifies less a hollowing out of the UK's spiritual commitments, more their diversification, recombination, even hybridisation.



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Additionally, you can consult the project website at the URL below, which includes a range of materials and writings pertaining to this project, and also a forum where could post your own thoughts/experiences relating to the subject matter:

http://web.me.com/jennifer.simmonds/Everyday_Urban_Spiritual/Welcome.html

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