

Yoga an auxiliary tool in students' lives: creating and re-creating balance in mindful bodies

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Abstract: *Student mental health is a global public health issue. This study was carried out on the premise that yoga constitutes a low barrier health-promoting activity of relevance for students. Data was generated through individual interviews with five students, aged 20-27, participating in a 12-week yoga program. Informed by phenomenology and somaesthetics the findings show how practicing yoga involves learning and establishing new habits across several dimensions. The findings shed light on the broader significance of yoga as a self-care practice with the potential to promote young people's health, well-being and equilibrium in life.*

Keywords: *Students, Yoga, Phenomenology, Somaesthetics, Health*

Introduction and background

In this article we examine how university students in Norway attending a 12-week yoga¹ program (involving twice weekly sessions) experience performing yoga as part of their student life.

The article presents findings from a qualitative, interview-based study conducted within the framework of a larger Norwegian research project. The point of departure for the larger project is the view, supported by research, that a young person's transition to university coincides with a critical developmental stage: that of individuation, separation from family, development of new social connections, and increased autonomy and responsibility (Patton et al., 2016). Thus, the student years represent a critical period in life, one of rapid change and high levels of personal, financial, and social pressure (Duffy et al., 2019; Kessler et al., 2007). Brain development, accelerating in this period, is sensitive to risk, to which students are particularly exposed by virtue of their age (Chung & Hudziak, 2017). Most lifetime mental disorders have their onset before the age of 25 (Sæther, Sivertsen, & Bjerkeset, 2021), and university and college students have been found to be more vulnerable to such health problems than the general population (Nerdrum, Rustøen, & Rønnestad, 2006).

¹ While there are many definitions of what yoga is and many different yoga traditions, in this article yoga is defined as a practice that consists of physical positions (asanas) based on Ashtanga Vinyasa, breathing techniques (pranayama), meditation (dhyana) and yoga philosophy. Yoga provides training for taking control of body and mind (Elstad et al., 2020).

Distress levels among university students, already rising rapidly over the past decade, increased exponentially during the Covid-19 pandemic (Sivertsen, 2021, p. 38). Students' lived experience of the pandemic, like that of people in general, has included uncertainty, a sense of endangerment, fear, misery and grief (Stanley, Zanin, Avalos, Tracy, & Town, 2021). There is general agreement that adverse symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety, commonly referred to as distress (Viertiö et al., 2021), pose a threat to students' health (Auerbach et al., 2018), suggesting that students' health needs should be given a greater priority (Qin et al., 2021). Early intervention is seen as crucial if the adverse effects of distress, among them lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, and enhanced risk of suicide (Eisenberg, Speer, & Hunt, 2012), are to be avoided. Of significance in this context is a tendency for mental disorders emerging during early adulthood to remain untreated for long periods of time (Kessler et al., 2007). Such lack of treatment can contribute to the development of more complex disorders (Hawton, Saunders, & O'Connor, 2012; McGorry, Purcell, Goldstone, & Amminger, 2011; Sæther et al., 2021). Therefore, investing in the mental health of young people is likely to yield both short-term and long-term health-related and economic benefits (Patton et al., 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2012).

However, research has found that young people with depression and anxiety symptoms seldom (18-34 %) seek professional help (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010), even in countries where many mental health services are provided free of charge (Zachrisson, Rödje, & Mykletun, 2006). Young people are more likely to seek help from informal sources such as friends and family (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). Known barriers to help-seeking include fear of stigmatization, embarrassment, negative attitudes (including towards seeking professional help), difficulties recognizing symptoms, lack of emotional competence, and a preference for self-reliance (Eisenberg et al., 2012; Gulliver et al., 2010; Rickwood et al., 2005).

All of the above suggests that students in places of higher education require low-barrier activities that promote their mental health (Winzer, Lindberg, Guldbbrandsson, & Sidorchuk, 2018). One such activity is yoga, which has become increasingly popular over recent decades (Elstad et al., 2020). Although research on the impact of yoga remains limited, two studies have suggested that yoga may be an effective intervention to alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety (Elstad et al., 2020; Falsafi, 2016). This finding is in line with the results of one-to-one cognitive therapy and other mental health interventions among university students (Bailey, Hetrick, Rosenbaum, Purcell, & Parker, 2018; Cuijpers et al., 2016; de Vibe et al., 2017; Harrer et al., 2019; Winzer et al., 2018).

As part of a wider public health effort to improve student mental health, calls have been made for more research, including qualitative studies, into students' experiences of yoga (Hagen & Nayar, 2014; Jeitler et al., 2020; Taylor, Gibson, & Conley, 2019; Wang, Hagins, & Qidwai, 2017). While a number of studies have explored the experiences of yoga among pre-school, primary and secondary schoolchildren (Butzer et al., 2017; Conboy, Noggle, Frey, Kudesia, & Khalsa, 2013; Hagen & Nayar, 2014; Jeitler et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017), little is as yet known about how university students experience practicing yoga and how these experiences might be understood to relate to health, mental health and well-being.

Qualitative research in this area is particularly thin on the ground. One qualitative study, which sought to assess the impact on university students of an MBSR (Mindfulness-based stress reduction), drew its participants from a borderline clinical population whose members self-referred to the student counselling service (Hjeltnes, Binder, Moltu, & Dundas, 2015).

Another qualitative study highlighted yoga's positive effects on physical and mental health and well-being, but only in relation to adults (Taylor et al., 2019). Further research has explored the impact of yoga on a clinical population in primary healthcare, highlighting yoga's role in deepening participants' sense of identity and capacity for self-reflection (Anderzén-Carlsson, Persson Lundholm, Köhn, & Westerdahl, 2014). Other yoga-based studies have examined further important health-related aspects of practicing of yoga. These include an exploration of yoga as an aesthetic practice (Korpelainen, 2019), and research highlighting the intimacy of the yoga mat and its space in everyday life (Lemermeyer, 2017).

To our knowledge, however, there has as yet been no qualitative study on how students *without* a mental health diagnosis experience practicing yoga. To address this gap in the literature, our study seeks to examine young university students' lived experience of practicing yoga as part of their everyday student lives.

Methodology

The main inspiration for our study is phenomenology, a philosophy and method which focuses on how things (phenomena) appear and are experienced. As a method, phenomenology implies a way of seeing, a methodological guided way of seeing (Gallagher, 2012): in the case of our research, a way of understanding students' lived experiences of practicing yoga as part of their student lives and the significance these experiences may have for their health and well-being.

Theoretical framework

We are particularly inspired by the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962/ 2002), and his view that being a situated body-subject is what constitutes our total existence, so that the body is the site of all our experiences and, knowledge.

Another source of inspiration is somaesthetics, an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that seeks to integrate the theoretical, empirical, and practical disciplines related to bodily perception, performance, and presentation. The term, coined by Richard Shusterman in 1996, derives from the concept of soma as the living, feeling, sentient, purposive body, implying the essential union of body-mind (Shusterman, 2012, p. 188). Somaesthetics recognizes the cultivation of the body through the integration of the material, mental and spiritual dimensions of human life (Shusterman, 2012, p. 189). Rather than a single theory or method, somaesthetics is an open field for "collaborative, interdisciplinary, and transcultural inquiry" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 8).

Sources of inspiration for the development of somaesthetics (Shusterman, 2012, p. 11) have included yoga, a traditional Asian somatic practice, and contemporary Western counterparts such as the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais method.

Shusterman (2005) contends that somaesthetics explicitly contributes to self-conscious awareness (the ability to recognize what one feels in one's own body), an insight of particular relevance to this study. As we see it, this insight into how bodily feelings and experiences are not simply silent background knowledge but also something one focuses on, listens to and applies complements and enriches Merleau-Ponty's earlier insights into the body's fundamental role in our existence. Shusterman argues that somaesthetics goes beyond the tacit level of bodily consciousness, which Merleau-Ponty regarded as primary consciousness and described as the life of unreflected consciousness (Shusterman, 2005, p. 157). Referring to Merleau-Ponty's insights regarding the habit body and the problematic fact that we can develop bad as well as good habits, Shusterman notes that the philosopher may have been less concerned with the development of bad habits, so that his theory contributes fewer insights here:

Lacking in Merleau-Ponty's superb advocacy of the body's philosophical importance is a robust sense of the real body as a site for practical disciplines of conscious reflection that aim at reconstructing somatic perception and performance to achieve a more rewarding experience and action (Shusterman, 2005, p. 177)

In contrast, somaesthetics focuses explicitly on the need for, and usefulness of, conscious reflection on one's own body. This becomes a way of being able to work with oneself and one's bodily habits, towards the possibility of making beneficial changes.

Combining somatic theory with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, argues Shusterman, is made possible by the latter's pragmatic flavor, including its insistence that consciousness is primarily an "I can", rather than an "I think". In addition, the combination is facilitated by Merleau-Ponty's understanding of philosophy not simply as theory but also as a personal way of life (Shusterman, 2005, p. 177).

Following Shusterman's suggestion, we have attempted to combine the two approaches for the purposes of this research. In addition, we have adopted an understanding of health as explained and described by Hans Georg Gadamer: the notion that health is something which manifests itself by virtue of escaping our attention, so that the mystery of health lies in its hidden character (Gadamer, 1996). To be healthy is about being involved with the world, being together with one's fellow human beings; it's about active and rewarding engagement with one's everyday tasks (Gadamer, 1996 / 2004, p. 113). Health encompasses a totality in which body and mind are as one; the mind or soul is the living power of the body itself (Gadamer, 1996, p. 173).

Method

In pursuit of our goal of exploring how students experience practicing yoga, along with the significance this activity may have for their health and well-being, we opted to ground our study in hermeneutic phenomenology: the reflective study of pre-reflective experience (van Manen, 1997). According to van Manen (1997, p. 346), this means focusing not simply on *what* is said in the transcribed text (its semantic, linguistic meaning and significance) but also on *how* the text speaks: how it divines and inspires our understanding of the spoken words. In hermeneutic phenomenological studies, both these forms of meaning are of critical methodological importance.

In human science research of this type, the emphasis is on adopting a phenomenological attitude or orientation rather than on employing a specific methodology (Gallagher, 2012). The phenomenological attitude requires researchers to bracket their natural attitudes and to suspend or put aside their beliefs, judgments, opinions and theories (Gallagher, 2012, p. 43).

The yoga program the participating students attended was based on *Ashtanga Vinyasa* and consisted of *asanas* (yoga postures), *pranayama* (breathing exercises), and *dhyana* (meditation). Physical exercises were designed to promote strength, flexibility, stamina, and balance. The students were also introduced to yoga philosophy and ways to apply yoga to their everyday life (Elstad et al., 2020). This is in line with yoga classes conducted in other settings (both clinical and non-clinical), which usually include *asanas*, *pranayama*, meditation and yoga philosophy (Brems et al., 2015) in an effort to train both mind and body towards the goal of emotional balance (Hagen & Nayar, 2014).

All three authors of this article have personal experience of practicing yoga. The first author (who also conducted the interviews) is a trained yoga teacher, but played no role in shaping the yoga program at the center of our research. The second author, also a trained yoga teacher,

has been involved in designing both the yoga program and the larger research project. The last author has only limited experience of practicing yoga and has not been involved in either the design or implementation of the program.

Recruitment of participants

All participants were selected from students assigned to the intervention group within the larger project. Participants were to have no serious mental health diagnosis, no recent major life crises, and no experience of systematic yoga practice in the preceding six months. A total of 62 students met the inclusion criteria and an email was sent to them all. The first five who responded by accepting the offer were included in the study. The participants, four of whom were women, were all university or college students aged 20-27, living in the Oslo area.

The study was approved in June 2017 by the Regional Committee for Medical Research Ethics in Norway (2016/1751). Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study.

Data generation

Research data was gathered through individual interviews with five students. All interviews were conducted by the first author at the yoga intervention location over a 4-month period (October 2017- January 2018). Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and was audio recorded with the participant's permission. An interview guide was developed, based on the following two thematic open questions: What is it like for you to do yoga? How was it for you to participate in the yoga program? The aim of these thematic questions was to facilitate a conversation where the participants felt free to share their experiences in their own words. The interviewer asked follow-up questions and made sure to keep the conversation within the study's topic.

While some participants had completed the yoga program when interviewed, others were halfway through it. Some participants had previous yoga experience, and some had started to integrate yoga into their everyday life after completing the yoga course. When talking about yoga, participants also included experiences from their lives outside the course. The data therefore includes experiences of yoga in general, experiences from the specific yoga program and episodes from participants' individual lives. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author shortly after each interview.

Analysis

Our reading and analysis of interview transcripts involved the application of a phenomenological research method inspired by van Manen (2014, p. 320). Each text was read through several times by all three authors. As we read, we posed the question: What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon of practicing yoga as described by the participants? The text was then coded inductively and analyzed, guided by hermeneutic reflection to uncover meanings rather than facts (van Manen, 1997). Following van Manen (1997), this involved phenomenological reduction and reflection in respect of four lifeworld existential dimensions: lived body, lived time, lived space and lived relation.

On this basis a number of experiential themes emerged. "Theme" in this context involves a focus: that of a meaning, a point or a "punctum" in the described experiences (van Manen, 2014, p. 320). Phenomenological themes draw attention to the *eidōs* of the experience; they represent possible fragments of experiences that are unique but also in a human sense shared as they may bear similarity with the experiences of others. In other words, analysis involved identifying

meaning structures (van Manen, 1990, p. 87) in participants' descriptions of their experiences with practicing yoga. This process involved reflective writing, re-writing and tightening the text to reveal the meaning of the various experiences. However, experiential descriptions are not easy to distinguish from descriptions that include opinions, views, and interpretations, suggesting that even the most evocative experiential description is unlikely to capture the fullness and subtleties of participants' actual experiences, as felt in the moment (van Manen, 2014, p. 54).

Despite the difficulties in describing lived experiences, we have sought throughout both to invoke and to explain participants' experiences of doing yoga, as expressed in their own words.

Findings

We present the themes that emerged from our analysis in the form of processed excerpts from interviews, followed by our subsequent interpretations and analysis. Processed excerpts are set in italics, while our subsequent analysis appears in plain text.

Practicing yoga is to adapt to space and atmosphere

When I entered the door, the atmosphere was very calm. I was forced to be quiet. Then I found it easier to get into the right mood to do yoga.

Entering the yoga class is a step into serenity. The calm atmosphere in the room is experienced by the student as a forceful invitation to be quiet. Being required to be quiet is then experienced as helpful to getting into a mood they perceive as appropriate and in which doing yoga feels possible and good.

This reflects that we, as bodily subjects, are not only in the world but are also part of it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/ 2002, p. 94). When we enter a room, an environment, or a situation, we are always influenced by the prevailing mood or atmosphere. We will also, without necessarily consciously thinking about it, adapt or not adapt to the situation we now inhabit. "To be a body is to be tied to a certain world," observed Merleau-Ponty (1962/ 2002, p. 171), highlighting our inter-relational, reciprocal and interconnected way of being in the world. "Our body is not primarily *in space*" but part of it.

Practicing yoga is looking for an atmosphere of presence in oneself

I am looking for some kind of tranquility and try to imagine my mind as a blue sky. Then there will be dark clouds in the sky. The clouds might represent a to-do list or worries such as studying for an exam, calling my boyfriend, washing the dishes and so on. My goal is to blow away all the clouds, so the sky becomes clearer. The sky should be as blue as possible when I am in yoga class. As if I am trying to breathe away the dark clouds in my head.

The student describes yoga as about seeking to achieve a calm and peaceful existence. To do so, it is important to leave behind the problems of daily life for a while. Still, thoughts arise about things one must do. Yoga is about using one's breath, about (as the student says) 'blowing' distracting thoughts away so that existence under a blue sky is restored.

Our existence is always in the present. As bodily beings we combine, include, and belong to both time and space (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/ 2002, p. 162). But while our existence is always

in present time and space, we also belong to the future and to the past; the present holds a past and a future within its “thickness” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/ 2002, p. 321). The present is in a broad sense the horizon of past and future, and a zone in which being and consciousness coincide (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/ 2002, p. 487).

The practice of yoga seems to involve an effort, if not to stop time, then at least to maintain the present, the “fresh” present, for a definite period. Practitioners use their breath to take control of their consciousness and flow of thoughts and thereby achieve a felt bodily tranquility.

Practicing yoga is to adopt and adapt a non-competitive attitude towards oneself

The most helpful benefit of yoga is realizing that it's not me against the world (...). After all, there is competition in almost everything in life, right? Clothes, hair, academic performance, relationships and how many fancy pictures you have on social media. We came here to the class and the instructor said: “There is no competition here, it is only you and your body.”

This student experiences yoga as an activity that encourages practitioners to focus on their own experience, without fear of being rated by others. As both personal and relational beings, we are in constant exchange with our surroundings. Merleau-Ponty (1962/ 2002, p. 121-122) explains that there are two views of oneself and one's body: “my body for me and my body for others”. He continues:

“It is indeed not enough to say that the objective body belongs to the realm of ‘for others’, and my phenomenal body to that of ‘for me’, since the ‘for me’, and the ‘for others’ co-exist in one and the same world...”

Yoga therefore can be understood to be about directing attention to oneself as a phenomenological body, rather than as an objective body for inspection and observation, not by only others but also by oneself. Our intertwined position of being personal and at the same time always in relation to our world is an embodied position of continuous shift between being directed inside-out and outside-in. We are always both subject and object, never either/or (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/ 2002).

The experience of practicing yoga can be understood as one of being invited to discipline one's directness, to focus attention on one's own subjective experience of own body and movement, and let the outside world just be for a while. Attending to oneself as a phenomenological body is to perceive one's existential and phenomenological bodily being in the world. This is what Shusterman (Shusterman, 2000, 2008, 2012) calls somaesthetic awareness. By disciplining our somaesthetic awareness, the aim is not simply to know our body and habits, but to change them (Shusterman, 2008, p. 65). Yoga can thus be understood as a practice which enables practitioners to refine or change some of their habits.

Practicing yoga is to kindly take care of oneself

About just a year ago I went through a really hard time. Every day when I got up in the morning, I would tell myself things like ‘you are so big, you are fat’ and stuff like that. But now I rarely say such mean things to myself. I may still be dissatisfied with my body, but now me and my body are friends. So, I think I got a really precious gift... a yoga course for free where my head and body became friends.

By practicing yoga, this student experienced body and head (mind) becoming friends, no longer fighting against or devaluing each other. As social beings we always notice how we are seen by others. If we constantly turn this gaze of others (the socio-cultural gaze) towards ourselves, we risk over-objectifying ourselves. The attention we devote to being and living as the bodies we are can then fade into the background, overshadowed by an evaluating, sometimes critical gaze directed at ourselves.

When Merleau-Ponty (1962/ 2002, p. 122) points out that we are what others think of us and what our world is, he draws attention to something very significant for all humans, and especially so for those who in various ways do not comply (or are perceived as not complying) with societal norms; for example, humans whose bodies are judged fat or disabled. Here, practicing yoga becomes a way to be more friendly and accepting towards one's self. In the same way that working with the surface and appearance of the body can lead to beauty, working on turning the attention inwards towards bodily consciousness can render the body — the experiential dimension of one's body — more beautiful (Shusterman, 2012, p. 337).

Practicing yoga promotes a sense of gratitude towards one's own body

I remember we had a yoga class with [name of the yoga instructor] where she told us: 'feel your toes, feel the soles of your feet...' And then she said: 'thank your toes, feet and legs for carrying your body'. Then I started to think like... I have never been grateful for my toes and my legs. Never been grateful for this (...). There were many little things that I became aware of, through focusing on different body parts.

This student describes experiences while practicing yoga that encourage realization of how little awareness one has of one's body. In our day-to-day life, our body is mostly absent from our consciousness; it passes in and out of our awareness. This lack of consciousness is an integral part of our ability to engage with the world around us, and to carry out many routine actions (Leder, 1990, p. 69). Usually, our body is only brought to our attention during moments of dysfunction or pain. This means that we take our body for granted when it is functioning as usual. Yoga, however, challenges us to pay attention to the body, a unique and important experience. Practicing yoga as described by the student seems to raise a deep bodily awareness of gratitude for being the body one is.

This sense of gratitude to one's own body might relate to yoga's propensity to encourage us to cultivate our own body, both in terms of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and of creative self-fashioning of the body, a process that might be understood to relate to the aesthetic of the body's external representations and also to the body's perceptual inner experience: in this instance, a perceptual inner experience where cultivation of improved aesthesis means feeling better in the sense of enjoying better feelings while also perceiving what we experience more accurately (Shusterman, 2012, p. 111).

Practicing yoga is to put everyday life on hold

It is fantastic to have yoga in my everyday life. Having time where I can focus on being present, breathing and exercising my body. A time where I can let go of worries about my academic performance and stress. Where I can take time out to distance myself from the world for a little while.

Practicing yoga through breathing and moving seems to allow practitioners to be present in the here and now. It functions as a shelter or sanctuary, one in which everyday worries can be placed on hold. Being present in the moment also seems to be about receiving and creating what some participants called an ‘atmosphere’ or mood within oneself. Atmosphere, according to Shusterman (2012, p. 234) can best be understood as an experienced, bodily felt quality of a situation emerging from and pervading the situation one is part of. The yoga room, the yoga setting with its atmosphere and distinct environment: all this taken together seems to offer participants the possibility for certain kinds of actions, behaviors or ways of being in the world (Gallagher, 2012, p. 71).

Practicing yoga is to find belongingness

Yoga is like a religious place where I can find my inner peace and where I belong. I think it's strange, but at the same time very pleasant, to suddenly feel that I fit into a place where I previously thought that I didn't fit in.

This sense that practicing yoga has a religious dimension appears in tune with Johnson’s (2008) description of embodied human spirituality and the human experience of transcendence. Johnson describes two forms of transcendence. In its vertical form, transcendence involves something high above one’s embodied situation. This can be compared to a religious experience that elevates our existence to something beyond our bodily existence, mortality, and finitude. But transcendence can also take a horizontal direction, a spiritual transcendence “that recognizes the inescapability of human finitude and is compatible with the embodiment of meaning, mind, and personal identity” (Johnson, 2008, p. 281). For Johnson, horizontal transcendence consists of our ability to “go beyond” our present situation through transformative acts that can change both our world and us.

In line with this, Nancy (2008, p. 69) argues that being a body also means being a body of spirit. In situations where the practice of yoga resembles a religious experience, this could reflect the fact that the practitioner has made contact with their (Shusterman, 2012) own body of spirit. In doing so, they reveal an ability to transcend the present and therefore change their experience of both self and the world. Practicing yoga seems to raise the possibility of getting in touch with one’s own bodily spirit and by that means achieving a new sense of belonging: both to oneself and to the world in general.

Working with getting in contact with one’s own spiritual life may even render the body more beautiful (Shusterman, 2012, p. 337). In an interview, Shusterman elaborates on the concept of beauty related to aesthetics and to the notion of “living beauty”, explaining that he has chosen this notion due to its semantic richness and embrace of two distinct meanings: one that refers to beauty as lively, vivid and/or energetic and the other to the idea of living one’s life as an aesthetic project and as an art of living a beautiful life (Heinrich & Marino, 2020, p. 6).

Practicing yoga is to let go – dare to let go

After all, I find meditation difficult (...). It becomes difficult when I have a lot of things in my head that I need to do. What should I eat? What should I do tomorrow? Then you have to put all the thoughts away, and this won't happen without effort. I really have to work with myself and my head to be present.

As this participant notes, not letting yourself be distracted by thoughts when meditating involves hard work. Clearing one's mind of disturbing thoughts does not come easy. The focused concentration needed in meditation is described as an "alert attentiveness" that might be very tiring for beginners (Shusterman, 2012, p. 307). Breathing is always in the here and now. As a result, a focused attention on breathing during meditation may help break the habit of letting thoughts of past events and future projects distract us (Shusterman, 2012, p. 312). The 'hard work' referred to by the student can be understood to be about focusing on one's own breathing in order to control and discipline one's flood of thoughts.

Practicing yoga is to become aware of hidden emotions and habits

I think it's [meditation] a little scary. Just sitting there thinking or not thinking. It's hard to put aside the things I think I might do then... like sending messages to my friends. Yes, letting go of all the things I might need to do.

This student experiences meditation as difficult and a bit scary. The scariness may derive from the strangeness of focusing on own breathing. In everyday life we rarely notice the breaths we draw. However, our way of breathing -- its rhythm and depth -- can provide us with rapid and reliable evidence of our emotional state. Focusing our consciousness on our own breathing can therefore make us aware of our emotional state, of which we otherwise might have remained unaware (Shusterman, 2008, p. 20). Becoming aware of our own felt emotions could well be a bit scary. Increased bodily consciousness of our own breathing can also make us aware of our unconscious habits: for instance, holding our breath, or breathing fast.

Practicing yoga encourages body-mind harmony

When I do yoga, I focus on how I breathe. I do it before I go to bed... I think it's sort of a way to get the brain and the body to communicate.

This student reflects on how breathing during the practice of yoga may help overcome what we might call a body-mind split. Practicing yoga and breathing is something the student does before falling asleep, because it seems 'a sort of way' for body and mind to communicate. This body-mind communication might be understood as body-mind harmony, a state in which the individual is freed from evaluating either their thoughts or their body. Merleau-Ponty argues that we must acknowledge the unity of the mental, physical, and spiritual as inherent in our existence:

"The union of soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary decree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/ 2002, p. 102).

For Merleau-Ponty, unity of body and mind is something that must at every moment be created and restored as part of our existence. The experience described by this student indicates that practicing yoga can contribute to just this.

It is interesting that the word yoga means binding together and uniting (Strauss, 2020), and that a common understanding is that yoga refers to the association of the individual self with the universal self. This reveals interesting similarities between yoga philosophy and phenomenology. Somaesthetic lack of awareness (that is to say, inadequate perception of our

somatic comportment and feelings) can lead to minor everyday problems. One example could be finding it difficult to fall asleep because of lack of awareness that one's breathing is too shallow or one's body too tensely held to induce a sleep-inducing state of repose (Shusterman 2012, p 101). In yoga, focusing one's attention on one's own breathing, body and bodily reactions seems to help raise awareness of one's own habits, thereby opening up the possibility of changing them.

Practicing yoga provides strength and courage

On social media I have unfollowed a lot of yoga ladies who typically show totally crazy poses that we never did here in class (...). I've protected myself from these fancy yoga ladies who really just made me scared and nervous about never being good enough.

For this student, yoga as 'dis-played' and performed on social media is something unattainable, something at odds with one's perception of one's own body. The positions and movements shown are seen as out of reach and impossible to perform. To protect their own self-esteem and self-image, the student has chosen not to follow such 'yogis'. Participating in the project's yoga program seems to have given the student the strength and courage to rely on their own body, with its possibilities and limitations. As social and relational beings we engage with others, even when the other is on a screen, in ways that are linked with our embodied sensorimotor processes, and with the physical and social affordance the other presents us with (Gallagher, 2012, p.78). In other words, when we perceive something, we perceive it as actionable -- as something we too can reach and perform, or not. The action of others therefore shapes how we perceive the world and our own possibilities for action (Gallagher, 2012, p. 114). Inter-corporeity means that in-between individuals there is a reciprocal and dynamic response to the other's action in which such action can be taken as an affordance for own action and interaction (Gallagher, 2012, p. 200). Participation in the yoga program seems to have strengthened the student's determination not to strive for the unattainable.

Practicing yoga encourages the cultivation of new skills and habits

Now I can master yoga poses and breathing without thinking too much. Then I feel like I can just totally calm down... it feels like a pause button in life.

For this student, yoga has made it possible to master new poses and breathing techniques without having to think about it. When something is learned, the body has understood and incorporated it into its world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/ 2002, p. 160.161). For this participant, the learned poses and breathing have become habitual. For Merleau-Ponty, habit is "knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily efforts is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/ 2002, p. 166). When an action has become habitual, it has been incorporated into our own body. This capacity expresses the power we have to shape our way of being-in-the-world by learning new skills and habits. The phenomenon of habit prompts us to see that to understand is to experience the harmony between intention, performance and our bodily anchorage in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/ 2002, p. 167). It is when new skills have been learned and habits cultivated that the body has understood and significant new meaning has been absorbed (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/ 2002, p. 169). Practicing yoga seems to involve learning and establishing new habits across several dimensions. This requires practice, courage, and perseverance. On the way to greater mastery, students experience yoga as difficult and a little scary, but also as a gift and a 'pause button in life'.

Discussion and final remarks – yoga and health

The findings of our inquiry touch upon some of the ways in which yoga may promote young people's health and well-being. Paying disciplined attention to body and mind through yoga movements, postures and breathing requires practice and endurance. Practitioners learn to be present in the here and now, and to kindle an appreciative attitude towards self and body. All the same, practicing yoga can also be experienced as difficult and a little scary.

These findings suggest that present-moment awareness may partly be about what Shusterman (2008) calls "reflective awareness", something that never stops at our skin since we cannot experience our body as separate from our environmental context (Shusterman, 2008, p. 215). Indeed, our findings reveal the environment in which yoga is practiced to be highly relevant to how the practice is experienced. The atmosphere that yoga teachers create and facilitate must therefore be understood as important for how the practitioner experiences doing yoga. The yoga environment itself may contribute to practitioners acquiring an attentive presence and reflective awareness of their embodied being.

Running like a thread through our findings is how participants found their practice of yoga contributing moments of felt peace in body and mind. In the context of Gadamer's (1996) description of health as a state of equilibrium, of experienced weightlessness in which different forces balance each other out, the experiences of calmness and peace the students describe can be understood as expressions of felt health. At the same time, this felt calmness — this harmony between body and mind — does not come easy; achieving it requires effort and hard work. For Shusterman (2012, p. 337), such labor can have aesthetic results: working on one's inner spiritual virtues can render the body more beautiful. Perceived health can perhaps be understood to be related to perceived beauty in the form of gratitude towards one's own body.

In disciplines of somatic education, such as yoga, exercises are deployed to treat the possible misuse of our bodies in our spontaneous and habitual way of being. The explicit bodily attention characteristic of such disciplines is geared not simply at improving our bodily knowledge but also at promoting change (Shusterman, 2005, p. 166-167). The way we, as bodies, handle life with its various challenges can lead to bad as well as good habits when it comes to taking care of ourselves and our well-being. The findings presented here suggest that yoga has the potential to support practitioners towards greater insight into their body and its possibilities and limitations: into what the body-subject can, or can almost, or cannot do. Such insight is essential for the achievement of change.

To the extent that yoga practitioners strive for change, yoga seems to have the capacity to promote good health and prevent ill health. Nowadays, exercising our bodies is generally understood as an important pathway to health. However, we may or may not find such exercise enjoyable. Shusterman highlights that health itself is enjoyed not just as a means to achieve other ends but also as an end in itself (Shusterman 2012, p. 46). Being healthy means having the ability to enjoy life. It is the rhythm of life as a permanent process of establishing and re-establishing equilibrium that constitutes health (Gadamer, 1996, p. 114). In other words, health is something we have to create and re-create throughout our lives. We can never gain full control over the rhythmic functions taking place within ourselves. Rather, health is a state of equilibrium, a process in which different forces balance each other out. If that equilibrium becomes disturbed or disrupted, its restoration requires effort and counterforces. Our findings suggest that yoga can serve as an auxiliary tool, or a counterforce, to re-create balance in our mindful bodies.

We consider our study to be a small but useful contribution to understanding yoga's potential, especially in relation to the mental health and well-being of students passing through a particularly stressful and challenging stage of life. Further qualitative research is required to explore the various dimensions of yoga practice and its possible benefits and disadvantages.

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