Yoga practice through the prism of the quest for excitement: Emotional renewal and transcending the physical realities of the body

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Abstract: Drawing on a survey conducted in France between 2019 and 2023, which used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods, this article seeks to examine the practice of yoga through the prism of the quest for excitement by focusing on emotional dimensions. Results show that practitioners who are strongly committed to yoga and belong to the privileged classes or the upper strata of the middle classes engage in a practice focused on self-control/emotional renewal with the aim of reaching spiritual dimensions that are themselves a source of intense emotions.

Keywords: yoga, quest for excitement, self-control and emotional renewal, spirituality, new practices

Introduction

In the past twenty years or so, yoga has experienced unprecedented growth in European countries, the United States, the English-speaking Commonwealth countries, and much more recently in Latin America as well as the former Soviet states. In the United States, 15% of the adult population said they practised yoga in 2017.[1] Similarly, in 2021, almost 20% of French men and women had practised yoga at least once in the previous three years.[2] This 'yoga boom' (Singleton and Byrne, 2008: 1) is generally described as a typically Western process, characterized by a massification and diversification of practice modalities (De Michelis, 2005). However, this process is more recent in France than in English-speaking countries. Surveys show that the enthusiasm for and diversification of yoga began in the 2010s in France, compared to the 1990s (De Michelis, 2005) in the US and the UK. This 'lag' of twenty years means there are less extensive and targeted studies, and therefore the situation is less well known from an academic perspective. By focusing on it, we will thus be able to conduct a more detailed analysis of local aspects rather than just the global 'Western' features, such as practitioners' social characteristics, practice modalities, governance and networks, and the structure of occupations. Yoga can be defined as a holistic psychophysical or psychospiritual practice that is 'a bricolage' (Altglas, 2014; Newcombe and O'Brien, 2023) of ascetic practices of Asian origin, variably focused on spirituality or introspection. These assume a technical dimension (postures and/or dynamic sequences, in rhythm with one's breathing) and invoke forms of authority and ritual associated with various religious matrices (Buddhism and Hinduism)

Most of the studies looking at this enthusiasm for yoga in European and North American countries fuel the very dynamic field of yoga studies (Di Placido, 2021) along two main theoretical lines. The first, taken by religious anthropologists and sociologists, focuses primarily on the logics of transnational dissemination of yoga. It emphasizes the links

between the circulation of yoga and the development of neoliberalism in North American and European societies in the late 20th century (Godrej, 2017). Analyses in this vein show how certain features of this activity in Western countries – such as the use of postures (Singleton, 2010) or the choice of certain Indian Sanskrit texts over others (De Michelis, 2005)– are the result of cross-influences, domination relations, or imitation between India and the places receiving the yogic knowledges (Newcombe, 2019). From this theoretical perspective, the profusion of yoga specialities – and even subspecialities – can be explained by a lack of regulation and the strong competition between courses (Jain, 2015). The second theoretical perspective explains that 'modern postural yoga can converge with neoliberal entrepreneurial discourse' (Erkmen, 2021: 1048). In the wake of the works by Michel Foucault (1978) and Nicolas Rose (1989), yoga is analysed here as a particularly effective vector for spreading and reinforcing a neoliberal definition of the individual subject (Smith and Atencio, 2017). It is supposed to help construct a balanced individual, who manages his or her individual actions based on their effectiveness (Koch, 2015). However, studies that have looked at concrete practices and their social roots have pointed to the reductive nature of these analyses, and in particular the necessary link between yoga and the passive endorsement/incorporation of a neoliberal subjectification. Indeed, this theoretical strand partly obscures the environments (particularly urban/rural) (Erkmen, 2021) and different appropriations of yogic practices in France (Nizard, 2019; Cousin and Chauvin, 2019; Madec, 2018; Ben Hamed, 2021) in a context of diversified practice modalities and practitioners. Thus, in her work on yoga practice in contemporary Turkey, T.D. Erkmen shows the connection between the spread of modern yoga among Istanbul's middle classes in the 1990s-2000s, the latter's growing precarity, and the rise of authoritarianism in this country (Erkmen, 2021). Practising yoga seems to be a way of managing, at an individual level, the risks posed by advanced economic liberalism to professional careers and living conditions. However, yoga also offers a safe space for Istanbul's women, where they can reclaim control over their bodies and their spirituality, in a political context where public forms of protest are harshly repressed.

Whilst not denying that yoga can be a sounding board for neoliberal ideology and be appropriated in different ways by a variety of practitioners, this article wishes to 'take a step sideways' and analyses this practice through the prism of the 'quest for excitement'. However, this theoretical perspective is not new. Indeed, Miranda Thurston and Daniel Bloyce (2020) have hypothesized that the transformations and expansion of yoga from the late 19th century onwards were more the result of a psychological need for excitement generated by society than a quest for a more adjusted life that would be a source of happiness. Their reflection is structured around emotional dimensions that characterise yoga and, more specifically, the link between generating and controlling emotions that underpin the quest for excitement. The study presented here is conceptually rooted in this perspective, whilst adding to the work of Thurston and Bloyce (2020) on two points. Firstly, it is important to conduct a field test and give an important place to empirical dimensions. In other words, explaining the yoga phenomenon means referring to the practitioners themselves by analysing what they say about their own practice. The second point concerns the subject of the article itself, which is less interested in transnational diffusions and the yoga boom than in what this activity does concretely to those who engage in it – albeit the two elements are obviously linked.

The quest for excitement began to be theorized in the 1960s (Elias and Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Dunning, 2001; Dunning et al., 1992) in the wake of Norbert Elias's works on the 'civilizing process' (Elias, 1978), which highlighted the role of sport and, more

widely, leisure in the process of euphemizing violence and gradual pacification of Western societies. Beginning with the 19th century, sport and leisure activities participated particularly effectively in a relatively new psychic economy based on the control and self-control of violent impulses. This 'pacification process' rested on the 'quest for excitement', which reconciled two seemingly contradictory functions. On the one hand, sport and activities helped maintain a set of codes for keeping emotions under control, but on the other hand, they helped loosen that control and manifest excitement in an enjoyable way. It is probably in this contradictory aspect that the value of the quest for excitement lies. This concept has too often been reduced in applications in sports sociology to a cathartic role of 'purging' dangerous passions in humans by making them experience these in the form of the representation or control of emotions. The need to actually experience these emotions is often overlooked (Heinich, 2015) . In other words, it is the link, thanks to the sport or leisure activity practised, between self-control/control of emotions and enjoyably loosening this control that lies at the heart of the theory of the quest for excitement. It is precisely this link that we wish to study in this article in relation to the practice of yoga. From this perspective, we hypothesise that yoga is a leisure activity that enables a person to experience a singular emotional quest by accessing new, more intense emotional states, while at the same time working to regulate them. To this end, the text is organized in three parts. An introductory part highlights the sociodemographic structure of yoga practitioners in France in order to describe the interviewees and the yogic context in this country. The following two parts look at the concrete dimensions of the practice, shedding light on a process of control and emotional renewal that aims to reach specific levels of consciousness, which can be a source of particularly strong sensations and emotions.

Combining quantitative and qualitative analyses

The material used here comes from a qualitative survey framed by sociodemographic data relating to yoga practitioners. This combination of quantitative and qualitative methods first took off in the United Kingdom and the United States (Green, 2007), and subsequently in Europe and therefore France (Grossetti, 2011; Aguilera and Chevalier, 2021). For this study, by jointly using these two methods we were able firstly to delve deeper into the results of an INJEP quantitative survey on French people's physical practices (2020). Then, by highlighting the results of both statistical and analytical investigations, we were able to further generalize and describe in detail the sociodemographic context of yoga in France. More concretely, by analysing the social characteristics of self-declared yoga practitioners who took part in the INJEP survey (n = 735) we were able to first identify structuring factors in yoga practice, particularly the education level. Our study was then completed by 38 interviews conducted with individuals – 35 women and 3 men – from privileged backgrounds or upper strata of the middle classes, whose educational achievement was above Bac+3 (bachelor's degree) and who had practised yoga more than once a week for over two years, in large urban centres. All our interviewees said they were financially 'comfortable'. Our decision to work on this particular profile reflects our wish to look at practitioners whose social profiles represent, as we explain below, most individuals who engage in yoga. The results published here do not obviously account for the whole yoga population, but they do rest on a statistically representative ground. The authors of these analyses do not all hold the same position within the world of yoga. One of them is unfamiliar with this field and was primarily responsible for the production of quantitative data. Two others have practiced yoga a few times and conducted interviews with practitioners and professionals. One of

the researchers, on the other hand, has been involved in the world of yoga as a Hatha yoga practitioner for about fifteen years. We also made observations in a yoga school (the Hatha School)[3] situated in the centre of a French city and attended by yoga practitioners from the privileged classes or the upper strata of the middle classes. The method of objectived participant observation is a commonly used approach in ethnographic research conducted in disciplines such as cultural anthropology, sociology, and investigative journalism. This method aims to achieve 'understanding the other through the sharing of a common condition.' It involves studying a society or identified group by sharing their way of life. This 'participant immersion' in their field of study ideally lasts several years. The researcher is accepted by the group members and subscribes to the group's stakes while maintaining a certain distance. Indeed, the immersed researcher risks 'becoming native,' becoming so engrossed in the social world they are studying that they lose their scientific objectivity. The researcher may also lose the desire to critique the observed group in order to maintain ties with them. To counter this, the researchers must continuously 'objectify' the data collected through this type of observation, ensuring that they critically analyze this data and constantly place it back in its context of production. In the case of this study, the researcher responsabel for the observation has been practicing yoga for fifteen years at the Hatha school. He began conducting participant observations at the start of the study by recording classes in the form of ethnographic notes. A thematic analysis was then performed to gain a nuanced understanding of how individuals perceive and define their own yoga practice without it being influenced by the researcher. This method is particularly interesting in a study of yoga through the lens of the quest for excitement. Indeed, it allows for a closer examination of the emotional work of practitioners and helps identify the various dimensions of emotional control/decontrol.

The Hatha School opened around thirty years ago. Its founder and main teacher is a follower of Patañjali (Patañjali, 1991), who is an emblematic figure of Indian tradition, often credited as the author of the ‘Yoga Sūtras’, a fundamental text in classical yoga consisting of 196 aphorisms (*sūtras*). Although Patañjali is the name most commonly associated with this text, there is some historical ambiguity about his identity and precise period. Scholars generally estimate that he lived between 2nd century BCE and 4th century CE. In his presentation of the Hatha School, its founder explicitly called himself a follower of Patañjali. This is basically Hatha Yoga. This type of yoga focuses on physical practices and control of the ‘vital energy’ by specifically working on one’s breathing. Its goal is to reach a meditative state through bodily practice. The bodywork through postures (*asanas*) is fundamentally meant to enable practitioners to open their minds to invisible energies or, in other words, a world that transcends human consciousness. Other types of yoga, such as Raja Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Karma Yoga, follow distinct paths focused on controlling the mind, devotion, knowledge, and action, respectively. The ways in which these yoga ‘styles’ or schools are classified vary with the experts (yoga teachers, leaders of national yoga associations), but, generally speaking, distinction is made between Hatha Yoga and Ashtanga, Vinyasa, Yengar, Bikram, Yin, Jivamukti, and Kundali. Each school of yoga has its own particularities in terms of body, breathing, and meditation techniques. What sets Hatha Yoga apart from the other types of yoga is its focus on poses and breathing, as well as the fact that anyone should be able to practise it, depending on their aspirations and physical, mental, and spiritual possibilities. The characteristics of the Hatha school seemed to reflect the majority of the quantitative data from the INJEPS survey. Indeed, it is located in a large urban center, well established around thirty years ago, and attended by yoga practitioners from the privileged classes or the upper strata of the middle classes. The 'Hatha yoga'

taught is also the type of yoga most commonly practiced in France (Nizard, 2019). In France, the supply of and demand for yoga classes began to increase in the 1990s within a context characterized by changes in the cultural boundaries between social classes. Indeed, since the 1980s, there had been a reorganization of the symbolic boundaries between social groups, together with a redefinition of the cultural capital (Coulangeon et al., 2023). The policies behind expanded education and widespread consumption of cultural products had, to a certain extent, reduced the symbolic distances between classes. However, this cultural homogenization concealed the persistence, even increased complexity, of class divides. On the one hand, mass education had limited effects on the reduction of social inequalities as it did not substantially decrease inequalities in access to diplomas or academic achievements (Baud, 2003). On the other hand, the cultural gap between social classes narrowed at a time when material disparities within the French population became more pronounced (Galland and Lemel, 2024). The higher number of university graduates seems to have reinforced the inclination of the social groups most endowed with cultural capital – but with a relatively low economic capital – towards *ascetic aristocratism* (Bourdieu, 1984). Yoga presents characteristics that are congruent with the cultural appetencies of these social categories: a bodily practice that is inexpensive, austere, serious, and strongly based on reflexiveness. It is worth adding that several studies inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's analyses of the social construction of tastes show that introspection and reflexiveness play a primary role in the social differentiation of women from social categories that are most endowed with cultural capital (Garcia, 2011)

To sum up, the data in this article come from processing 758 questionnaires from the INJEP national survey;[4] 38 semi-structured interviews with practitioners, 24 of whom also taught yoga;[5] and two terms of objectivized observations of a weekly yoga class attended by students of all levels.[6]

Socially differentiated appropriations of yoga in France

The results of the survey on French people's bodily practices conducted by INJEP in 2020 on the basis of the French population census allow us to gauge the extent to which most physical practices and practitioners in France are socially rooted.[7] Table 1 provides an overview of the social characteristics of respondents in the INJEP survey (N=735) who said they practised yoga, compared to the whole French population.

(Insert table 1 here)

The quantitative results presented here come from the 2020 edition of the National Survey on French People's Physical Practices and Sports (NSPPS 2020). This survey is jointly conducted by the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Institut National de la Jeunesse et de l'Éducation Populaire (INJEP) "National Institute for Youth and Popular Education"– the main public institution responsible for analysing the sports practices and physical activities of the French population. Several summary publications have resulted from this survey (for instance Lefèvre and Raffin, 2023). It is based on a robust methodology and collects data on physical activities and sports from a large representative sample (n = 11,082) of the French population aged 15 and over at the time of the survey, living in France and its overseas territories. The survey was conducted using a mixed methodology (by phone and by internet), and each questionnaire was individually validated by the survey team.

One of the unique aspects of this survey is that it does not presuppose a single definition of what constitutes a physical activity. Respondents were asked to answer two questions: one allowed respondents to freely describe activities they considered to be their physical practice; the other presented a pre-established list of activities, which included yoga and other meditative gymnastics (qigong, tai chi, etc.). It is the synthesis of responses to these two questions that was used to identify yoga practitioners (n = 736).

The participation by one of the authors of the present article (Brice Lefèvre) in the scientific coordination team of this survey made it possible to explore several new questions, such as those regarding the meanings attributed to physical practices or sports, which we use here. The classification of reasons for engaging in physical activity or sport, divided into thirteen categories, encompasses the key aspects of physical activities in modern Western societies: adventure, appearance, connection to nature ('nature'), competition, obligation, enjoyment, health, socializing ('meet'), personal achievement, physical exertion, body care, psychological factors, and risk. Survey respondents were invited to rate on a scale from one to five (Likert scale) whether a given reason fully corresponded (five) or not at all (one) to their personal motivation.

The respondents' BMI is more often normal (even low) compared to that of most French people. However, in terms of their self-evaluation of their monthly income level, the yogis differ little from the French, apart from the fact that they are a little less likely to describe themselves as being in a 'difficult' situation in this respect. Finally, yoga appears as a highly developed practice in large urban centres: 60.3% of practitioners live in cities with 100,000 inhabitants or more. However, yoga is not absent from rural areas: 14.8% of respondents said they lived in towns and villages with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants.

The INJEP survey also makes it possible to document the meanings that respondents invest in their physical practices. They were invited to rate on a scale of 0 to 5 whether reasons suggested by the interviewer corresponded to those that drove them to engage in a physical activity. All the possible 'reasons' put to the interviewees are presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 here

They group together all the trends that participate in the symbolization of physical practices in most contemporary industrialized countries (concern with health, relationship with nature, self-improvement, etc.). We have ranked each respondent's reasons for practising a physical activity from most to least popular as they appeared based on the scores reported. Figure 1 shows the dispersion of these rankings – with the reasons ranked 1 or close to 1 being the most cited as reflecting the meaning invested in physical practices by yoga practitioners. We can see in this figure that health, well-being, and fitness are the most common goals, even though the interviewees consider themselves to be – and are – in excellent health. Thus, the vast majority of interviewees do not see yoga as a therapeutic practice in the sense of remedying a medical dysfunction of the body. Similarly, we observe a desire to improve fitness and achieve a certain level of physical performance, although there is little interest in risk and competition. These data seem to indicate that yoga practitioners seek an optimal version of their bodies, their mental and emotional constitution, and their behaviour in their daily lives.

Despite its popularity, yoga seems to be practised especially by middle-class women with a large educational capital (Bourdieu, 1995), more precisely, those whose qualifications are equivalent to or above a bachelor's degree. Thus, the INJEP survey results show that women from privileged classes are overrepresented among French yogis. The two tables below indicate that 81.2% of women compared to 18.1% of men practise yoga; 60.3% of them live in an urban unit with more than 100,000 inhabitants, and 24.7% between 9,000 and 99,000 inhabitants. The most preponderant age group is

between 25 and 39 years old with a percentage of 31.6%, followed by 50-64 years old with 24.4%, and 40-49 years old with 18.4%. There is a relatively high educational level since 39.9% have achieved at least a bachelor's degree (Bac+3), compared to 22.9% who only got their Baccalaureate – this also includes undergraduates currently studying for their degrees. Similarly, the categories of yoga practitioners who are overrepresented compared to the French population are primary-school teachers and similar, administrative and commercial intermediate occupations in companies, intermediate occupations in health and social work, and administrative and commercial company managers. Overall, these practitioners belong to the privileged classes and the upper strata of the middle classes, with cultural distributions tending to favour the cultural capital, of which the educational capital forms a significant part. This initial overview of the demographics of French individuals invested in yoga highlights the practice of women from sections of the dominant classes. These data accord with those obtained in the field of yoga studies, which point to a strong representation of women (Hoyez, 2012) (Newcombe, 2019) from the upper classes, who seek to achieve a form of perfection through yoga (Hauser, 2013). The rest of the article does not focus on the gender of yoga, but lays the groundwork for possible subsequent reflections on this topic.

Practising yoga: self-control and emotional renewal

The body is at the heart of yoga practice. It is the first thing that one works on, whether it is postures (*assanas*),[8] breathing exercises (*pranayama*), or meditation (*dhyāna*). While the *assanas* may seem more physical to the uninitiated than the breathing or meditation exercises, the latter are nevertheless bodily exercises. In yoga they involve an 'awareness' (we could say a kind of objectivization) of oneself, in other words, of the body in the process of breathing or meditating. Moreover, postures, breathing, and meditation are not supposed to be performed in a chronological order: postures involve being aware of one's breathing in and out (some teachers require this to be done only through the nose), which is their main goal (Nizart 2019).

> The goal of yoga is meditation, it is being able to get into a pose with all the adjustments, you try to align your body, you try to be aligned when standing, you are standing straight, you are really aligned. You normally stand up against a wall and every part of your body, including the back of your head, is stuck to the wall. The yoga that I practise is quite demanding for the body and in terms of the precision of movements and poses. (Marie-Noël, 60 years old, Bac+8 (PhD), researcher).

One of the desired effects of meditation is capturing and changing emotions that practitioners see as uncontrolled. As with Buddhist practices (Mathé 2003), our interviewees who practise daily reserve times for meditation every day. This is considered to be the basis of a sense of well-being. First and foremost, practitioners work on their breathing; indeed, in regular yoga practice, postures are designed as a tool to help bring about a radical and lasting transformation of the ways in which practitioners breathe. This biological function is thus subject to a (re)training process lasting several years until it becomes natural. *Pranayama* (breathwork) is meant to foster a meditative state, which is the ultimate goal of yoga in its most orthodox conceptions (in other words, those claiming to be based on Sanskrit texts). The sole goal of the bodywork that precedes it is to help practitioners focus on what they call the 'present moment' and prepare the body for a long

meditation session. The daily practice of *dhyāna* usually occurs in a reserved space: a corner or a whole room dedicated to meditation. The sitting practice on a *zafu* (meditation cushion) is the most common and popular with our interviewees. Indeed, although the 'corpse pose' (*savasana*), which consists of lying down and completely relaxing the body, is often used in yoga classes, it differs from *dhyāna*, which relates to the quest for a state where 'the mind is detached from thoughts'.[9] This form of meditation involves an unusual waking state, which is quite uncomfortable for those who have had little or no training.[10] Practitioners have to keep their eyes half-closed while sitting cross-legged (*sukhasana*), in a lotus (*padmāsana*) or semi-lotus (*siddhasana*) position, or on their heels (*vajrasana*), for several minutes, or even an hour, while 'watching their thoughts pass by like clouds'.[11] The sitting pose is preferred by individuals who meditate in the morning and usually practise every day. Antoine, for example, gets up at 6 am every day, does a few *assanas* for twenty minutes or so, and then a sitting meditation for around half an hour:

> Well, I practise really in order to reach a state of relaxation and this allows me to meditate daily, in the morning, so I try to get up early. I try to be strict on that point. So I've been doing fifteen to twenty or thirty minutes of poses and then meditate for another twenty, twenty to thirty minutes. (Antoine, 54 years old, Bac+5 (master's degree), engineer)

The emotional work done in yoga practice is meant to extend to the various areas in the practitioners' lives. Being able to 'better manage one's emotions' – fear, stress, anger, anxiety – in interpersonal or professional situations is something that all our interviewees if not seek at least experience. They all say that practising yoga helps them to 'stand back' from difficult situations and deal with 'negative emotions' in their daily lives and particularly at work. Thus, Danièle (57 years old, Bac+3 (bachelor's degree)), a senior civil servant, explains how she copes with a significant workload by 'managing her stress' and how practising yoga gives her confidence in her interpersonal relationships, including the most difficult ones.

> I'd just taken up a management post and was struggling to position myself in relation to the team. I would go home and almost cry. Once I nearly had an accident because I was brooding over a conversation I'd had with a colleague about a budget. She didn't agree with me but it was mainly to be contrary because her arguments didn't hold. It was really intense. … I pulled over to the side of the road and started to control my breathing like I do during classes. After a while I stopped shaking. That's when it clicked … Breathe, ground yourself. It allows you to pull yourself together, see things more clearly, and respond in a more… more adapted way.

Danièle describes a sense of tranquillity, which she believes coincides with a positive shift in her interactions with others. By using the breathwork from their yoga classes and bodily postures that help them ground themselves, but also by regularly listening to themselves, Danièle and other interviewees say that they step back from difficult emotional situations and are able to respond in what they feel are more thoughtful and adapted ways to those around them:

> When you need to sleep, eat, when you're angry or afraid, that's when yoga is in fact really helpful, because with yoga you take time to listen to your bodily sensations, which allows you to identify emotions, and then non-violent communication helps you express your unsatisfied need once it's been recognized. (Sarah, 50 years old, Bac+3 (bachelor's degree), primary-school teacher)

‘Making peace with yourself’, ‘connecting body and mind’, ‘busting stress’, ‘relaxing’, ‘taking a break’ are phrases commonly associated with well-being practices (Marquis, 2014). They abound in our interviews. Indeed, according to our interviewees, yoga practice helps them individually manage their emotions and thus feel better in their daily lives. Research shows that this individual adaptation to external constraints is particularly valued in the working world and especially among women. Indeed, certain scripts (implicit rules) such as the ability to manage oneself and one’s emotions are skills that are implicitly expected in professions that require interacting with others (Hochschild, 2003).
These results clearly confirm those obtained from the quantitative survey concerning the high proportion of women and the practice of yoga as a means to improve emotional responses in daily life. It seems, therefore, that this emotional work lies at the centre of yoga practice.

The emotional self-control observed among our interviewees is most often coupled with specific dietary practices. These are based on the idea of the harmful nature of certain substances (foods that are deemed ‘bad’, tobacco, alcohol, etc.), which can provide temporary pleasure but are thought of as sources of suffering in the long run. Besides smoking (completely eliminated, with some exceptions, by our interviewees) and drinking (eliminated or limited to very moderate and occasional use), fasting, vegetarianism, and veganism are present among our interviewees, who see yoga as a complete way of life, practise meditation, and go on retreats. Élodie (44 years old, Bac+4 (bachelor’s degree), teacher), for example, explains that she first fasted in 2014 and that was when she decided to become vegetarian. She took this decision at the same time she started practising yoga:

> I stopped eating animals in 2014, I think, it was all my idea… It happened at the same time I started going to the yoga school. I fasted for a week in 2014 and it was all my idea in fact. I still ate fish for a while and then that was it really.

Fasting may occur occasionally, weekly, or daily, may be partial or total, but in every case it is associated with improving one’s personal well-being.

> In fact, I don’t eat in the morning. I also do mountain climbing and even when I go climbing I do not eat in the morning. It works well for me. I have the feeling I’ve found a balance. (Antoine, 54 years old, Bac+5 (master’s degree), engineer)

At the Hatha School, the teacher does not give any dietary instructions or rules, but he regularly brings up smoking or drinking in a humorous way: ‘You’re thinking about having a drink after this yoga class! Drinking alcohol! Yuck! How awful!’ he said at the end of a Friday evening class. One day, in the changing room, a regular student who smelled of tobacco (she was obviously a smoker) admitted being embarrassed about not being able to get rid of the cigarette smell before her yoga class because it got into her thick hair. And she said she was aware of the contradiction between her smoking and practising yoga. She had been on several retreats in India and wanted to become a teacher. Whilst not all interviewees referred to dietary rules, they all brought up the idea of self-respect, having a healthy and dignified attitude towards oneself. These ideas are not specific to yoga but they are more or less explicitly distilled in yoga classes: the body has to be healthy, maintained, and looked after – it is seen as a temple, which is a metaphor

very often used by practitioners. These forms of asceticism and dietary restrictions are obviously part of a desire to rationalise and control ordinary practices meant to help 'prepare' the body and mind for practising yoga. But they also reflect political dimensions that permeate the world of yoga, such as growing attention being paid to environmental issues or to the imposition of health practices deemed bodily invasive. This research has not really delved into these aspects. However, the importance placed on vegetarianism or flexitarianism by our interviewees, as well as their refusal or strong criticism of vaccination during the COVID 19 epidemic, point to the political dimensions present in yoga practice in terms of rationales for and ways of producing and/or incorporating norms and values that would need to be further examined.

The analyses conducted in this first part clearly show that yoga is used not so much as a means to release tensions accumulated during daily life as a space for learning new emotions and better-adjusted relationships with others and the world. This goal is worked at during a specific process of self-control/emotional renewal which enables responses and attitudes that are more appropriate in daily life, particularly in situations of complicated interpersonal relationships or work-related stress. This first result, therefore, confirms that the quest for excitement is a theoretical framework that can help explain yoga practice. Thurston and Bloyce (2020) had already seen the importance of 'emotional renewal' dimensions, as opposed to 'cathartic' ones, in yoga, but they did not describe the empirical forms taken by these dimensions. The results presented here help us highlight them in relation to the importance of meditation – which has nothing to do with relaxation – as the ultimate goal of yoga practice. Achieving these meditation skills requires working on one's emotional self-control, going as far as retraining certain biological functions, such as breathing, and engaging in certain forms of dietary ascetism. It is on this self-control and meditative accomplishment that the emotional renewal is built, providing better-adjusted responses and attitudes in everyday life. However, while practitioners explained that they mobilized these new, more harmonious emotions achieved through yoga, other emotional dimensions of the practice were also mentioned, particularly in the search for certain forms of spirituality.

Transcending the physical reality of the body: an intense emotion

In this process of self-control/emotional renewal, practitioners also talked about reaching a higher level of self both physically and spiritually. Thus, meditation and *asanas* are seen as spiritual exercises that allow them to encounter divine forms or at least transcend the physical reality of the body. The importance of meditation examined above is a particularly representative example of this, but so is the search for a certain sensory acuity and ever more heightened bodily sensations. Indeed, practitioners explain that practising yoga postures overall leads to greater insight into one's actions, life, and especially, as Clara says, greater self-awareness:

> I have the feeling that what I call 'spiritual' is not the same as others, the word is very hard to define. … I look for meaning but not necessarily by searching for something extraordinary or religious. I think that we can find extraordinary things in our lives, it is in fact a presence, a level of presence in oneself, of openness. That's what spirituality means to me. It's not a religious system. (Clara, 40 years old, Bac+5 (bachelor's degree) yoga teacher and journalist)

Ultimately, as summed up well by Aurélie, the aim of engaging in yoga is not just to work on one's body, relax, or move, but to look for other dimensions, called here spiritual, or at least build a different presence in oneself and the world.

> And I like this spirituality and it's something I search. I don't do Pilates, for example. I could've also done Pilates or whatever else, but it's because of this spiritual dimension that I do yoga. (Aurélie, 33 years old, Bac+3 (bachelor's degree), agricultural-school teacher)

The use of somatic practices to help one get into a meditative state is not unique to yoga. Most religions have seen the body as material for spiritual exercises that allow them to encounter the divine. While Eastern spiritualities such as Hinduism and Buddhism are particularly representative of this (Mathé, 2003), other examples include certain Christian forms of asceticism, Sufi trances achieved through repetitive dancing (Zarcone, 2004), and Torah chanting. In the case of yoga, we are dealing with a spiritual dimension 'cobbled together' by drawing on various Eastern philosophies (Garnoussi, 2011). The interviewees mobilize discourses and techniques borrowed from Buddhism, Hinduism, but also Christianity depending on their emotional and psychological states. For example, Maryse (65 years old, Bac+4 (bachelor's degree), yoga teacher) explains that 'the goal of my trips was to reflect, to embark on a reflection between Hinduism and Christianity, so we followed a bit in the footsteps of great French spiritual figures who went to India'. Thus, Eastern wisdoms are emptied – at least partly – of their philosophical doctrine. This is expressed by Sylvie (56 years old, Bac+8 (PhD)), a teacher-researcher who became a yoga teacher in parallel with her occupation:

> It isn't closed, it's not a school, it's not a philosophy, it's not an obligation if you want to call it God, call it Allah, or call it Buddha, so yes, it's extremely open … but spirituality is not religion.

A corollary of this spiritual quest is a desire to improve one's physical and cognitive capacities. This involves a search for physical excellence (a body that is flexible, agile, sensitive, etc.) and cognitive excellence (concentration, attention, letting go, etc.), where simultaneous control of several bodily and mental actions is a central goal. For these practitioners, the theme of the 'body-mind connection' is part of a discourse of effort comparable to that observed among practitioners of competitive sporting practices. They have to 'improve', 'take the moves further', 'do increasingly more complicated poses', 'be aligned'.

In practice, this means reaching an acute and extra-ordinary awareness of their bodies: position of segments in relation to one another, isolated mobility of certain parts of the body (tongue, eyes). This awareness is coupled with the search for somatic hypersensitivity: feeling one's organs, blood circulation, and body energy, ability to deeply relax not only the muscles but also internal organs. This bodily hyperacuity linked to a form of meditative introspection accounts for the practising of yoga as a means to improve one's physical and cognitive capacities.

> At first you're a bit overwhelmed and gradually you increase the level of difficulty: turning your tongue, keeping your eyes busy, tightening the mudras, you visualize inside your body, and also do mantras which are basically syllables: 'om' when breathing in, 'sham' when breathing out. You sometimes have to visualize things that are quite tricky, like a triangle that is in your head, upside down, with a red thread on one side, and a white

> thread on the other. Yeah, it's a bit tough. (Aurélie, 33 years old, Bac+3 (bachelor's degree), agricultural-school teacher)

This physical strictness linked to a form of meditative introspection is also perceived by some interviewees as a way to distinguish between levels of practice.

> Sometimes in a pose, you can spend one hour in a pose, it's true that it allows you to be demanding with yourself … you enter a state that's a bit… You're in a state of meditation, meaning you're just breathing and the body is in position and breathing, that's not something a beginner can achieve. You get there quite quickly if you set your mind to it… so yeah… That's the goal of this type of yoga. (Sylvie, 56 years old, Bac+8 (PhD), professor)

While the watchwords 'listen to yourself' and 'don't harm yourself' permeate many yoga discourses and classes, they do not always – or for everyone – conflict with the idea of self-improvement. Reaching this level of body and meditative control is a kind of milestone that can make practitioners want to deepen their yogic practice.

In the following interview extract, Sylvie explains the moment when she felt she had reached this particular dimension:

> Yes, yes, I did several [sessions of long meditation and physically demanding poses] and, to be honest, during one of them I stayed on the mat. I was really in the light and the next day I was in a kind of state, I felt this immense goodness, it was… Yes, I touched something a bit special that day. (Sylvie, 56 years old, Bac+8 (PhD), professor)

However, it is not possible for everyone to attain a higher self and this is what distinguishes the initiated from the rest. We are thus dealing with an accomplishment in relation to oneself but also in relation to other practitioners. The elite train to become yoga teachers in order to run classes and especially retreats, which allow for longer, deeper spiritual and physical stints, as well as adopting a particular lifestyle that is conducive to transformations. Our choice to survey only practitioners with at least two years' experience and regular practice necessarily highlights these specific spiritual dimensions – it would be interesting to examine them among yoga beginners.

This commitment subsequently leads to a founding spiritual experience, which is deemed to be out of the ordinary and marks the entry into a higher mental state that can be seen as, at least, a kind of culmination of a higher spirituality and a different presence in the world. This was the case of Anne-Claude (60 years old, Bac+4 (bachelor's degree), retired osteopath), who describes how during a retreat in India, where she performed saltwater cleansings and intense meditation, she experienced the death of her father and found lasting peace.

> What the retreat changed for me is very personal. You had to drink salted water to cleanse your intestine. So you drank lukewarm salted water with salt from Himalaya and at one point your stomach was cleansed. But then you needed to be able to drink more so that it reached your intestine. After my seventh or eighth glass, I needed to throw up so badly I couldn't take it any longer. I only had one image in my head, it's very personal. My dad had passed seventeen years earlier, … when I drank that salted water I could really see my father drowning and I'd really thought I'd done my grieving, but it came back with a vengeance then. I was and still am amazed I experienced that, and now it's much, much better.

Interviewees speak of this search for spiritual dimensions as a solitary and profoundly individual journey. The focus needed during bodywork, particularly in terms of feeling the postures, is described as a priority. Thus, Marie-Noëlle (60 years old, Bac+8 (PhD), researcher) explains that she prefers 'a class where there isn't a lot of talking because it's true that, when you start talking, you lose concentration'. As for Antoine, he changed his yoga teacher after a few years because during her classes there was too much 'chit-chatting' before starting. Marie-Noëlle also shared with us her impressions on this topic by comparing three teachers she had followed:

> So, when we arrive, everybody says hello, changes into their gear, etc. It's true that in Fabienne's class there's a bit too much talking. In Claire's there's no talking at all, and in Isabelle's even less, you really don't want to talk there. … in general, I liked to go to a class where there isn't a lot of talking because it's true that, when you start talking, you lose concentration. So yeah, I preferred it quiet.

Yoga practice is thus fundamentally individual in nature – orientated towards self-control, which is associated with little sociability between practitioners attending the same class. Many practitioners reinforce their focus on themselves by going on retreats for a few days or weeks in yoga centres where verbal exchanges are reduced to a minimum and silence must be strictly observed. This is, for example, the case of Élodie (41 years old, Bac+3 (bachelor's degree), primary-school teacher), who took part in a retreat in order to learn to live in solitude:

> I went on a retreat with some sisters who live as hermits in a forest, in the mountains. They each have a small house. I love working on the question of solitude, it was perfect there, I cut myself off from everything… phone. I followed the rhythm of the daylight, did chores for the place…

Self-control through the body (controlling one's breathing, paying attention to sensations and emotions, meditation) is part of an individualistic practice based on a shared vision of what yoga should be: a bodily, silent practice focused on the self.

These results from the qualitative analysis complement those obtained through the quantitative analysis, which show that the meaning attributed by practitioners primarily revolves around health, well-being, and a certain self-optimization. Meeting others is not predominantly desired. However, the strongly individual characteristics of the practice can be linked with the spiritual dimensions analyzed here as a necessary means to achieve this higher level of being in the world, which is a source of particularly intense emotional renewal. Anne-Claude and Sylvie describe very well the emotion they felt at this specific moment. The feelings of 'power', of 'having touched something special', perfectly illustrate this aspect of yoga and especially the deep excitement that comes from reaching this particular state. The analyses produced in this last section confirm those obtained in the previous one regarding the importance of the emotional work, but they also highlight the importance of spiritual dimensions. In other words, this very intense emotional renewal is both a means to transcend the bodies' material reality, but also the consequence of this transcendence and the new state of being that results from it. Whilst the nature of these immaterial dimensions is not clearly defined, including by the yoga elites, they can be seen as new forms of quest for excitement that are specific to more recent practices than those initially cited by Elias and Dunning (Dunning, 2001) (Dunning et al., 1992) (Elias and Dunning, 2008), such as football. This idea of the recent evolution of certain dimensions of the quest for excitement has been particularly examined in relation to extreme sports (Bettine et al., 2013). Studies have noted the importance of individuality

rather than collective aspects, as well as an intense emotional renewal rather than a release of impulses.

Yoga and the quest for excitement: emotional renewal and current practices

This study, which has focused on the concrete dimensions of yoga practice, highlights the importance of the quest for excitement as a theoretical framework that can be used to explain practitioners' significant involvement in this activity. Firstly, it is a combination of self-control and emotional renewal that seems to underpin their engagement in this activity. By controlling their bodies through *asanas* (postures) and *pranayama* (breathing), they reach a specific meditative state that is a source of new emotions described as better adjusted and, above all, applicable in daily life. The concept of the quest for excitement as described by Elias and Dunning is centred around the emotional control-decontrol dyad. Here, the notion of decontrol is to be seen not so much as a cathartic way of releasing one's emotions as controlling them in order to renew them. Secondly, this meditative state allows practitioners to access certain spiritual dimensions or at least attempt to transcend material reality. Reaching these new states leads to a great intensity of emotions and sensations. According to Elias and Dunning, the quest for excitement applies to a wide range of leisure activities such as mimetic activities, which include imitative activities but also those that generate complex emotional experiences. From this perspective, this article clearly shows that yoga practice should be seen through the prism of the quest for excitement, but it also allows us to partially redraw its contours. The spiritual dimensions and powerful intensity of the new emotions it arouses revolve more around an emotional renewal than a cathartic release of these emotions. Thus, the arrival of new practices that are more focused on interiority and individuality seems to fall under the quest for excitement, albeit as an updated incarnation. It would be interesting to widen the study to other current practices, such as meditative gymnastics of Asian origin (qigong, tai chi) and extreme sports (particularly 'ultra' sports: trails, raids, bikes). Finally, the results presented here and especially the very powerful emotional renewal need to be interrogated through the lens of the choice of practitioners (particularly committed), the type of yoga (spiritual), and geographic characteristics (urban). Similarly, whilst the quest for excitement in its renewed forms appears as an appropriate theoretical framework for describing the practice of yoga, its link to political dimensions touched on here also needs to be further examined. [12]

Endnotes

[1] Source: National Health Interview Survey, url: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db325-h.pdf

[2] https://snpy.fr/enquetes/grande-enquete-pratique-yoga-en-france/

[3] 'Hatha School' is not the real name of the school studied. It has been given this name in order to preserve the interviewees' anonymity.

[4] The information on the survey design (sampling, multimode data collection) is provided in Lefèvre, Brice and Valérie Raffin. 2021. 'Les freins à la pratique des Français peu ou non sportifs: des situations hétérogènes.' *Injep Analyses & Synthèses* (52).

[5] The occupation of yoga 'teacher' is not officially recognized. In France, there are only certifications awarded by private schools, which vary greatly (courses can last from several months to several years). Also, among the regular practitioners we studied, we found individuals who gave yoga classes but these were rarely their main source of income. Within YogaProfs, only five interviewees 'lived off' their income from teaching yoga. The others had either a main job or other sources of personal income (partner, family).

[6] The Hatha School does not distinguish between different levels of student.

[7] For further information on this survey, see Lefèvre, Brice and Valérie Raffin. 2023. 'Les pratiques physiques et sportives en France: Résultats de l'enquête nationale 2020 menée par le Ministère chargé des sports et l'Institut national de la jeunesse et de l'éducation populaire (INJEP).' Paris: Institut National de la Jeunesse et de l'Education Populaire (INJEP).
In order to calculate the percentages presented in this article, we adjusted the sample using weightings provided with the data by INJEP.

[8] In this text, we use Sanskrit terms for yoga postures. For precise definitions see: Singleton, Mark. 2010. *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[9] Quoting the teacher at the Hatha School, who speaks of the 'monkey of the mind' or 'mad monkey' according to a Buddhist conception whereby ideas and mental images have to be tamed in order to facilitate a form of concentration.

[10] Self-observation by Marie-Carmen Garcia (co-author) during meditation sessions lasting over an hour, as part of a course that offered Buddhist-inspired meditation. When meditating in a *vajrasana* pose, the practitioner's body is completely still and his or her gaze must not deviate from an oblique direction, looking at nothing whatsoever. Despite years of training in *pranayama* and yogic postures, the transition to this meditation proved to be physically quite painful and mentally difficult to sustain.

[11] A phrase often used in yoga classes.

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Table 1. Social characteristics of yoga practitioners according to the INJEP survey (2020)

Sources: INJEP 2020, Employment Survey 2019, and Census 2017; N (INJEP) = 735

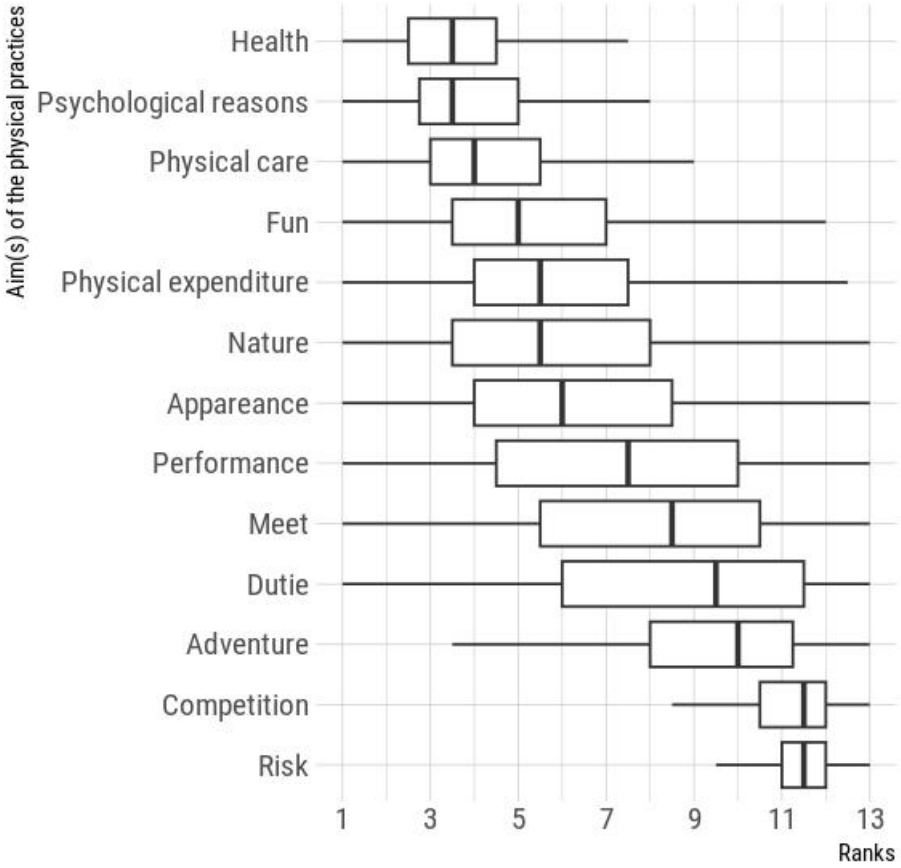
	% (sample)	% (pop. FR) *
Sex		
Female	81.2	48.6
Male	18.8	51.4
Body Mass Index (BMI)		
Low	6.1	4.5
Normal	64.4	48.2
Overweight	19.7	47.3
N/A	9.8	0
Age		
15-24	12	14.6
25-39	31.6	21.3
40-49	18.4	15.3
50-64	24.3	23.3
65 and over	13.6	25.5
Education level		
Below Baccalaureate	22.9	37.8
Baccalaureate	20.1	20.7
<Bac+3	17.2	15.6
>Bac+3	39.8	25.6
Occupation		
Farmers	0.9	1.1
Craftworkers, shopkeepers	4.1	5
Managers and professionals	22.5	14.2
Intermediate occupations	28.8	19
Employees	19	20.9
Workers	3.4	15.9
Not working	19.4	23.7
N/A	1.9	0.3

Monthly income level (self-eval.)		
Comfortable	69.6	63.6
Just about managing	21.8	22.3
Struggling	8.3	14.1
N/A	0.3	0
Main residence		
100,000 and over	60.3	47.1
between 2,000 and 100,000	24.7	32.1
2,000 or less	14.8	20.8
N/A	0.1	0

Note: 60.3% of the INJEP survey respondents who said they practised yoga live in cities with 100,000 inhabitants or more – compared to 47.1% of French people in employment.

Figure 1: The meanings of physical practice for yoga practitioners (INJEP 2020)

Source: INJEP 2020; N = 735



Note: The median rank for the categories ‘health’ and ‘being comfortable in your own skin’ is between 3 and 4. So for 50% of the interviewees who practise yoga, health or wanting to be ‘comfortable in your own skin’ are among the first three reasons given for doing a physical activity.