

Yoga is Big Business

By Paul Fox (originally published in Yoga Magazine)

Yoga has become mainstream over the past ten years. Tens of thousands of people have taken up yoga, some of them inspired by the many celebrities who have taken to the mat because of the health and toning benefits of this ancient system of exercise and spiritual development.

As yoga has become more popular, it has received much more media attention, spawning hundreds of articles on the different approaches to yoga and how it should be practiced. These articles are often accompanied by wild guesses about how many people practice yoga in the UK. Some have claimed that it is as many as one million people. Our research suggests that yoga is in rude health and still growing rapidly, but we are some way off from hitting the one million figure.

Our overall findings suggest that there are just over 10,000 active yoga teachers in the UK, teaching between 20,000 and 30,000 yoga classes each week. Research suggests that teachers are offering an average of 2-3 classes per week and that the average number of students per class is around 15. This suggests that there are between 300,00 and 460,000 people currently practicing yoga in the UK.

It is no surprise that the biggest beast in the yoga jungle is the British Wheel of Yoga – recognised by the Sports Councils as the national governing body for yoga in the UK. With more than three thousand teachers, the BWY provides nearly one third of yoga teaching in the UK. Its teachers provide around 9,000 classes a week, reaching an estimated 150,000 students.

What may surprise many people is that the other big beast in the jungle is the BSY Group (formerly British School of Yoga), which specialises in distance learning courses for yoga teachers. It has around 3,000 teachers, putting it on a par with the British Wheel in terms of teaching numbers. Perhaps we shouldn't be so surprised at the size of the BSY Group, given that it will be celebrating its 60th anniversary next year. The BWY by contrast has been going for only 40 years.

Further down the list we find that the Sivananda organisation with just over one thousand teachers and the Iyengar organisation with 820 teachers are also significant players in the yoga market. The Iyengar organisation runs a particularly vigorous training regime and requires a big commitment from its teachers. The Sivananda approach is rather different, because it is possible to train to be a teacher in four weeks. But that four weeks is an intensive residential Ashram experience which adds up to a lot of training hours.

Many people will be surprised to see that there are only around 130 Ashtanga Yoga teachers in the UK. Although this approach to yoga is growing in popularity and attracts a disproportionate amount of media attention, it is surprisingly difficult to become an Ashtanga teacher. Would-be teachers are

expected to travel to make several trips to India to study for a month at a time with the Guru of Ashtanga Yoga, Shri K Pattabhi Jois. After some time, lucky students may receive a “blessing” to teach. Only very senior students who have been going to Mysore for around ten years, like John and Lucy Scott and Hamish Hendry, have been “certified” to teach.

The Iyengar-inspired teacher, Ruth White, has trained 350 teachers on her own. This impressive figure will not be such a surprise to those who know Ruth. She has been one of the most active yoga teachers in Britain over the past thirty years.

Among the other yoga teacher training organisations listed in our table are the Association for Yoga Studies – AYS -- (formerly Viniyoga Britain); the Mandala Yoga Ashram in Wales; Satyananda UK (the worldwide Bihar School of Yoga); Friends of Yoga – FRYOG – which is as old as the British Wheel; the Yoga for Health Foundation; and the Scottish Yoga Teachers Association, which has strong links to the BWY.

We have included in our statistics a figure of 750 for “other” yoga teachers. This covers small teacher training organisations too numerous to mention, as well as active teachers who trained in India or somewhere else abroad. This figure is necessarily something of an estimate.

With surveys like this it is always difficult to extrapolate precise figures for the number of classes and therefore the number of students practicing yoga. The assumption that each teacher provides an average of 2-3 classes each week is based on some research carried out on teaching members of the BWY. It is also backed up by the experience of the insurance industry.

Nigel Wissett-Warner's company, DSC-Strand Limited (www.yoga-link.co.uk), is one of the leading insurance scheme providers for yoga teachers in the UK. He agrees that it is difficult to say exactly how many classes yoga teachers would generally conduct each week, but believes the average to be between 2 and 3. "Like actors, some yoga teachers 'rest' and don't teach at all for a period of time; many others are teaching a couple of classes and some teach a dozen or more classes and make a good career out of yoga teaching".

Of course, our survey does not include people who have tried yoga and then given it up for one reason or another. There must be tens of thousands – perhaps hundreds of thousands – of people who have had experience of yoga but do not currently attend a class.

One of the big questions thrown up by our survey is whether or not the boom in yoga is set to continue or has peaked. Jonathan Satin is manager of Triyoga at Primrose Hill in London – the biggest yoga centre in the UK. He told Yoga Magazine that the interest in yoga has been growing steadily over the past five years. “When we started we had roughly 65-70 classes a week. Now we have 100. We have also opened a second smaller venue in Covent Garden”.

Jonathan says it is difficult to know how yoga will develop in the future, but he is optimistic. "We believe the growth will continue. If you look to the American market, yoga is increasing year on year by 25% -- a phenomenal growth rate. Provided you offer high quality teaching and the right environment I believe it will continue to grow in the UK. The key is quality of teaching. If you get poor teachers it affects everyone".