

# JOY: The Journal of Yoga

## Yoga: A Competition?

By Nikita Goel

Recently there has been a debate going on in the world of yoga: whether or not yoga should be considered an Olympic sport. This debate has become increasingly important as yoga has been pushed onto the world stage with the first annual International Yoga Day, celebrated on June 21<sup>st</sup>. The debate has caused a rift in the yoga community, with many puzzled practitioners in each camp. Rajashree Chaudhury, the founder of the USA Yoga Federation and the one to introduce the idea of competitive yoga, said in an interview that “Raja yoga is the mental practice and incorporates meditation, pranayama, and mudra. What are the benefits of having a raja yoga practice? The benefit is spirituality. Can spirituality be measured? No. And we don’t try. What we are, what we are actually doing in the competition, is only hatha yoga. What’s the benefit of hatha yoga? Physical. What do you need to do hatha yoga? Physical body. That’s it. Breathing and spirit is a part of any sport. So that’s why hatha yoga can be a sport.”<sup>1</sup>

This leads us to the question that lies at the heart of the debate: “what is the purpose of yoga?” I, and many others, would argue that the point of yoga is to hone our minds, guide us on a spiritual path and reach a peaceful state. Competition, on the other hand, has been proven to increase pressure. Based on research by Shira Taylor Gura, hatha yoga is an ancient mind-body exercise which uses breathing and postures to relax the mind and body. When individuals practice the postures, deep breathing and stretching movements of hatha yoga, they increase awareness of their body positioning that can evoke a relaxation response.<sup>2</sup> This practice is the exact opposite of Ms. Chaudhury’s argument.

In addition, the proven effects that competition has on an individual go against the established purpose of yoga. “The roots of yoga are based in acceptance and non-violence and compassion toward self and others,” said Roseanne Harvey, 35, of Montreal, who has been practicing yoga for fifteen years. She mentioned how in yoga class they teach one another to not compete. She also feels that if emphasis is put on perfecting a pose it would discourage people who would look at the competitors as attaining a physical level they can’t reach. She said, “It can deflate people, it can intimidate people from wanting to try it.”<sup>3</sup> Competitions can be highly stressful events, and the possibility of losing can cause great anxiety and agitation to participants. In

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<sup>1</sup> Zoe Kors, “Interview with Rajashree Choudhury,” *Origin Magazine*, 2013, <http://www.originmagazine.com/2013/04/07/us-founder-and-president-rajashree-shoudhury-interview-part-i/>.

<sup>2</sup> Shira Taylor Gura, “Yoga for stress reduction and injury prevention at work,” *WORK: A Journal of Prevention, Assessment & Rehabilitation* 19, no. 1 (2002): <http://content.iospress.com/articles/work/wor00221>.

<sup>3</sup> “Should yoga be an Olympic sport?,” *THE ASSOCIATED PRESS*, February 28, 2012, <http://www.nydailynews.com/sports/yoga-olympic-sport-article-1.1029893>.

such events the competitors' fates are negatively linked and can often be described by the mantra of "my success requires your failure." Trying to outperform others has been found to be damaging to one's self-esteem, which in turn is damaging to overall psychological health. In fact, the benefits of yoga have been found to be nearly opposite from the effects of competitive stress.<sup>4</sup> When a person practices yoga postures, stretching, and deep breathing, he or she can reduce pain, relieve tension, and improve communication and mental health.

There are many people within the yoga community who praise its benefits and disagree with the push towards competition. However, it is important to note that yoga is a demanding physical and mental activity, like many competitive organized sports. Raj Bhavsar, gymnastics bronze medalist at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, argues that yoga should be a competitive sport, saying "I understand how there could be a correlation between the two [gymnastics and yoga] given the balance, flexibility, and strength required, but all sports rely on that. I attended a yoga competition over a year ago - seeing the physique of the athletes and watching them perform routines under pressure are what pushed me over the edge that this is a sport 100 percent. The essence of sport is a dedication to training, showing up to perform, combined with a certain level of mental readiness: I checklisted these three things with yoga."<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to note that the debate in this case is not that of whether yoga is a sport, but rather whether yoga should be an organized competitive activity. Yoga is undeniably a physical activity, but this does not mean that it has to be a competition. Yoga, like any physical activity, can be performed as a talent and for self-improvement and health, not merely for winning and losing.

Ms. Chaudhury's second argument for making yoga a competition is to encourage youth participation. She has said that children do not participate in yoga because it is uninteresting and they do not know what they would achieve out of it, and turning yoga into something by which youth can win accolades would solve the lack of participation.<sup>6</sup> This may be true to some extent, as children tend to not understand the importance of meditation, but it is not true that competition and 'winning a trophy' is the only thing that can motivate a child. I myself am a youth who practices yoga and who started yoga so I could take care of my health, not because I wanted to compete and win recognition – and I am not alone.

Yoga is something which we should do for ourselves and for our well-being, not due to the outcome of a contest. It should be something that makes us joyous, healthy and stress-free. To keep the spirit of yoga alive and spread it for the benefit of mankind and health we should not turn it into a competitive sport that hinders the purpose of yoga.

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<sup>4</sup> Alfie Kohn, "No Contest: A Case Against Competition," *New Age Journal*, September/October 1986, <http://www.angelfire.com/or/sociologyshop/myths.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Marina Chetner, "Yoga as an Olympic Sport?," *Mind Body Green*, August 10, 2012, <http://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-5763/Yoga-as-an-Olympic-Sport.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Rajashree Choudhury, "USAYOGA," *United States Yoga Federation*, accessed December 21, 2014, <http://www.usayoga.org/our-story>.

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