

Tokyo Yoga - Tradition & Modern

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WHAT IS IT LIKE TO PRACTICE IN one of the most modern, expensive and cutting-edge city in the world? Tokyo has for years been a trend-setting, buzzing capital, a hub for business, technology and consumer culture, attracting foreigners, tourists and the masses to its belly like a vortex running on adrenaline. Coffee vending machines appear on virtually every street corner, station platform and parking lot, providing a quick fix solution to a demanding and hectic lifestyle.

Shibuya, Ginza and Ueno – epic, buzzing districts, always seem to appear in visitors' snapshots of Japan, in the same way as London is famed for Piccadilly Circus and Big Ben. Media reports only reinforce this post-modern, stereotyped view of Japanese culture, so when I told friends I was off to investigate the yoga scene in Tokyo, I was greeted with some quizzical looks. Japan is certainly famous for its aesthetics, zen temples and spiritual roots, but yoga is a far more recent import.

Although as a practice, yoga has been around for many years, the big boom started in 2004, when yoga became trendy in most parts of East Asia – following a global trend partly set by people like Madonna or Sting. But that boom only lasted for a couple of years in Japan – by 2006, the few large yoga centers like Bikram Yoga had to close or downsize to adjust to falling numbers. The smaller, independent studios remained active and even grew with a smaller but more dedicated student base, some of whom having traveled or studied abroad, wanting to take their practice to another level. The current student base still remains fairly young, with a typical class consisting of a majority of 25-35 year old women, but there has recently been an increase in Japanese men joining classes.

The fact that Yoga Journal just launched a quarterly edition in Japanese, should indicate that interest for yoga is here to stay,



Jogajaya teacher and owner Patrick Oancia (center)

with a shift towards integrating yoga lifestyle into a modern environment.

Different from many Asian cities, all the studios I visited in Tokyo were small (one room, holding up to 20 people on average), due to high rents and lack of space, but not surprisingly, all were extremely clean – students diligently spraying their mats after class wiping off every speck of dust or drop of sweat, tidying props and bolsters, in a typically respectful and dutiful manner.

MINDFULNESS IN JAPAN'S CAPITAL

My quest for places to practice yoga in Tokyo started in the West side of the city, in Ebisu, a quiet yet trendy and up-market area. It is also home to YogaJaya, one of Tokyo's leading independent studios. Opened by Patrick Oancia in 2004, and neatly tucked away in a residential back street, YogaJaya is a peaceful abode to all things yoga. A small reception on the ground floor acts the shop, information desk and meeting point.

I was greeted with a smile as I registered for Patrick's busy Friday evening dynamic class. We all started by quietly sitting, while Patrick slipped in and led an extended breathing sequence. Core strength and arm balances happened to be the theme of the day, so we went straight into a playful, sweaty and hard session, but Patrick gave each student help and attention as if in a workshop.

Browsing the schedule after class, I felt reassured to see handstand practice wasn't a Japanese studio specialty, but rather a one-off special: YogaJaya offers much more variety. Patrick pointed out that although dynamic styles are very popular, classes and workshops do range from gentler styles to meditation and pranayama with renowned practitioners.

But, as I asked Patrick after the class, is the yoga approach here, typically Japanese? How are students' general attitude to life reflected in their practice? (Tricky question to answer when the class is a mix of men, women, foreigners and teacher training students).

Japanese culture, he tells me, is on a very broad level, clearly regimented, structured and competitive. This is why at the start, dynamic practices like Astanga really kicked off. As a discipline, Astanga is systematic, organized and structured, which fits well with an ordered and controlled Japanese way of life. Students are generally dedicated and disciplined – often to the extreme, which is why they love this system.

But aspects of a culture that can sometimes be extremely dogmatic never came across in my tour of Tokyo – and I saw fewer yoga fanatics than in London.

Yoga Jaya has always shifted more towards other forms of yoga – they offer less Astanga classes to balance the schedule with other styles like Hatha Vinyasa, Yoga Focus

classes and special courses. Class dynamics vary, taught with an emphasis on alignment, breath awareness and mindfulness.

Patrick is a thinker and an activist. His dedicated yoga practice goes far beyond setting up and running one of Tokyo's leading yoga studios – he has a vision for Yoga in Japan. (Highlighted in a recent video: http://www.yogajaya.com/films/yogajaya_vision_small.mov).

The Teacher Training courses, workshops and classes held at YogaJaya reflect this vision whilst seek to provide an environment for people to explore their own practice; speaking eloquently and with passion, he encourages students to develop awareness and find their own way, by “working with different metaphors to find their potential in real life and become unified to the active life.” Rather deep insight for a Friday night but I liked his style, approach and the space.

MORE SHIBUYA-YOGA

Next stop, Hiroo station. Still in the heart of Shibuya, is Tokyo's latest arrival, Yoga Tree studio. Running up four flights of stairs (I found out there was a lift on my way out!) after a somewhat confusing train journey through Tokyo, it felt like entering a sleek, intimate, yoga haven. I was late so missed the start of Michael Glenn's Vinyasa Flow class, but was greeted with a smile as I lay my mat down at the back. Michael, who opened the studio in 2009 (thanks to a slump in the property market, making spaces like these more affordable in central Tokyo), teaches in a calm and gentle manner, focusing on alignment, breath and body awareness. Students in this (English) class were mostly foreign but Yoga Tree attracts people from a mix of backgrounds, age, gender and levels.

Yoga Tree's variety of classes and styles maintains the 'belief that yoga is a big umbrella that offers something to everyone'. The schedule reflects this view: from traditional Hatha to Astanga, Vinyasa Flow, Yoga for Runners and Restorative – taught in both Japanese and English- there is definitely something here for everyone.

Having worked for years in advertising, Michael believes in letting the studio find its own space in the capital: he remains

reluctant to overly promote his studio, new classes and workshops. He believes in letting the space “grow organically”, develop in its own terms – and this is exactly how Yoga Tree feels like – a peaceful, calm and open space with what it seems, a steady, harmonious future ahead.

OTHER PLACES

Tokyo does offer a variety of other places to practice- Sun Moon Yoga, Lotus8 and Prana Power to name but a few. Each has its place in the capital, and each of them seems to offer a selection of Dynamic, Hatha and Restorative classes in both English and Japanese. Iyengar fans can pay Rajay Mahtani (Iyengar Certified) a visit in one of her central Tokyo classes (<http://www.rajay.org/yoga/tyc.html>).



Yoga Tree offers a variety of styles

The website Hello Yoga gives an honest overview of the main studios and practical information on each place.

So yoga shopping in the capital of Japan could be an activity in itself, but this time, my tour stops here.

COSTS

Tokyo is a notoriously expensive place to be and yoga classes reflect this costly lifestyle. Drop-ins vary between 2,500-3,000 yen (about GBP 20 on average per class), but cheaper options are available for residents or long-term stayers. Some studios like YogaJaya for instance, offer introductory discounts (half price for the first class). They also run daily open practice between 8.30-10 am for space-deprived Tokyo-ites wanting to roll out their mat and practice freely in a dedicated yoga place – a good concept for busy cities.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Has yoga in Japan evolved in a way of its own, taking some typically Japanese traits?

Yoga in one of the world's most hectic, cutting-edge cities definitely has a place, rooted for many years but only fairly recently emerging into people's daily lives. While yoga practice here is a fairly new phenomenon, it is leaving space to grow deeper roots and open up to new realms. Training teachers locally is one first step, a task that YogaJaya is deeply committed to.

Tokyo may in fact not be a number one destination for spiritual quests, but on a next visit to Japan's capital, you can definitely feel safe in the knowledge you can roll out your mat, practice, breathe and find a welcoming yoga community, no matter which path you choose to take.

USEFUL INFORMATION

Hello Yoga

Run by yoga teacher Dylan Robertson, this is *the* website for Tokyo's English speaking community, providing information on classes, workshops, teachers, and articles. <http://helloyoga.com/>

Yoga Jaya

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Tokyo, 150-0021
Ph: +81-(0)3-5784-3622
<http://www.yogajaya.com>

Yoga Tree

Tanaka Building 4F, 5-5-1 Hiroo,
Shibuya-ku
Tokyo 150-0012
<http://www.yogatree.jp/>

Eco Nikko

A retreat centre in the heart of Unesco World heritage site of Nikko, two hours north of Tokyo. They run some classes and retreats in a stunningly peaceful and Buddhist temple setting. <http://econikko.com/>

Inna is a freelance writer and yoga teacher based in London and Asia. Since embarking on an intensive Ayurveda and Yoga teacher training in Goa, she has been sharing her passion for yoga and environmental issues on and off the mat – and across the globe. inna@brahmaniyoga.com www.brahmaniyoga.com

