

## *Perspective of the Mainstream Image of Yoga – The Sails Within*

With yoga becoming more and more popular, it's easier to find images and videos of people, particularly women, demonstrating postures for health and fitness on TV, in magazines and social media. Yoga can have a transformational impact on the mind and body, which in part makes it so attractive. Yet sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking only certain people can practice yoga based on what we see on the internet or in yoga studios. We think we have to have the body of a gymnast or super-model to practice. As a result, some people become intimidated to try yoga or they're trying to aspire to an ideal they see outside of themselves. However, if we step out of our head and stereotypes for a moment, do we really know the exact image for yoga? Is it even a posture at all? Perhaps we as a western society have portrayed a false ideal in the mainstream world about what yoga is, how it feels, what it looks like and who practices it.

I was inspired to think about this when I was looking at news in *USA Today* and saw an article about a company called Swimsuits For All, which recreated a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue with [plus-size models](#). Swimsuits For All wanted to show beauty comes in any size and appearance in response to *Sports Illustrated*, which typically has slim women fitting the supermodel body, which the fashion industry typically associates with beauty. The cover shot of the campaign provided some positive shock value, seeing women in a size 12-plus posing topless and beautiful like their other model counterparts. Unfortunately, women with body types other than those of a "super model" don't seem to get as much positive media attention, if they get attention at all. It's great to have variety in beauty and refreshing to see the Swimsuits For All campaign give women with curves the attention they deserve. However, though we often hear beauty comes in all shapes, colors and sizes, it is not celebrated as much in mainstream media. Not to mention the advertisement of women in yoga seems to present similar body type dynamics.

We're familiar seeing a picture of women in magazines, on the internet or in social media practicing Scorpion pose in a two-piece outfit or Standing Bow pose on the beach. Many of these photos feature women with a slender body type, as opposed to a woman with more curves or bigger build. Yes, some body types have an easier time with certain postures because of how they're constructed. However, do we think of a woman who is a size 14 being a cover model for Warrior One or Headstand? Or do we think a woman who is a size 2, 4 or 6 as more appropriate? We can be conditioned to think yoga looks a certain way based on stereotypes we've picked up from television, peers and our personal experiences, but a change in thought begins with understanding *what* yoga actually is.

Yoga can be defined in many ways, but it is often described as unity between the self and the universe, not necessarily the physical aspect most of us think when it comes to yoga. In fact, this physical aspect, also known as asana or posture, is only a small part of yoga. There are a total of eight aspects or limbs of yoga as described in *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*: yama (abstinence), niyama (observance), asana (posture practice), pranayama (breath), pratyahara (withdrawal of senses), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (superconscious state). With that in depth description, yoga is really about a sense of being, not an outward appearance. Let's not forget yoga is just as beneficial to men as it is for women, yet another stereotype about the practice.

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While the physical aspect of yoga is relevant, a regular practitioner may find being on a yogic path goes far beyond one's appearance. Ideally, that would be something everyone understands about yoga, but generally in western culture today, the fitness aspect of yoga seems to fit more comfortably for the time being.

Our society would be best served seeing more photos of different women's bodies in Standing Bow or Headstand, not to mention more men in those postures too. Even pictures of modified postures for poses such as Plank can serve a purpose in showing the infinite images of yoga. We know we don't have to look like models to be beautiful and worthy of adoration. Just like our bodies and practice levels, we don't need to be pigeon-holed to determine whether we exhibit an image of yoga. While we may want the media and society to change their views about how yoga is portrayed, like Swimsuits For All, we have to be the catalysts for the diversity of what yoga looks like and what it truly is.