

Is A Heated Room Important When Practicing Yoga?

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Imagine what it might feel like to sit in a dry sauna at the local gym. Notice how your energy seems to drop. It may be difficult to take a deep breath. Your thinking often will become clouded. As sweat drips off your body like a wet dishrag you continue to count the minutes until you can leave. You are more concerned about what you are going to do when you finally get out than enjoying the moment at hand.

Now imagine this same scenario, only this time you are not sitting on a redwood bench sipping a sports drink. This time you are practicing yoga. You are not just practicing any type of yoga. You are practicing “Hot Yoga”.

The last couple of years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of yoga practitioners. Executives to housewives have joined the fray of devotees. Many different styles have developed. Yoga studios seem to pop up on every corner now as entrepreneurs attempt to try their hand at this latest business trend.

The rage in the last few years has been to practice yoga in a warm room. Many hot yoga proponents try to keep the room at 100* F or above. Not only is the room heated but all of the doors and windows are closed. Yoga students are locked into a room without outside circulation. You are now exercising as if you were sitting in that gymnasium sauna. Only this time, you are not sitting.

While yoga continues to see a substantial boom in practitioners it comes into question as to the safety and effectiveness of practicing in a heated room. While staunch supporters of heated yoga rooms would have it no other way, (in fact, a heated room is the *only* way, in their opinion), raising the temperature of a yoga room brings up some very interesting questions that have yet to be answered.

Most likely drawing on their experience in India, many early yoga teachers who came to the West had almost always practiced in a warm environment. Whether you are indoors or outdoors it is very hot in India. You cannot escape the heat. Unfortunately, these same teachers credited the heat for their gymnastic success.

But many people have had just as much success and fruition with their yoga practice while practicing yoga in a neutral environment. Testimony after testimony of experienced teachers and practitioners

alike will account for the fact that the ambient room temperature had little or nothing to do with their body's ability to open up and change.

While it may be true that a warm room could help beginners and could help one to warm up at the beginning of the yoga practice, an entire yoga session in a warm room is not the only way to practice yoga.

First of all, let's look at what the heat is actually doing and not doing. It is thought that a warm room helps to heat a yoga student's muscles to help deepen the practice. But this may not necessarily be so.

The human body will gain heat in several ways: respiration, conduction, radiation, and convection. The body does not gain a significant amount of heat in a yoga class from respiration, or inhaling warm air. This is not a significant factor. Conduction only applies if you were actually sitting on a warm heat source and your skin is in direct contact with that source. This is not the case in hot yoga. Heat absorption by radiation happens in cases like the sun's direct rays shining on you. Radiation does not generally occur in a yoga class unless the types of heaters used are radiant ones. They usually are not.

The main way that the body might absorb heat in a hot yoga class is through the process of convection. Convection occurs when the heat source comes in contact with air molecules in the room. Those molecules in turn float around the room and transfer their heat to anything that they touch that is conductive. Most likely this is your skin.

But there is a very big problem here. The skin actually acts as an insulator to prevent too much heat from entering your body. There is no assurance that most of the heat is actually entering your body. The skin has three layers: epidermis, dermis, and subcutaneous layer. These layers of skin act as a barrier against excess outside heat. Underneath this final layer of skin there are layers of fat that act as another layer of insulation against too much heat penetrating the body. The body, in its ultimate wisdom, is trying to keep you in balance, (98.6°F), and prevent excess heat from entering.

Add to this the sweating mechanism. The body will perspire when it is trying to cool itself. Either our muscles are working hard on the inside, (like when you are exercising), or the room temperature is too hot on the outside. The body activates the sweat glands in the skin to use moisture as a way to cool itself off. The sweat is actually trying to cover the skin to carry away excess heat.

Many people falsely believe that by sweating profusely while practicing yoga they are achieving a deeper practice. This is not necessarily so. Heating the room is not the most effective way to heat up the muscles of a yoga student. Imagine trying to warm your house by lighting several fires on the outside of the house. It would take an awful lot of heat sources to even begin to feel a slight warming on the inside. This is because your house is usually insulated against excess exchange of hot and cold air. The walls act as insulators, just like your skin and fat. It would be much more efficient to light a fire on the inside of the house to warm the house up. This is much more efficient.

When we exercise, including practicing yoga, the muscles themselves begin to shed off excess heat after a short time. This is like the exhaust in your car trying to escape from the combustion of fuel in the engine. Once again, sweat is the way the body carries away this excess heat of muscle activity. Using your own muscles to warm your body is a much more efficient process.

There is a mindset of practitioners of hot yoga that coincides with extreme competition. Some of the most competitive personalities are drawn to hot yoga because they believe that they are doing the “ultimate” workout. This might be an illusion for some. Sure, one may be sweating profusely, but the level of depth in the poses might be hindered.

For example, our brain reacts to the stress response when it perceives a threat. This danger could be a real danger, (like a polar bear chasing after you), or an imaginary danger, (like the room is too hot). A warm room often becomes a danger sign to the brain and reacts with the stress response. You are now not only sweating profusely while trying to master a pose you are now fighting the heat. You have another battle going on. Your body is now tightening its muscles, (one of the reactions to the stress response), as you are attempting to lengthen. You are now fighting against yourself. If the room temperature were a comfortable degree you would not have this extra battle to wage. Competition is stressful. Competition, either with yourself or with others, almost always activates the stress response.

Competitive personalities are results oriented. In the hot yoga case these personalities believe that the more sweat produced the better person that they are. Needless to say, producing excess sweat does not make you a better person or a more advanced yogi. You only have a sweat soaked mat to show for your myth making.

A good example of the heat and stress response might be to imagine that you were taking a college entrance exam. Imagine the pressure that you might feel. Now let's imagine that in the back of the

classroom where you are taking this test there is a colony of Africanized killer bees flying busily around. How much attention can you really pay towards the test? This is the same with hot yoga. Many yoga students now spend their entire class just fighting off the heat and surviving to the end.

When you heat a room up and close the windows and doors and fill it with people breathing heavily and deeply the quality of air in that room quickly begins to deteriorate. Yoga instructors practicing hot yoga are encouraging their students to take deep breaths but they are filling the room with a toxic volume to ingest. As more and more people take deep breaths the levels of carbon dioxide rises and the levels of oxygen decreases. How can you be getting the benefits of deep breathing when you are depriving the body of what it requires most- oxygen?

Bacteria also love to flourish in a warm, sweaty environment. The remnants of each class linger on far after the class ends. Sweaty and sticky mats, floors, and walls, become a prime breeding ground for laboratory experiments. Even during class, the warmth of the air will increase the life of any airborne germs as they filter their way from one end of the room to the next. Molds, fungus, and bacteria love warm, moist environments.

If this is not insult enough hot yoga has been said to be good for just about anyone. Then why are there warning signs on hot tubs and saunas that certain people should avoid using them? Pregnant women, young children, the elderly, and those suffering from high blood pressure should avoid using hot tubs and saunas. But why is there a blanket acceptance to all who care to participate in hot yoga classes?

No, hot yoga is not for everyone. There are many ways to practice yoga and achieve all the marvelous benefits that the practice has to offer. While a heated room might appeal to some others will not benefit as much. While a warm environment is for some open doors and fresh moving air help others to stay relaxed to deepen into their practice.