**Beer yoga, goat yoga, hip-hop yoga: Is novelty yoga real yoga or incompatible with its true aims?**

Goat yoga, dog yoga, BroGa, SnowGa: it seems barely a week goes by without a new form of novelty yoga appearing on our Instagram feeds.

Usually it has involved an excitable herd of furry animals or a rhyme-based pun and was a one-off class rather than a structured fitness regime.

But can novelty forms of yoga truly call themselves yoga — or is it difficult to achieve the true aims of yoga while shivering in the snow, or with a goat trampling on your chest?

**Beer yoga more relaxed**

Mackay yoga studio owner Liz Eales teaches one beer yoga class per week among her schedule of more traditional yoga classes.

She said the atmosphere in a beer yoga class was more relaxed and informal than a regular class.

"Yoga can be quite daunting coming into a studio setting, so … having a beer, wine or cider, whatever you want … it's been really successful," she said.

 "There's a lot more laughs, it's a less serious vibe — so when people come in, it's just nice and relaxed, and they can just be themselves."

The classes supply one or two beers per person and participants incorporate the beer bottle into yoga poses.

"It can be quite physically challenging when you're holding a beverage in your hand that you don't want to spill. Your balance increases, your core increases," Ms Eales said.

"People can actually get a really good workout in the class, as well as find some muscles they didn't know about."

**No true form of yoga**

Jessica White from the University of Queensland tutors in Hinduism and Hindu texts, including the Yoga Sutra, and wrote her honours thesis on modern yoga.

She said the aims of modern or contemporary yoga included "becoming flexible, becoming strong, becoming mindful, steeling the mind, relaxing, becoming healthy, connecting with other people, connecting with yourself".

Ms White said the diversity of practices in yoga meant there was no true form of yoga and the practice was constantly evolving.

"The word yoga itself has been used to denote an incredibly diverse amount of practices and forms of philosophy over the the centuries, and so when we look back into the distant past … there's really no one form of practice that that we can say 'yes, this is the only true yoga'," she said.

"It's always been characterised by diversity, by adaptation, by syncretism, by absorbing different kinds of ideas into itself and changing throughout time."

Ms White said this diversity of ideas meant that novelty yoga forms did have a place in modern yoga.

"There would certainly be people out there in the yoga world, particularly those that come from a lineage-based yoga practice that might perhaps … say it has nothing to do with the true aims of yoga," she said.

"But there might people who would suggest that 'well, what are the true aims of yoga? That very much depends on the context, on the time'."

**Light-hearted fun**

Ms White said it was a question of what type of experience participants wished to have.

"I'm very aware that something like a beer yoga is probably a more light-hearted experience than a silent meditational retreat," she said.

Ms White said that participants may not find methods to relax or meditate during a novelty yoga class.

"I would say in beer yoga or goat yoga you would find some sort of postures, but would you find breathing practices, would you find meditation, would you find active relaxation? Maybe not," she said.

"One of the things that yoga does offer very well is the ability to become mindful or to learn to meditate with movement and … if you have a goat jumping over you, then how can that be achieved?"

**Gets the guys involved**

Ben Courtice, owner of the venue where the Mackay beer yoga classes are held, said novelty yoga was a way of enticing newcomers who may not otherwise try yoga.

"I find there's a lot more guys doing it," he said.

"With the beer, it's got a lot more blokes interested, so that's a good way to get the guys into doing yoga in a casual way.

"Everyone that's in the class talks to each other and some have another beer after the class and hang out, so it's very social."

Ms White said it was important to encourage a range of people to try yoga.

"Generally speaking modern yoga classes have been dominated by women, which is surprising in a way, because many of the very prominent original teachers or promoters of modern postural yoga style were men," she said.

"There are certainly people in the yoga world who are actively trying to encourage men into the practice, because it does offer so many benefits.

"Beer yoga may function as a way to entice people who might not have tried it, particularly men, to give it a go."

**Animal therapy and feel-good fitness**

Goat yoga starting popping up on farms in the United States in 2016 and quickly saw people lining up to take part.

Advocates say it is a form of fitness that allows people to tap into the positive effects of bonding with animals.

Central West yoga instructor, Jan Green, who led the inaugural goat yoga session at the gardens was new to the concept but said she understood why goats worked with the form of exercise.

"Goat yoga is just a very calming therapeutic thing to do and great for people with all sorts of issues going on," Ms Green said.

About eight kid goats wandered around the dozen or so yoga participants during the two-hour session, sometimes heading over to sniff and interact with the humans, or try an offered piece of fruit.

"They seemed to really love us when we're sitting in meditation; that's their favourite thing," Ms Green said.

**Animal attraction: a marketing win**

Many of the people who signed up to the yoga weekend at the gardens in Oberon were attracted by the addition of cuddly animals to an exercise retreat.

One participant was a Canadian woman, living in Sydney, who had never tried yoga before, but booked the session on a whim after seeing it advertised.

Another, Sarah Hardy, also from Sydney, who described her yoga practice as "infrequent", said she and her friend made their decision to go "in two minutes flat", solely because of the goats.

She thought part of the concept was to help people relax through a bit of fun.

"It's meant to induce yoga laughter and it certainly did that; we were all cracking up laughing," Ms Hardy said.

Ms Hardy said she thought goat yoga "had potential" in Australia but it all depended on the temperament of the goats because a session could go "any way".

Mayfield Gardens received a huge amount of publicity about its first goat yoga session and marketing and event manager, Meg McKenna, said it was clear the goats were a successful drawcard.

"It is good marketing but goats have this physical and mental ambiance, and they really do make people happy," Ms McKenna said.

While the addition of goats to a yoga session meant the yogis had to be careful of droppings when doing their poses, Ms McKenna said the goats were well behaved.

"They didn't perform as we expected but they were still a bit of fun," she said and added that the young animals would be returned to the care of the local farmer who had provided them for the session.