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BY LYNNE GOLODNER

"You can't cross the sea merely
by standing and staring at the water."
—Rabindranath Tagore

Taught on or near water, the ancient practice brings calm.

Waves on a glistening lake ripple under the morning sun, as silent yoga practitioners balance on mats laid flat on the grass, arms reaching for an invisible north star. The instructor speaks the poses, and the students follow wordlessly, the only sound other than her voice, the lisp of the wind and the ruffling current.

Waterfront yoga. Yoga on a paddleboard. Yoga and water go together like peanut butter and jelly, mother and baby, and studios and teachers throughout Michigan are capitalizing on this fit by bringing the ancient practice to Michigan's abundant waterfronts.

A 2016 Yoga Alliance study shows the number of Americans practicing yoga has increased 50 percent over the past four years to more than 36 million practitioners. Twelve percent of yoga practitioners practice on a beach, while 7 percent prefer to practice beside a body of water.

"Our minds are restless, and the practice of yoga is about learning how to get some space between the chatter and noise and busyness."
—Jennifer Saks

"We are inspired by water," Wallace J. Nichols says in "Blue Mind: The Surprising Science that Shows How Being Near, In, On or Under Water Can Make You Happier, Healthier, More Connected, and Better at What You Do."

"This human-water connection ... characterized by calm, peacefulness, unity and a sense of general happiness and satisfaction with life in the moment" exactly mirrors the purpose of yoga.

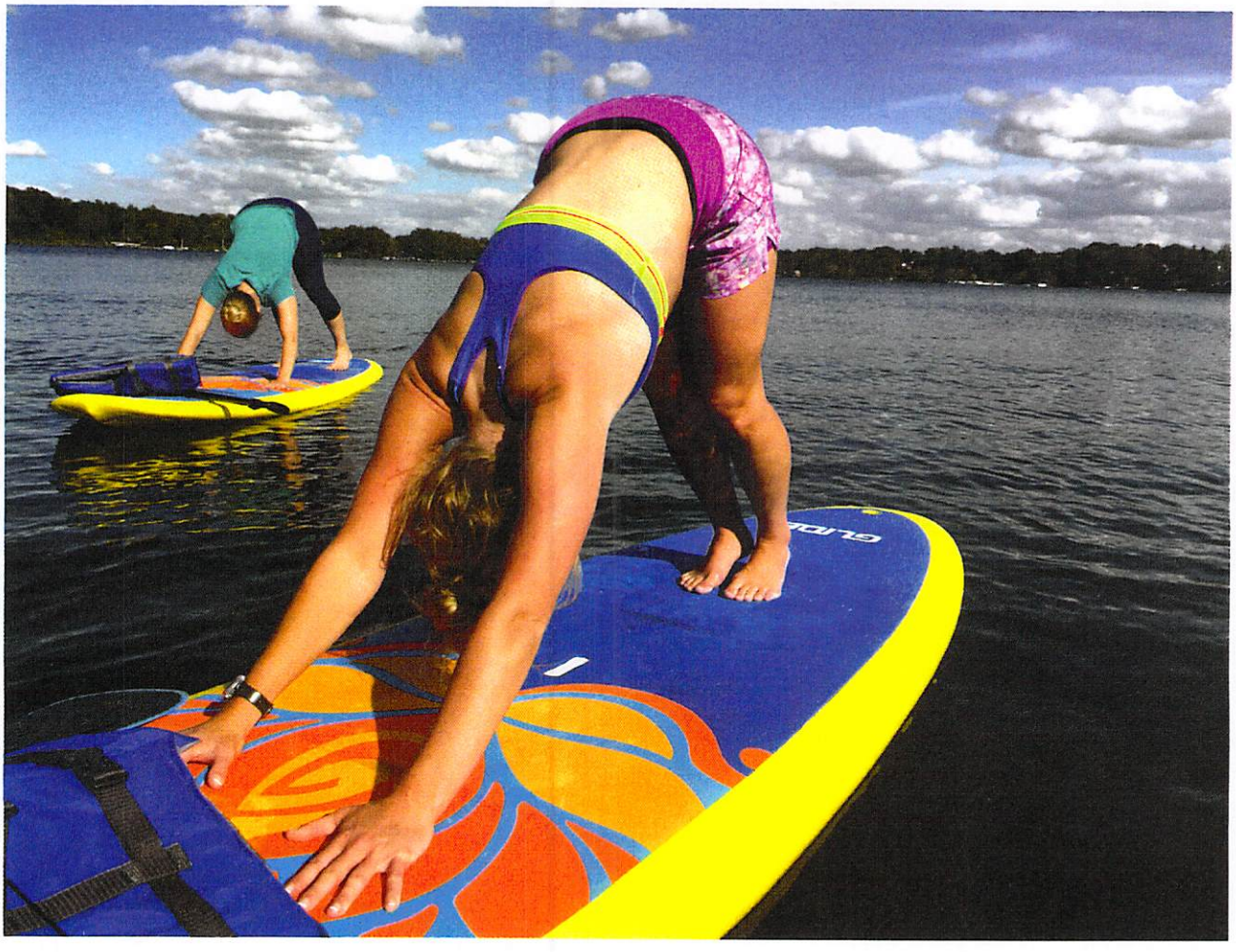
Translated from the Sanskrit to mean union or yoke, yoga is the practice of uniting mind, body and spirit. Modern-day teachers pull from the teachings of the Indian sages Patanjali, author of "The Yoga Sutras," and Vyasa, author of the "Bhagavad Gita," in constructing classes that transport people from modern-day stresses into a momentary state of calm.

Yogic practice explores five elements — earth, water, fire, air and ether. The water element focuses on flowing action, one movement flowing seamlessly into the next, generating peace at the soul level.

"Our minds are restless, and the practice of yoga is about learning how to get some space between the chatter and noise and busyness of our minds to be able to touch for a moment the still essence of who we are," says Jennifer Saks, retreat manager at Song of the Morning, a yoga retreat center in Vanderbilt on the Pigeon River.

Before the river was restored to its natural wild state in 2015 following the removal of a small dam managed by the retreat, the campus was centered on a pond created by the dam. Buildings border the river, and individuals immerse in the water or step into a craft to become one with its flow.

"A still lake is representative of the ultimate stillness inside us and how one little thought, rippling out in a thousand places, and then we're lost — it's almost like when you toss a stone onto a still lake, all the ripples and movement," Saks says. "Yoga is about the ability to flow; life is a moving, challenging, ever-flowing endeavor. A river

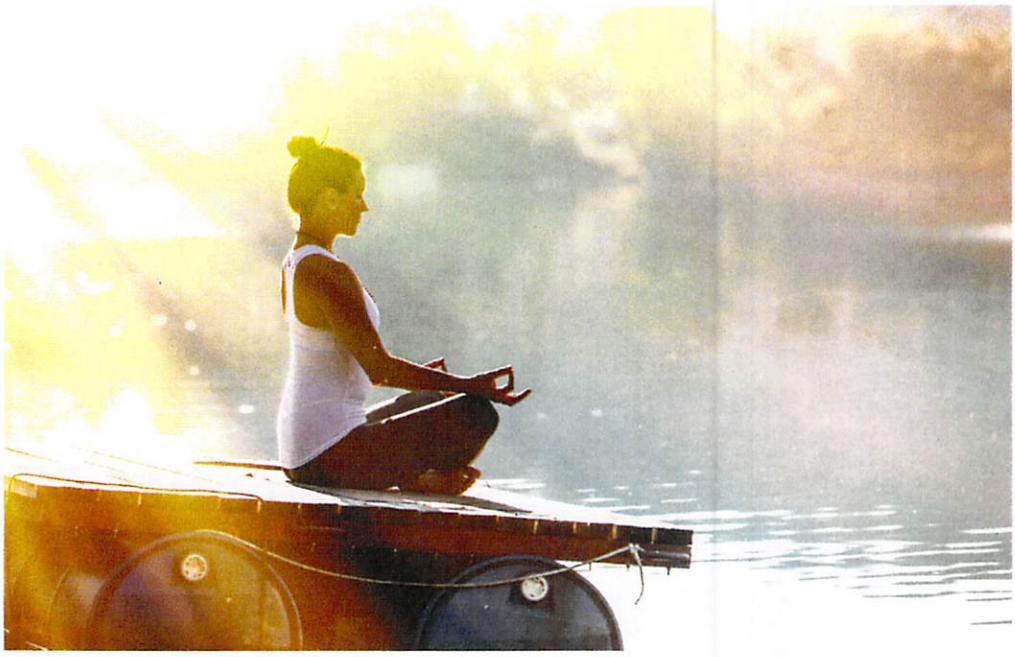


is absolutely about flow and movement."

Saks says people come not only for the silence of retreat and the camaraderie of community but seek Song of the Morning's water-laden landscape. Song of the Morning (songofthemorning.org) was created in 1970 by Oliver Black, a disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda, who is credited as bringing yoga to the West more than a century ago. Today, 300 people retreat to Song of the Morning yearly, in addition to more than 500 who attend its annual summer Yoga Fest.

As much as yoga beside water has restorative and inspirational qualities, yoga on water can be even more powerful. With the explosion of interest in Stand-Up Paddleboard Yoga (SUP Yoga), studios around the state are offering opportunities to experience the calming practice of yoga while balancing on the water.

"Yoga is almost like a mini-vacation, because you're taking 60 minutes for yourself and focusing on how you're feeling," says Courtney Welch, a yoga teacher in Lake Orion. "When you add water, it literally is a mini-vacation, because the water reminds (us) of going with the flow."



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— Courtney Welch

Last summer, Welch paddled 39 lakes in southeast Michigan, often posting serene pics on her Instagram (instagram.com/inspiredbymovement). Followers were shocked to learn the peaceful poses took place in urban centers.

A social media and communications guru by day, Welch began practicing yoga in 2001 and gained certifications in teaching, life coaching and SUP over the years. In 2011, she led a yoga retreat in Costa Rica, teaching classes on the beach.

"I love movement and being on the water," says Welch, who grew up near lakes. "It has you slow down, no matter where you are. Yoga on the board makes (yoga) even more accessible."

Paddleboards can hold up to 240 pounds and seated poses make it easy for disabled, elderly or new practitioners to take part, says Jennifer McDaniel, SUP director at Funky Buddha Yoga Hothouse (yogahothouse.com) in Grand Rapids' Eastown. A retired Spanish teacher from Allendale Public Schools, McDaniel now teaches yoga full time, including four to six weekly SUP classes every summer on Reeds Lake and in Holland on Lake Macatawa.

"I love how I feel when I am out on my board in the water," she says. "It's its own state of flow, because you're hyper-present to your surroundings and literally every motion of your body changes how you're standing or falling, so it is an exercise in being extremely aware of each moment."

A fan of the water, McDaniel admits to being a little skittish when she can't see the bottom of a murky lake. Paddleboard yoga changed that for her. Standing on the board, she says it's easy to see straight down into the water, and become one with the elements.

She'll even take the board out at 2 or 3 in the morning, lie on her back and gaze at the stars, or venture onto a lake in winter with a paddleboard. The practice has given her a new bravery and a new connection to the natural world.

"Out in the elements, every movement you make, there's a reaction with your board," McDaniel says. "You're extremely aware of your present moment and of the conditions. You feel the sun, the breeze, the water touches you. It's a very woken up way to spend part of your day." ≈

Lynne Golodner writes about how people find meaning. She lives in Huntington Woods.