

About a year ago, I took up yoga. Although I'd been curious about it for decades, I hadn't dared try it for two reasons: I have a version of [ataxia](#), and I feared the standing poses in particular could prove dangerous for me with the seven degenerative discs in my lower back. But my dear friend Veeta, who's Indian and has been practicing yoga most of her life, changed my perspective. Thanks to her, I realized I could do floor exercise and achieve most of the benefits without worrying that my poor gait could cause more damage. Once I tried it, I fell in love with it.

Despite my late-in-life love for yoga, for decades I had been reticent about trying it, as I have been conflicted about its practice in the U.S. As far back as I can remember, yoga has been promoted mostly by white people, to the point that I had all but forgotten that yoga started in India some 5,000 years ago—*or so I thought*.

Wanting to take my yoga to the next level, for months I had wanted to take an online class, but I'd been conflicted. Like most people of color, I have not felt welcome or comfortable taking a yoga class because, with few exceptions, nobody looks like me—starting with the instructor.

Like so much these days, it's not surprising that white people have claimed yoga for themselves. And why not—when so many believe Jesus was white and that cornrows were invented by Bo Derek (or, depending on your age, by Kendall Jenner); when hip hop has been coopted by white teenagers in American suburbs; when we have substituted Black Africa with “sub-Saharan” Africa; and when “pre-Columbian” is used to describe the thousands of years that preceded the arrival Christopher Columbus and his merry band of thieves, murderers and rapists.

I shared this with another friend of mine and asked if she knew of any yoga classes taught by a Black or BIPOC woman. “Yes,” she replied, “but it's not the yoga you're thinking of—it's not Hatha, Vinyasa or Astanga, and it's not even yoga from India. Her name is Angie Franklin. She's the founder and owner of [Afro Yoga](#). Angie teaches a style of yoga called Kemetic Yoga, which originated in Egypt 5,000 years before India's first practitioners.”

Kemetic Yoga: Predating Yoga from India by an Estimated 5,000 Years

Yoga not from India? What? Until recently, I too had bought into the widely held belief that the birthplace of yoga was India. I realize this concept is pure blasphemy for many people. The idea that yoga dates back 10,000 years and was practiced by the ancient Egyptians is dismissed.

So what exactly is Kemetic Yoga, and why am I just hearing about this? Angie Franklin lives in Sacramento, California, and she holds a bachelor's in Global Studies. She received her yoga

certification in 2016 as a Power Vinyasa instructor, and her Kemetic Yoga certificate from master instructor of Kemetic Yoga, [Yirser Ra Hotep](#), in February 2020.

“Kemet, meaning ‘Black land,’ was the original word for Egypt, which was a name given to it by the Greeks. Although we tend to think of yoga as originating in India 5,000 years ago, we now know differently. In addition to studying yoga practices back in the 1970s, Ra Hotep started looking at hieroglyphics and interpreting them. What he and others have found is very interesting.”

On his website, [Ra Hotep documents the history of Kemetic Yoga](#). He explains how he came to understand the origins of yoga in Egypt.



Hieroglyph of Egyptian God Shu in MAAT (also Maat) pose.

(to learn more about yoga originating in Egypt 10,000 years ago, I recommend a series of books authored by Dr. Muata Ashby. Dr. Ashby holds a doctorate in religion and another doctorate in divinity in holistic health. He is an adjunct professor at the American University of Holistic Theology. He is a practitioner of Egyptian Yoga, Indian Yoga, Chinese Yoga (also known as Qigong—pronounced *chi gong*—dating back 4,000 years), along with post-doctoral research in advanced Jnana, Bhakti and Kundalini Yogas.

Of the many books he's authored, I believe [Egyptian Yoga: Postures of the Gods and Goddesses: The Ancient Egyptian system of physical postures for health meditation and spiritual enlightenment ... Hatha Yoga](#), [Egyptian Yoga: The Philosophy of Enlightenment](#) and [The Kemetic Tree of Life Ancient Egyptian Metaphysics and Cosmology for Higher Consciousness](#) are the ones that will provide readers with the most amount of history of Kemetic Yoga.)

Angie Franklin explains in her own words what Kemetic Yoga is and how it is beneficial to the body.

Kemetic Yoga has a very heavy focus on the breath with the intent to soothe the nervous system and activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which allows the body to go into a rest and digest space versus a fight or flight, which is what we're in all the time as people of color.” Angie used the example of hearing a police siren and immediately being on guard.

If we don't take the time to discharge that energy, it accumulates and it causes disease. So, it looks now like really being true to a slower style of practice; it looks like taking a lot more time to get people connected to their breath; it looks like allowing people enough space to experience the posture and the benefit and the effect that it's having on them, and to really just allow time for integration to slow things down. Moving slow is a radical practice in a capitalistic society where everything is based on accomplishments, progression, and achievement. I try to let my students know that this is not about achieving anything. This is about experiencing something.

Franklin, who is African American and Spanish (she was born in Spain), founded Afro Yoga because of the concern I articulated at the top of the article about Black and BIPOC people not being welcomed into white-dominated yoga spaces.

Like many other teachers in the beginning, you're not really sure where to go; you're just taking whatever type of teaching jobs you can take, you know, you're new, you're trying to find your voice. And that was very much my experience. And I think that it didn't really dawn on me how white it all was, because that's just how the world is in America, in most cities, right? So, it didn't dawn on me as being a problem, initially.

You know, they're [white instructors] teaching yoga for abs and for sweat, and to push you to the edge and to make you bigger, better, faster, stronger, like that's the way. And I think that that's also done a lot of damage to the practice of yoga in terms of, you know, again, accessibility and exclusion; who is able to practice at that style, at that level? If people are just entering the practice—and this is something I had to learn very quickly—I was certified in power Vinyasa. I cannot teach power Vinyasa to a beginner. That does not make sense for them because it makes it—if you're spending the entire time in the practice just trying to catch your breath and trying to catch up to the next pose instead of being present, I'm talking about the speed and the rigorousness of the practice itself.

The practice has to be slower and more intentional and accessible to get people into their breath, to get people into their body, to get them to experience the practice, versus going through the motions to check off the box.

About a year later, I started teaching all over and I was teaching at Sacramento State University here locally, and I substituted a Saturday class. And the class was full, you know, it was wall to wall. And there were some Black women in that class. And they waited until the very end of the class to speak to me and shared with me how surprised and delighted they were that I was at the front of the room.

Kristen Johnson was one of Franklin's earliest students, and she remembers her first experience vividly: "I started taking Angie's classes years ago. It was my first class taught by a Black yoga teacher. I was used to having white yoga teachers. Her classes are special because she speaks in a familiar way and it's a community. Practicing yoga in a space where most bodies look like me was a connection that was missing in other classes.

"Angie created a safe space for Black folks to do yoga that wasn't predominantly white. We needed this so much in our city. Most studios are not inclusive or welcoming to BIPOC students, but the practice of yoga is for everyone."

Franklin concurs and explains how she came up with the idea to serve the Black yoga community.

And I think that was that was the very first time that it really hit me that I was like, wow, 'okay, it matters that I'm up here, and what else can I do?' And I think that at that point is when my wheels really started turning and thinking about how can I show up more for this community that clearly, you know, find so much value not only in the practice, but in seeing themselves reflected and represented?

So, I was sitting at my kitchen table, and I was kind of brainstorming, you know, I wanted to do a class in the park or something of that nature, and the word sort of just like, dropped in on me:

Afro Yoga. I just kind of heard it in the ethers, and it just landed. And as soon as it hit, I started to see what it could become, like, I started to see all of the things that it could be. And I'm a visionary person by nature, I'm a double Aquarius, like, it's just part of who I am, and we're big on changing the world and disrupting old systems and rebuilding new ones. I'm named after Angela Davis, and all of the things.

Next, I put together a flyer, put up a Facebook event, and it was just Afro Yoga, you know, it was a donation-based class on a Saturday morning. And I could not believe that 60 people showed up in the park that day!

Sixty women of color, mostly Black women, all hair styles, colors, shapes, sizes, kids, aunts, grandmothers, you know—just everyone was out there. And it was emotional for some. There were people who came up at the end and cried—people who have never been in a space where it was, you know, in a wellness, in a yoga space where they looked around, and it was nothing but their own people there.

And it was my first time experiencing it, too, you know, and it felt amazing. And I knew then, at that moment, it was absolute confirmation that what I felt to be true was true, that it's not that we are not into yoga, we're not into wellness—it's that we haven't been invited, we weren't invited out, there wasn't a specific invitation for us to show up.

This is another westernized/colonized way that yoga has been adapted to sell to people who are not us. It's been a results-driven practice versus like, let's just breathe and be here and be present. And that's not the experience that I've had in yoga studios, and it's a way that I've had to adapt my teaching style to serve the community that is in front of me, to allow the practice to serve them.

So, I continued on. Obviously, I was very, very excited and empowered to continue on. And so I did, I kept doing more classes in the park, and word started to spread. When I sat down that day at my kitchen nook, the words came to me, I wrote down a list of about 10 things I wanted to accomplish over the course of three years.

Caroline Collins has taken many of Franklin's classes. Collins also teaches Slow Flow Vinyasa or, as she likes to call it, "Soul Flow" and Kemeti Yoga. About Franklin, Collins told me, "First of all, she's dope! Her energy and vibe are contagious whether you're in her class or in conversation with her. In class specifically it's her authenticity and relatability that complement her knowledge and creative flows. You just feel at home with her, even though you're not even sharing the same physical space. And at home in your body, too. She truly creates an experience for us as Black womxn/WOC. All of her classes, from the studio to the [business side of yoga](#), show her dedication to the healing and empowerment of Black womxn, which is a breath of fresh air in a white-dominated industry."

These days, Franklin's classes are always filled up. Franklin offers [online instruction](#), including free and donation-based classes, because accessibility isn't just a slogan with Franklin. I took one of her Saturday classes and was pretty surprised by my reaction to it.

My First Experience with Kemetic Yoga

I was expecting Franklin to sit in front of us and immediately go into poses, and it would be up to us to follow and keep up. Franklin spends a few minutes explaining the practice of Kemetic Yoga, what to expect and the importance of the breath. She gives students a chance to download the week's [Kemetic Yoga playlist](#). Next, Franklin spends several minutes talking about breathing, and I understood what she meant about the breath being intentional. We spend our lives breathing without really being mindful of it. If I got nothing else from my first experience with Kemetic Yoga taught by Angie Franklin, I am far more aware of my breathing.

We did poses, some of which were familiar to me and some that I not only had never seen, but that weren't easy for me. Several times I found myself focusing more on perfecting the pose than on my breathing and I was quickly out of breath.

When the class was over, Franklin provided space for anyone in the class to share what they felt during the class or about whatever is going on in their lives that was addressed or even resolved with Kemetic Yoga. Because the class is primarily for BIPOC people (white people are welcome, but they need to know they won't be centered), I was pleasantly surprised to see how much of an emotional release it was for me, and I suspect for others.

I've already signed up for future [Afro Yoga classes](#). Because of Angie Franklin, I no longer feel conflicted about how whitewashed yoga has become. I don't have to. From a political perspective, it's important to me that Kemetic Yoga has no chance of being co-opted by white people. Some white people may be curious about it. A few of them may even excel at it, but there's no chance it will be overrun by white people.

From a cultural perspective, I love that Kemetic Yoga has its roots in Africa. Although I don't buy into the fallacy that there are biological differences between Black and white people, there are definitely cultural differences. Seeing people who span the color rainbow—as we BIPOC do—I can finally experience yoga for all the benefits it was meant to offer practitioners that a Black person can't realize in a class dominated by white people.

Thank you, Angie Franklin!

If you're interested in becoming a Kemetic Yoga instructor, Franklin offers [many certification and master classes](#).

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