



# A Special Place for Yoga

by : Justin Ehringhaus (former CIR from Maine, USA)





### “So, what exactly is yoga?”

**E**mbarrassed, this was the first of the many ignorant questions I posed to Yoko Kanemaru (Yoko-Sensei), a yoga teacher from Yamanashi Prefecture who had graciously accepted my request to interview her. I was the newest student of hers in fact, participating in the “Kofu City Morning Yoga” classes she led by the castle park every Thursday at 5:30 AM.

Although a month had passed since first joining, I had not yet grasped the underlying notion behind the act. Is yoga a sport? A method to become flexible? A fashion statement? A lifestyle? An existential way of being?

With many questions and no answers, I was thrilled to receive the go-ahead to write an article on the subject for this year’s Grapevine. But beyond wanting to learn more about yoga just to satisfy my beginner’s curiosity, I had an even greater question coming from a place of personal introspection. What is it about Yamanashi Prefecture that makes practicing yoga here so special?

This question posed the greatest mystery to me. I had grown up with yoga in my life. My mother had practiced every day—always in the morning, always for an hour. Going back to my earliest memories, I can recall seeing her complex poses and monotonous stretches from my peripheral vision. But these did not engage me nearly as much as the adventures of Ash

Ketchum and Pikachu on the TV screen.

In other words, I had absolutely no interest in yoga up until coming to Yamanashi. Was it the sprawling mountains, the lush forests, and the pure water that had inspired me to become a yogi? Perhaps. But now, sitting across from Yoko-Sensei at a local café immediately following one of her early morning yoga classes, I was utterly engrossed in hearing about how her practice of yoga in this prefecture, where she was born and raised, had influenced her life and identity in extraordinary ways. She started in 2012, and at first it was just a fun way to get in shape and become healthier. But then, her practice began affecting her overall spirits day to day. Her heart, she said, became lighter, happier, clearer—her mind, too, less judgmental toward herself and those around her. It was after realizing this that she decided to become one of the limited number of licensed yoga teachers in Yamanashi Prefecture. “There’s not many of us here,” she said, smiling, “but I wanted to share with my home prefecture all that yoga had taught me; it would have been selfish not to.”

Although she had practiced yoga in other prefectures and even other countries, it was her home prefecture toward which she felt the deepest connection: “Different parts of the prefecture carry their own special characteristics when practicing yoga; for example, the gentle hum of city life when at the castle park in Kofu, the cool climate of the Southern Alps when teaching in my hometown, and the stillness of temples



and shrines.” I explained my own conundrum at this juncture: that I had seen and grown up with yoga my entire life but that it was only upon arriving in Yamanashi that I found myself wanting to practice it. *Why might that be?*

I wondered if she would understand what I was trying to ask. But then, she gave me a simple answer. “I think it must be the air here. Yoga is all about breathing, filling your lungs with oxygen, experiencing gratitude not only in the mind but also throughout the body, and being in Yamanashi makes one want to take a deep breath. The air here is special, it is delicious. I think it imparts a special kind of energy that cannot be found

my yoga mat out on the rocky shores of the lake and gazed upon the foreboding outline of Mt. Fuji. It was still dark outside, and my skin prickled against the chill of the early morning air. But then, halfway through the class and in the midst of a pose, something changed. The sun peaked out from behind us and Mt. Fuji shone, revealing itself in its entirety with not a cloud in the sky to block its perfectly conical shape. Murmurs from participants around me indicated that this was, indeed, a rare sight to behold. And, for me, it was surreal. Taking steady breaths while sinking deeper into each movement, I remembered in that moment how delicious the air had tasted. *Special...* absolutely.



anywhere else in the world.”

Although thinking of the world around me in terms of energy, gratitude, air, or breath was still very new to me, Yoko-Sensei’s theory had reminded me of something. We finished up the pot of coffee in between us, thanked each other, and headed our separate ways.

While walking home, I reflected on a yoga event I had attended the week prior. The event was titled World Heritage Yoga, for it was located right by Lake Kawaguchiko and facing World Heritage Site Mt. Fuji. I had gone to the early morning class that promised the greatest views of Mt. Fuji - that, and, oh yeah, it was also to be taught by the incredibly beautiful and amazingly talented actress/athlete, Matsumoto Rio.

The sun had not even begun rising when the teacher gave her singing bowl a chime to indicate the start of the class. I had laid

Yamanashi Prefecture had brought out a side of me that both wanted to practice yoga, which I had been ignoring to the best of my ability up until that point, and a desire to breathe deeply. I cannot guarantee that it will do the same for everyone, but what I can say is that this prefecture is truly a beautiful one, and if you decide to travel here for even just a short amount of time, practicing yoga while being surrounded by its natural beauty and delicious air just might deepen your experience in an unforgettable way.

#### Information

If you would like to try a yoga class with Yoko-Sensei in Minami Alps City or Kofu City, you may contact her via her Instagram handle (@y05o05c05o) to find out more. Information about the World Heritage Yoga at Fujikawaguchiko can be found here: [sekaiisan-yoga.com](http://sekaiisan-yoga.com).

