

From the Ivory Tower to the Citrus Grove: A Yoga Journey

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In *Making Time to Write: How to Resist the Patriarchy and Take Control of Your Academic Career Through Writing* (2022), Cathy Mazak examines the scarcity mindset that pervades university professors' lives: we run short on time, funding, and sleep. This mentality seeps into our writing practices. I immediately drew a parallel with my yoga practice, both as a professor in the United States and now in Tunisia. While yoga embodies abundance, encouraging presence, openness, and self-trust, I was practicing postures while clinging to a scarcity mindset.

When I left the US academy and relocated to Tunisia – primarily driven by the inheritance of my ancestral land – my relationship with yoga transformed profoundly. At a local Pilates and yoga studio, I discovered a practice liberated from the Orientalist frameworks that fill Western yoga studios, one that refused to reduce yoga to mere physical exertion or exoticized spirituality.



Figure 1 – Pilates360 Studio (Photo Credit: Douja Mamelouk).

In this essay, I juxtapose my experiences practicing yoga in the United States with its reimagined form in Tunisia. In this Muslim-majority context, yoga intersects with local spiritual traditions in unexpected, even subversive, ways. Through dialogues with my Tunisian Muslim yoga instructor – who understands yoga not as a separate discipline but as complementary to her Islamic spiritual practice – I interrogate how yoga can be decolonized and recontextualized beyond colonial paradigms (Blu Wakpa 2018). By centering her perspective, I challenge the neoliberal, Eurocentric assumptions dominating mainstream yoga discourse and propose an alternative framework: a non-Orientalist yoga practice that resists cultural extraction, honors local epistemologies, and fosters cross-cultural dialogue on equal footing (Ternikar 2021). In other words, my yoga practice takes place in Dhouha’s studio and among the citrus trees, which I now call home.



Figure 2 – Dhouha Ben Amor (Photo Credit: Dhouha Ben Amor).

I met my yoga teacher, Dhouha Ben Amor, at a café in Ezzahra – a southern suburb of Tunis that once bore the colonial name *Saint-Germain* under French rule. Like so many Tunisian towns, it seeks to shed its imperial past. It was here, amid the echoes of this quiet decolonial act, that I sought to understand Dhouha’s philosophy of yoga.

What emerged was a perspective starkly distinct from the dominant American (and often white, feminized) yoga pedagogy. In the US, yoga is frequently framed as a spiritual refuge – a commodified transcendence for the weary Western self. The studio where I practiced, a place where the word *Namaste* was spoken with grace, was filled with women in Lululemon leggings and Nike sports bras. Next door, a juice bar sold exotic blends I could rarely afford on my professor’s salary; on the other side, a boutique priced its sports outfits at what might have fed my family for a week. Yet in Tunis, Dhouha’s practice carried no such imperative. There was no yearning to “connect” in the abstract, no performative reverence for an imagined Eastern mysticism or a Western shopping ideal. Instead, her approach was rooted in her own identity and an unforced coexistence with her spiritual and cultural frameworks. There was no abstract yearning to “connect,” no performative reverence for an imagined Eastern mysticism or a matching wellness aesthetic. Instead, her teaching felt rooted in her own identity and flowed naturally within her spiritual and cultural surroundings. Her classes centered on something

straightforward and grounded: helping women unwind their tired bodies while quietly strengthening them with no importance to the brands of clothing we wear.

This shift in perspective felt revelatory. It began to reveal some of the neoliberal tendencies that can underpin Western yoga: the extraction of ritual, a sometimes-transactional approach to spirituality, and a persistent focus on self-optimization. In my experience in Tunisia, yoga didn't seem to function primarily as a consumable wellness product or a colonized artifact. Instead, it felt like a simple, unpretentious practice that offered women a genuine space to rest and relax.

For Dhouha, the sun salutation is not an imported ritual, but an echo of familiar devotion – its postures mirroring the bends and prostrations of the five daily Islamic prayers. Where Western yoga often markets itself as a gateway to spirituality, her practice requires no such conversion. Instead, yoga has deepened what was already there: a meditative focus during prayer (*salāt*) and a heightened awareness of breath as divine remembrance (*dhikr*).

What fascinates me is the unforced syncretism of her approach. Unlike the commodified “mindfulness” of American studios, which treats Eastern traditions as fragmented tools for self-improvement, Dhouha's practice refuses extraction. For her, yoga does not replace or exoticize Islamic spirituality; it nourishes it. The *sujūd* (prostration) of prayer and the *uttanasana* (forward fold) of yoga are not opposites, but kin – two languages speaking the same bodily truth and a way to remind ourselves of the remembrance of Allah. This reclamation feels quietly radical. In a global wellness industry obsessed with consumable transcendence, her practice is a reminder: spirituality need not be purchased or partitioned. It can be lived – rooted, adaptable, and whole.

The health-and-wealth dogma of the global wellness industry – with its obsession with consumable transcendence – is no longer confined to Western nations. It seeped into the fabric of countries like Tunisia, where a predatory capitalism has infiltrated every sphere of life, turning even spirituality into a transactional commodity. In Tunis, where economic precarity looms large, the allure of wellness as a status symbol persists: boutique yoga studios cater to a privileged few, while Instagram influencers peddle “mindfulness” as a luxury rather than a lived practice. This mirrors the neoliberal paradox gripping the Global South, where austerity and aspiration collide and self-care becomes yet another extractive industry demanding financial investment rather than cultivating collective resilience.

What Dhouha's practice exposes, then, is not just an alternative approach to yoga but a resistance to this very economization of the soul. In a system that profits from alienation, her integration of yoga into Islamic devotion refuses the logic of scarcity – the idea that spirituality must be bought or tradition franchised. Hers is a quiet insurgency: a reminder that the body's wisdom need not be packaged and sold to be sacred.

My dialogues with Dhouha about yoga began with my eldest daughter's proposal, “What if we held yoga sessions in the citrus grove?” Dhouha, intrigued by the rawness of the setting, agreed to teach her classes amid the trees of our ancestral farm. In this space, the scent of blossoms mingles with the rustle of leaves and chirping of birds, far removed from the sterile, transactional ambiance of urban studios. For me, this was an opportunity to cherish my father's memory on earth.

Without formal training in agriculture, I drew on memories of my late father, who planted 700 citrus trees. Faced with the sudden need to understand technical irrigation systems and distinguish among varieties such as mandarins, Newhall navels, and Tarocco blood oranges, I recalled his wisdom. When I once asked why he divided the land into sections of different trees, he explained it was to produce small, seasonal crops while keeping the grove perpetually green.

Today, his strategy has fostered a thriving ecosystem where diverse bird species nest and bees gather nectar from the blossoms.



Figure 3 – Orchard (Photo Credit: Douja Mamelouk).

Here, in this uncommodified corner of Tunisia, we enact a quiet rebellion against “capitalisme sauvage.” Dhouha refuses to monetize spirituality; her fees are pared down to the essentials, just enough to honor her labor. Meanwhile, our farm – battling the twin siege of climate change and creeping pests – operates not for profit, but for preservation. Every dinar we earn from these sessions is reinvested in the land: pruning diseased branches, nurturing parched soil, and sheltering our animals from increasingly erratic seasons and parasites.

This exchange – yoga for sustenance, care labor – defies the logic of extraction. In a world where wellness is packaged and marked up for elite consumption, our grove becomes something radical: a space where value is measured not in profit, but in reciprocity. The trees, the practice, the people thrive through mutual tending, not transactional greed. What Dhouha and the grove teach me is this: resistance isn’t always loud. Sometimes, it’s the simple act of pricing a yoga class reasonably or the stubborn choice to cultivate a farm against ecological odds and a horrible drought. It’s the insistence that some things – land, tradition, the body’s wisdom – are all sacred.

Leaving the US academy seemed like professional suicide to my colleagues. Why trade tenure for dirt, theory for trees? The answer for me lay in Tunisia, on the ancestral farm that called me back with a pull stronger than obligation. After 30 years of nomadic life, I settled on a plot of land. My life is not the simple retreat of folklore; it is intensely complex. Yet I am anchored by my father’s words, “We battled daily for a better country for you. Isn’t it worth you battling for your children?”

And so I do. The battle looks different now, fought in traffic jams, crowded markets, and bureaucratic mazes. But the fight for a future, for a piece of earth that sustains life, continues.

The academy had its violence: the scarcity-mindset Cathy Mazak warns of, the relentless pressure to produce, the way it turned even critique into a commodity, neatly packaged for citation counts and impact factors. I craved a life where knowledge wasn't footnoted but lived – where the stakes weren't promotions but survival: the farm's brittle soil under my palms, the trees thirsting against drought, the yoga mat unfurled not for "self-optimization," but for breath, presence, and the quiet labor of care.

Dhouha's practice, the grove, the unyielding earth taught me what the Ivory Tower never could: there is abundance in letting go. Not the kind measured in publications or prestige, but in the tang of ripe lemons at harvest, in the sweat of honest work, in the way a body moves through *asana* not to "transcend," but to root deeper.

I left the American academy, yes. But I didn't lose my vocation – I reclaimed it. Here, scholarship isn't confined to journals; it's the farm's stubborn resilience, Dhouha's sun salutations, the refusal to let capitalism dictate the value of a life's work.

And so I kneel in the dirt now. Not to beg for tenure, but to practice grounding yoga poses, and to plant seeds that will outlive me.

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