

YOGA -- Saluting the sun, 108 times

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What's in a number? If it's 108, a lot. JULIA SILVERMAN explains the number's mystical significance, and what it has to do with the summer solstice.

PORTLAND, Ore. — All over the country Wednesday, yogis -- no, not acolytes of the cartoon bear, but the flexible and spiritual kind -- counted off 108 sun salutations, in honor of the first day of summer and the longest day of the year. That's 108 downward-facing dogs, 108 upward salutes, 108 four-limbed staff poses and forward bends, all linked together by deep breaths, in and out, to literally salute the sun. Click here for a photo flash gallery.

Why 108? The number is traditionally revered in Hindu culture, linked to several ancient measurements and traditions. (The tradition predates the numbers that the castaways on "Lost" spent entering into the island's giant computer every 108 minutes -- or else.)

The Buddhists have 108 names for Buddha, and Hinduism boasts 108 Upanishads -- ancient texts that lay down the basis for Hindu spirituality and the ideals of yoga. Ayurvedic medicine charts 108 "weak points" where a body can get congested, and of the 54 sounds in ancient Sanskrit, each has two elements, one male and one female. (Math whizzes, $54 \times 2 = 108$.) There are also 108 beads on a "mala" prayer beads used in Hinduism, and 108 beads on a Catholic rosary.

Scientists can point to the distance between the earth and the sun, which is 108 times the diameters of the sun. Mathematically, when you divide a circle into five equal parts, each pentagon angle is 108 degrees. Astrologers can offer the nine planets, and 12 signs of the zodiac. ($9 \times 12 = 108$. Getting the idea now?) And it should be noted that there are 108 stitches on a baseball.

A quick Google search turns up 108 Sun Salutation workshops planned for today, some spilling into the weekend, at yoga studios in New York, Minneapolis, Dallas, San Francisco and Portland, where teachers say they have proven popular.

Margie Weaver, the managing director of One Yoga in Minneapolis, said her studio hosted its first 108 session this New Year's Day, after she read about the tradition online.

"I did the first one as an experiment and it had such a good response -- there were 25 people or something -- the requests were 'Let's do it again,'" she said.

The goal, said Lisa Mae Osborn, who teaches at Yoga Shala in Portland, is to "celebrate the change in light that happens during these times of the year, and the cyclical nature of time. It's about taking the opportunity to be grateful for what we have."

In recent years, in addition to the summer and winter solstices, yoga studios all over North America have taken to throwing "108 sun salutation" parties, to raise money for causes from multiple sclerosis to Hurricane Katrina relief.

Earlier this month, in Vancouver, B.C., 1,000 people came to a public plaza for a 108 "yoga-thon", raising \$86,000 for a summer camp in Western Canada for children affected by AIDS. Elsewhere, studios in New York, Seattle and Alberta, Canada have hosted 108 sun salutation sessions, and donated the class fees to charitable causes.

Those who do the full 108 can expect to work up a sweat, but Osborn said the tradition doesn't have much to do with the go-go yoga craze that's spawned an ever-expanding empire of yoga-centric gear and gadgets over the past decade.

"You have to connect to your spiritual side to do a practice like this," she said.

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