School of hard knots

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If you’re going to turn into a human pretzel, it may not be a good idea to wear a mini skirt.

Some students at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) thought yoga, an elective subject, was all theory.

Until they turned up for their first lesson and got, well, all bent out of shape.

NTU yoga tutor Tan Lay Pheng, 34, said: “Of course, after that they never came back in mini skirts for the subsequent lessons.”

An NTU spokesman said the course, Yoga: Physical, Mental and Social Development, was a popular elective, and was over-subscribed each semester.

It was introduced in July 2003 by the NTU General Studies Unit with one class of 30 students.

Now there are two classes with a total of over 60 students. Each year more than 100 students apply for the course. The classes have practical and theory components and take up three hours a week.

Lessons kick off with a lecture on the history of yoga, its philosophy, diet, meditation and stress management.

This is followed by a two-hour yoga session.

Why is it so popular?

Students said it’s an easy option, although some are genuinely interested.

Third-year mechanical and aerospace engineering student Lim Beng Kiat, 23, said it helped in clearing the 12 academic units of general electives he needed.

“Yoga is considered three academic units,” he said.

However, he insisted it’s tough.

“The challenging part is to do the balancing poses. Some poses can be quite painful initially but at the end of the class when you do the corpse pose, it is very ‘shiok’.”

This is a relaxation pose — flat on your back, with the toes and knees turned naturally outwards. Fingers fall open by the side of the body with palms facing upwards.

And Mr Lim said he would be the first to join if the university offers an advanced level yoga class.

Mr Leong Wai Loon, 23, said he did not think the class was a simple way out to fulfil their academic requirements.

“Yoga is examinable, you still have to study it,” he said.

“It’s more of personal interest for me. Taking yoga class in the evening helps you to relax, you are still absorbing information but at a less intense rate.”

Yoga has fans on other campuses, too.

Ms Karen Ong, 21, a third-year marketing and communications student at Singapore Management University (SMU) said she chose the course because it seemed to be “fun”.

A local university exchange programme allowed her to take up the elective at NTU.

“After a long day of school I really would not want to take a long academic course. Undergraduate life is quite hectic, and taking yoga allocates two hours a week for exercise.”

NO EASY WAY

Dr Yeoh Oon Chye, 71, director of the general studies programme, said students would be mistaken if they believed taking yoga was an easy way out.

“They still have to demonstrate mental rigour, prove themselves in the examination hall.

“We give 30 per cent weightage to continual assessment, 70 per cent to the exam for the majority of the general studies electives,” he said.

But are there students who fail yoga?

Yes, said Ms Tan, who grades the papers. She wouldn’t give figures though.

Guess some of the students didn’t want to bend over backwards to get good grades.