

WHY YOGA CAN'T HURT YOU: IF YOU CAN FIND IT

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Yoga posture practice, which is only one branch of yoga practice, is one of the surprise phenomena of contemporary culture. It is not so long ago, less than forty years, that if you were doing yoga you were a little odd. Yoga, back then, was referred to, disparagingly, with epithets such as 'navel-gazing' and regarded as at best a harmless but useless self indulgence, and at worst a step towards madness already taken. Times have changed, though some of the old prejudices have not. The remarkable surge in its popularity over the last twenty years has not only turned yoga into a significant niche in the dominant market culture of our times, but a multi-billion dollar one at that. In raising its cultural profile so dramatically yoga has incurred the almost delirious wrath of religious fundamentalists. Some Hindus complain about cultural distortion, misrepresentation and theft. Some Christians condemn it as an auto-erotic cult driven by the Antichrist, while in Egypt a fatwa was declared against it a few years back. More recently a long running current of concern in the medical profession has exploded into a heated debate about its physical effects, in which yoga teachers themselves are not only admitting, but announcing its potential dangers.

Given that yoga has one of the oldest and most successful marketing campaigns of human history, perhaps it should be no surprise that it is finally eliciting such a stormy backlash. Even though postural practices have been associated with yoga for hundreds of years at least, it may well be that the extreme and varied physicality of its contemporary popularity are a more modern development, as some scholars have recently argued. When postural practices are presented as yoga, then they are bound to be, explicitly or implicitly, associated with the remarkable, and alluring, claims that have long been made in its name. These claims are much more broad and deep than those made for any other product available in our hyperbolic market culture, and include freedom from all suffering, perpetual peace, wisdom, compassion. This is not to mention a number of other notions as seductive to some as they are indefinable such as Enlightenment, Grace and Self-realisation.

When such grandiose promises are associated with extremes of physical exercise it should really be no surprise that anyone with a little spare time and a touch of dissatisfaction should give it a go. Even less so given the adulation and envy inspired by some of its more high-profile fans, including Madonna and Sting no less. It always feels good to use your body. It feels especially good to use your body systemically and repeatedly, and in the company of others with whom you can identify. The tribal aspect of yoga is one that has been successfully manipulated by a number of savvy yoga gurus as they drive their brands deeper into the global market. Insidiously linked with people's need to belong are those vague, mystical promises that touch a raw nerve in almost everyone driven along in the frenzy of a competitive culture.

At the same time there is more to the feel-good factor of intense physical exercise than developing your physical assets as you put them to use, there is also the chemical factor. We are almost all using drugs to get us through the day: caffeine, tannin, nicotine, sucrose, dextrose, alcohol, to name but the more popular and legal ones. Yoga has reached the mainstream by way of the cultural margins of New Age disestablishmentarianism. In doing so it has often been taken up by those experimenting with dietary cults, and other forms of unsubstantiated self-improvement. Yet extreme physical exertion is perhaps the easiest and most time honoured way of getting high. Push your body hard enough and it will respond chemically. Push it against its limits and it will produce endorphins to mask the strain imposed on vulnerable tissues.

It is not so hard to see that this unrecognised expression of drug use could be the driving force behind the popularity of yoga. It allows you to get high, as often as you want, while comforting you with a self-righteous catechism of spiritual accomplishment. Self deception has probably never had such a field day as it is having in yoga classes throughout the world.

Even though yoga styles and yoga brands are two-a-penny their differences are not enough to justify their claims to precedence. You will find some at least of the following in almost every yoga class: incense, chanting, foreign names and words, tight fitting designer clothes, eastern cultural icons, tribal jewelry and tatoos, an esoteric verbal or musical soundtrack, upbeat exhortations from seductive instructors, all contextualised in an obvious, even if unadmitted, competitiveness. What they all have in common, although in subtly different forms, is the pursuit of an idealised physical standard. This may be based on flexibility, strength, alignment, stress-release or any combination thereof. It is almost impossible to find a yoga teacher, brand or style that is not offering, or even promising, a seductive physical reward, along with more esoteric promises. Yoga posture practice, at least in its most popular and visible forms, is unashamedly a practice of self improvement: emotional, psychological and spiritual as well as physical.

Can this even be yoga?

Only if we can see and say what yoga is can we know whether or not it is physically dangerous, and even whether or not it is available. Literary evidence shows Yoga existing, under that name, in India for over two thousands years. Given that even one thousand years ago Indian cultural knowledge and know-how were transmitted orally, it could be thousands older. Yoga is in fact one of the six investigative approaches underlying the richness and sophistication of Indian culture in much the same way that mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology underpin 'Western' culture. Of those 'Darshana', Yoga is the practical one, whereby those driven by the urge for truth could experience their own nature directly.

Patanjali is to yoga what Newton is to physics. In his text 'The Yoga Sutras' he defines it in the second chapter with five words: activity, yoga, passion, self-enquiry, surrender. Of course these English words are not an exact fit with the sanskrit ones used by their author. Some, or even most of them, would be disputed by many. Not the fourth one, however. Self-enquiry is the heart and essence of yoga, no matter what form it takes, physical, psychological or behavioural. To some yogis, including the celebrated Ramana Maharshi, yoga is self-enquiry pure and simple.

If this is so, then all the grandiose claims associated with the word, and practices, of yoga emerge from self-enquiry, as the Oracle of Delphi would agree no less than Socrates. In order for postural practice to be yoga it must then be a process of genuine self enquiry, rather than self improvement. The difference between them is the difference between Charles Atlas and Ramana Maharshi. Genuine enquiry is not a covert attempt to reach a preferred conclusion, or prove a point. Yoga practice, in any form, must be based on what is rather than what is hoped for. Self-enquiry depends on a willingness and ability to examine your self just as you are, putting aside all preference and prejudice and the self-deception they generate.

Yoga posture practice can actually be a potent means for conducting effective self-enquiry all the way from the body, through mind to consciousness. For this to be possible it must not be based on ambition, tradition, geometry or assumption. It must be based on the intelligence through which the body protects and nourishes itself. The sensations that express the integrity and intelligence of the body must be the compass of yoga posture practice. There needs to be more to this than just feeling what happens when you arrange your body into this shape or linger in that one. You need to be able to respond to those sensations so that your body has no need to generate the euphoric endorphins that mask strain and injury. You need to honour in action the limits and capabilities of your body as it signals them.

For this you need to use the intelligence of your mind to interpret the significance of the sensations generated by your body. As your mind enquires more deeply into the significance of physical sensation it will encounter the nature and relationship between body, mind and spirit. In order to do so you will have to access the deep core of your being. In doing that you will find out whether or not the grandiose claims made for yoga are justifiable. At the same time you will not need to put the vulnerabilities of your body at risk in the vain pursuit of flexibility, strength or alignment.

In short, no matter what your 'yoga teacher' says, no matter how high profile the brand and how many tribal confederates share your articles of faith, it is quite likely that you have never practiced yoga. At least

not while telling yourself that you were. If, however, you have ever taken the time to really, honestly question your motives, experience, assumptions and values: you almost certainly have.

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