The Appeal of Yoga; Or Why Everyone is Carrying a Mat!

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Currently there are many books and Internet sites to supply Yoga definitions and posture detail. I thought I would use this opportunity to share thoughts, insights and observations from my personal practice, workshops I have attended, and from students that have come my way over the past years. Included at the end of this article is a resource list of local studios and some books on Yoga that I have enjoyed. I hope this will assist you in your practice, inspire you to take your first Yoga class, or simply answer basic questions.

I would guess there are as many reasons for coming to the Yoga mat as there are people trying Yoga classes every day around the world. The good news is that there is something for everyone. At any age, at any stage in your life, you can find Yoga poses designed to bring benefits to both body and mind. There are classes that are vigorous in nature, somewhat aerobic and fast-paced. Some traditions string postures into what is know as a "posture flow" and can move quite quickly. Others spend time developing one posture at a time or practice with longer holding times for each posture or "asana".

Studios may add heat to the room in an attempt to warm and loosen muscles, or use props such as ties, belts, blocks or blankets to modify or intensify the poses. Some styles focus almost entirely on intense breathing (pranyama) techniques, and some are restorative and quite gentle. Yoga can be done in a chair, on a bed top, with children, senior citizens, or handicapped populations. The challenge and key to enjoying your yoga may be as simple or difficult as finding the right match to an instructor or studio providing locations and class times that fit your schedule and personal taste. Though tapes and books are the first choice for many, there is no substitute for the watchful eye of a teacher and the experience of being in a class with others. It may be encouraging to know that studios are likely to offer a free first class, removing any financial commitment at the onset.

It would be unusual not to have heard from a news or personal source about the benefits of yoga. Yoga is a growing industry in this country that can be both awesome and confusing. I have noticed that it is nearly impossible to listen to a newscast, watch a sitcom, read a magazine or newspaper and not hear something about yoga. Either in jest or as a serious recommendation yoga is a buzzword in our current health and wellness culture. Yoga has become part of our every day language and for some part of every day life. I have heard many testimonials from people attributing major life transformations to the practice of yoga. Either on the physical level or emotional/spiritual plane, I am always reminded of the power this ancient practice has on our minds and bodies.

An overview

One of the ancient purposes for all the yoga postures, as I have been told, is to gain core strength and hip flexibility to sustain a seated lotus posture for long periods of time. This is required as part of a traditional meditation practice in order to achieve higher states of consciousness and ultimately enlightenment. That is it, a strong healthy temple from

which to experience the divine. There is no mention of the "perfect butt" or abdominal "six pack" in the yogic scriptures. This is not to say that it is somehow wrong to desire physical changes that go beyond how we feel to how we appear. Simply acknowledging the depth of the practice offers a slightly different perception. The flow may be the same, the physical challenges identical, but it is my belief that when the purpose shifts to encompass this broader view, the experience and approach is broadened to our benefit. I will also say that regardless of ones initial intention, if the experience is good, folks tend to return to the mat and in doing so gain many of the benefits that in turn keep them coming back for more. This is a cycle worth acquiring!

Since I have not set out to explain how yoga works or report on the many foundational and philosophical principles of the practice, I will offer some general guidelines and thoughts that I find most interesting and alluring about my time on the mat. My hope is to stir interest for new practitioners or insight for those with a well-worn mat in their possession.

The physical side

Each posture presents us with the opportunity to engage muscles, anchor the mind to the body with breath, and deal with the intensity of arising sensations. All of this happens in a moment rooted in the present. To be engaged completely is to be safe and to be prepared for instruction about body alignments that bring benefits on many levels. Instruction may come from a teacher's voice or from your internal storage of facts and intuition about a particular posture. It is worthwhile to consider the distinction between thinking about something and experiencing it with your senses void of descriptions, judgments, likes or dislikes.

Going to the edge

The "edge" is generally thought of as a point of transformation for both physical and mental aspects of the practice. To be engaged at the edge is to move towards a physical limit where sensation is the strongest and going any deeper or further would feel like over exertion or strain. While holding back from sensation reduces the physical benefits of a pose, moving past the edge into pain is by no means the objective. The concept of balance comes to mind here for exploration both on and off the mat. Observing how the edge is approached and embraced can be interesting. Working within this space requires attention to detail and the willingness to move into a physical challenge. Permission to back off of the edge can be equally valuable in many ways. It is important to remember that though the edge is intense we are able to hold a posture at that level for several minutes or about five full breaths. In asking our bodies to hold a little longer or to bend a bit more deeply we can move beyond yesterday's limits into something unknown, an experience that reframes the body's limits and the expectations of our mind. Edges change regularly as does the practice and can be reflective of many other areas in life.

The mind-body connection

One of the goals of holding a posture is to fully engage both mind and body without strain. Alert, engaged, and present at your edge define a part of the practice described as "witnessing" and is associated with aspects of meditation. In this case a moving

meditation that often describes the Kripalu tradition in which I have been trained. Consider how emotionally charged your thoughts may be, how this translates to the body, and how restful it is to just "be" without thought. Sensation and breath awareness becomes the anchor to unfolding experience in which we give the mind a rest and the body a prescribed physical challenge to create strength and flexibility. Sound like a marvelous duo? It is this combination that makes Yoga such an alluring discipline for many. Remember, the goal of practicing Yoga is not just to do better Yoga, it is to cultivate balance in the body and mind such that life flows harmoniously. Additionally, stronger more flexible bodies are known to last longer with fewer necessary repairs. Yoga is a powerful tool for general health and wellness that I believe has the potential to keep us all fit and happy. An important step toward achieving benefits from your practice, as much as good instruction or form, is the ability to embrace the discipline and practice with regularity.

The breath, energy lines and alignment

It is generic yet fair to say one should breathe fully and completely during all movement and while holding any posture. A full breath begins in the belly and moves up towards the chin slowly. The exhalation is controlled, smooth and of equal length to the inhalation. Inhalation rounds the belly outward while the end of the exhalation finds the belly reaching in towards the spine. Sounds easier than it may be. Practitioners often note how quickly they forget to breathe when trying something new or focusing intently on a particular area of the body. Attention to breathing provides the body with fresh oxygen and the mind with an additional anchor to the present moment. The power of our breath to focus, heal and energize is also a great subject for much discussion.

Additionally, as we move and settle into postures the lines we create with our bodies should be straight. If you have the opportunity to practice in front of a mirror you may be surprised by what feels straight and the adjustment you can make to further approach that position once you can see your own outline. I will caution, this is a generalization. There are many reasons for less than straight arms or spines. We are working towards a personal goal in which progress of all proportion is noted and should be appreciated.

It is helpful to come into a posture as you know it physically and scan the body using basic principles of alignment. Create a firm connection to the floor with all parts of the body that form the base (knees or hands, not just feet), lengthen the spine without arching the lower back (pelvic bowl should remain in a neutral position), extend the spine in opposite directions keeping shoulder blades engaged behind you, draw awareness and energy to your core while sending breath and awareness liberally around the body as you reach your full expression of the posture (asana). Total emersion into the body, into the moment, and into the self, is achieved and combined with all the physical benefits available from stretching and engaging, twisting and lengthening with care.

Which style is best for me?

Differences in Yoga styles may be associated with anything from its originating location in India to the American yogi who, in developing a student following, worked with a physical therapist and decided that ancient postures designed for the small bodies of

Indian men, who practiced from birth, needed alterations to be safe and accessible to the average American. For an in-depth description of a particular Yoga style I suggest an Internet search. You might ask for assistance with such a search from your friendly library staff! I would suggest asking about the style of Yoga before attending a class and some detail on the philosophy of the studio or individual instructor. Lately there is a tendency for instructors to state an "eclectic" approach which means they have either studied in many places and bring you what they feel is the best of all worlds, or they are not trained in teaching and will give you what they have read or seen. There is no way to know which class will be best for you. Keep in mind that within one studio there will be different levels offered and teachers with varying styles. Personally I have learned something from everyone, which is not to say I would return to all of the classes I have attended.

A common description of Yoga classes in adult education flyers is that of "Hatha Yoga." Please note, a basic definition of Hatha Yoga is any Yoga that employs physical postures. A class listing of Hatha Yoga does not let you know much about the kind of flow or intention of the experience. Other kinds of Yoga:

- Janu – the path of knowledge and wisdom gained through the study of scripture.
- Raja – known as Ashtanga (eight limbed Yoga) or "Royal Yoga", it is a systematic approach to self-realization.
- Karma – the practice of selfless service, predominately action oriented (community service).
- Bhakti – the way of devotion practiced by rituals of reverence such as chanting, prayer, or meditation.

Don't be shy to ask for a specific description if you want to know ahead of time what to expect from a class. Keep in mind the overall flexibility of Yoga itself and the many ways it has come to be modified as a version of the ancient teaching. As long as we do not get hooked on thinking there is ONE kind of Yoga that is "right" we can explore new formats, teachers, settings and approaches that may meet the changing needs of our bodies, minds and lives at any given time.

A final note

It is important to note that along with the wide range of benefits associated with Yoga is an increasing list of injuries. Keep in mind that working at your edge while honoring personal limitation is a challenge for many minds accustomed to the push of competition. A teacher is only a guide, the energy of the class an inspiration, but ultimately each one of us is responsible for our own safety and well-being. I hope you will try a class if you have not, or come to your practice with clarity, acceptance and the intention to return regularly.

Reading suggestions

- **Light on Yoga** by B.K.S. Iyengar
  A classic! This has a great preface on the history and philosophy of Yoga with ALL the classical postures pictured and detailed for benefits.

- **Living Your Yoga** by Judith Lasater
  Inspirational. Written by a long time practitioner/wife/mother, view on "Yoga off the mat" in our daily lives.
- **Into the Heart of Truth**
  Philosophy. Very readable, practical and helpful applications of the Nyamas (our relationships with self and others).
- **The Secret of the Yamas** by John McAfee
  A spiritual guide to being with ourselves.
- **Moving Into Stillness** by Erich Schiffman
  A "how to" book with a beautiful preface about moving into stillness with the breath! Details of postures, alignments, benefits etc.
- **Yoga for Wellness** by: Gary Kraftsow
  Specific postures for healing specific issues in the body.

Internet Websites

- www.Kripalu.org
  or call Kripalu for a free catalogue 1-800-741-7353
- www.Yogasite.com
- www.Deeppeace.com
  Great site for Yoga inspiration and information
- www.Anusara.com
  Another great site for Yoga inspiration and information

Google will take you to any specific information about Yoga (if you ask correctly!)

Magazines

- **Yoga Journal**
  Varied articles about postures, teaching, spirituality and related personal growth topics, places to take classes, retreats, book/tape reviews etc.
- **Yoga International**
  Less commercial than Yoga Journal, fewer ads; articles on philosophy, life style etc.

Availability

- **Community:** A variety of classes geared for the yoga enthusiast. Classes are held at Healthtrax Wellness Studio at Hartford Hospital's Avon Wellness Center. Call (860) 284-1190 for schedule and registration information.
- **Staff:** To register for the 8 week Yoga Class series for Hartford Hospital Staff (Mondays 12-1p, Conklin 202), call Sheila Belzer at (860) 545-2418 or email sbelzer@harthosp.org