

Why yoga?

by Lexie Wolf

Last week I told our yoga discussion group I was going to try to write an article for this paper explaining what yoga was beyond the rather silly looking shapes we make with our body that most people know as “yoga.” They had many great insights. So I want to say up front this piece is a collaboration.

I was going to attempt to summarize the foundational classical text we were discussing— the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali— but that seemed a bit dry! So I won’t. You are welcome. Suffice to say there are ancient and wise texts in the yoga tradition as there are in so many other traditions, with very insightful things to say about the human condition.

Yoga is a system of practices aimed at freeing ourselves from these human minds of ours, which pretty much torture us on a daily basis. The world deals us real and terrible blows and challenges. Some of us much more than others. But the filter through which we experience them — our egos and our minds— is pretty important too. When we’re falling in love, someone cutting in front of us in line might not matter a bit. When we’ve already had a bad day, it can enrage us. In yoga we work to observe that filter, understand it a bit better, and maybe separate ourselves from it.

The physical part of yoga was intended to be a small aspect of this system, a way for monks to prepare their bodies to sit in meditation for long periods. Meditation is really the focal point of classical yoga.

Swami Vivekenanda is credited with “introducing yoga to the west” at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893. In the West we latched on to the physical aspect of yoga — Hatha yoga — and ran with it. What we know as yoga in America started to catch on in California in the fifties. American yoga is a Wild West of varied interpretations and styles. Very broadly speaking, you’ll find yoga more strictly physical in gyms with more of the spiritual and philosophical aspects of yoga included in studio classes. Lots of people come to yoga first as fitness, then realize there is much more to it.

The practice can be richest when we see our body, and our experience on the mat as a metaphor for the human experience. We have to overcome self-doubt and what we think others are thinking of us and previous notions of what we think we can do. We have to adapt the poses to work for our particular bodies and know that what we are doing might be completely different from what others are doing — and that’s ok. We strive to be forgiving and accepting of ourselves. We can notice things about ourselves and how our perspective changes with tiny physical or mental shifts.

In our yoga discussion group Greg described his “a-ha” moment in yoga when he realized it would all be easier if he relaxed and got out of his own way. That his own tension was what was making it difficult for him to get into a pose. There is much to learn and experience during a yoga practice, if we tune in to it.



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There is a magic that happens when you practice in community and can feel the energy in the room, witness people working to be their best selves. There is another kind of magic that comes from practicing at home alone, and going entirely inward. It’s all good.

Yoga, like many things, takes time and consistency. Over time, bodies change. Perspective changes. We’re on a journey to increase consciousness and awareness, to free our minds from thought patterns that hurt us. To quiet

the DMV and Facebook and the border crisis and our children and all we have lost and what we hope to gain and who society tells us we should be.

We practice being human, our outer and inner fitness improves, and hopefully we take that out into the world with us and live our yoga.

I can’t help but wonder what the world would be like if everyone had a bit more ease and inner peace.

With gratitude to Danielle, Jess, Andrea, Teri, Greg, Amy and Tom.

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