

YOGS IS NOT ABOUT FLEXIBILITY

By: Devarshi Steven Hartman

Yoga is not about flexibility or physical prowess. I have been known to say, “Great, so you can put your foot behind your head. You’re still an asshole!” The outcome of real yoga is authentic presence – Gandhi, said, ...“where what you say, what you think, what you feel, what you do; are all in alignment.” This is the deeper “alignment” to be sought through yoga practice. (And please, critical thinkers, I am not saying physical alignment is not important for physical safety). I am always sad to hear of people who “tried” a yoga class and left saying, “I am not flexible enough or “good” at it” – They simply went to the wrong yoga teacher. Today, this happens a lot more than it use to as “yoga” emphasizes more of the exercise benefits rather than the deeper transformational process inherent in its origin.

Yoga is an ancient science for personal transformation, which creates freedom at every level of the being. When we practice the science of yoga, we begin to purify the physical body (Anna Maya Kosha), energetic body (Prana Maya Kosha), and mental body (Mano Maya Kosha). These “more dense” layers shadowing the Infinite Being, hold resisted memory, patterns, and habits (samskaras) that are unconscious, indoctrinated, non-deliberate and generally unhelpful to our freedom.

Yoga practice first, brings self-awareness to these patterns - you cannot change something you are not aware of. Second, yoga practice enters you into the experimentation process of self-regulation, where you begin to explore these patterns and perceive new choices. Third, sustained yoga practice generates prolonged periods of self-mastery, or freedom and conscious choice, over what was previously unconscious and habitual. These habits no longer “do you”, but you “do” the habits. Self Awareness, Self-Regulation and Self-Mastery comprise the ARM™ of yoga practice described in Pranotthan Yoga Methodology.

All yoga practices – asana, pranayama, and meditation experiments are designed to create and establish Witness Consciousness (Vijnana Maya Kosha) - or non-judgmental, compassionate awareness in all that we do. Swami Kripalu said, “Establishing Witness Consciousness is the highest goal of yoga”...Not being able to do a headstand! Don’t get me wrong. Headstands are grand. I love them. They have many benefits. But without the goal of Witness Consciousness they are not yoga; they are gymnastics. One need not be a gymnast to be a yogi and being a gymnast or bendy-posture-mimicking-Gumby, does not make one a yogi.

Asana practice is meant to help us start to tune-in and listen deeply to our body, our animal self, and create a relationship of self-care and compassion for this precious “space suit” that houses our consciousness this lifetime. Through conscious compassionate movement, we unlock areas of tension, trauma, limitation, (the yogic scriptures say from this life, and others!) and yes; JOY, PASSION, and SENSUALITY come too! We open to the full gamut and range of life’s experience and expression through our precious animal self. AND we begin to access the innate intelligence (pranotthan) held in our miraculously divine body.

Most humans today are out of touch with their natural rhythms and physical intelligence because we have been trained not to listen and are constantly distracted by the world and seeming threats and pleasures outside of us. Practicing asana with a sensitive teacher who encourages us to listen, to breathe, to turn-on and tune-in to sensations, will have us begin to access the intuitive, innate, healing messages waiting in our cells, just for us. When we begin to listen and observe with Witness Consciousness, our beautiful, mystical body begins to release and experience what we have resisted and repressed. This is the natural, necessary, purification process (kriya) caused by yoga practice that creates freedom and authentic presence.

Through practice, we begin to listen to the “language” of our animal body (which, by the way, is not English). The animal self speaks in sensation. Sensations are an experience, happening in the present moment, and require establishing compassionate Witness Consciousness (non-judgmental, compassionate self-observation)

in order to hear them, feel them, see them, and experience them. Our everyday mind often carries many judgments around sensations. They are too much here, too big there, too scary, too sensitive, too emotional, too confusing, too feminine, too angry, too masculine, too sexy, too loud, too overwhelming, too weak, too, too, too... True yoga asana practice is designed to assist us in exploring and experiencing sensations – all sensations - in a safe environment for the purpose of restoring freedom of expression and awareness. Yoga is a metaphysical healing process, which is why, for many people, yoga becomes a spiritual or religious experience. It is just that simple. It's just that profound.

Once we begin to listen to our animal intelligence through sensation, we begin to move to the subtler layer of the energetic body (Prana Body). Asana practice was established to explore and distinguish the ranges of expression possible in the animal body/physical self. Pranayama practice/breathing and energy practice was created to explore and distinguish the ranges of expression and subtleties of the energetic body, or one's personal lifeforce. Sustained breathing practices, or pranayama, turn our attention towards the subtle lifeforce that breathes life into the animal self and animates it. When we begin to breath into our cells, feel sensations fully, and relax with whatever is presented to our self-awareness, a subtler purification, presence and healing process ensues.

Places where we have been holding or stuck, where energy is not moving, where control has taken hold, begin to loosen. Each resisted energy pattern holds a hidden gift unique to us: a freedom of expression, an unconscious fear or limitation waiting to be integrated - All through deliberate breathing. A sure way not to feel your feelings is to hold your breath. Many of us hold our breath all day long, all week long, all month long, all year long – You get the picture. Deep breathing, slow breathing, rapid breathing, nostril breathing, mouth breathing, alternate nostril breathing, and every combination therein are the specific ancient practices of pranayama, all designed to restore the energy body back to balance and freedom.

Deliberate breathing initiates a complex series of chemical reactions that stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, lower cortisol levels, slow the heart rate, produce serotonin, aid digestion, and much more. When we practice asana and pranayama, even for short durations, the innumerable benefits are exponential. Dedication to sustained practice guarantees human freedom and optimal health is restored. Nothing less.

Lastly, Meditation and concentration practices of yoga are designed to become in-charge of one's attention. The energy of "attention" and "awareness" are yet, subtler still, than the energy of the animal self (physical body) and the lifeforce self (prana body). When we are able to direct our attention, at will or consciously, to whatever we choose, we are the masters, or creators, of our experience. Whatever you place your attention on, is what you experience. Much of our attention is trapped in our unconscious and resistance to the moment, just as it is. Practicing being right-here-and-right-now in body, breath and mind, brings to the surface all of the ways we are NOT right-here-and-right-now, or all of the ways which we want to change the moment to be different than what it actually is. Beginning to practice being fully present in body, breath and mind, initiates another level of purification.

Our ability to "be here now" is what presence and authenticity – the outcome of yoga practice - is all about. EVERYTHING that ANYONE desires CAN ONLY BE FOUND IN THE PRESENT MOMENT. Ask yourself, or anyone, what you truly want and we all say the same thing regardless of age, religion, nationality, or limitation. We ALL want happiness. We all want freedom. We all want joy. We all want love. We all want health. We all want meaning. We all want to belong. Then why don't we have them? If everyone on the planet is united in what we want from this human experience – and we are! – Then why, oh why, don't we have it?

It is because all the things that we truly seek, and want, are not things at all, but EXPERIENCES. And true experience can only be had, held, experienced, and received in THE PRESENT MOMENT. People do not know how to be present. They have not been TAUGHT to BE present. We need to PRACTICE the tools to be present in order to clear what is in the way of our being present...When you learn to be present, you can be

present to happiness, present to belonging, present to abundance and receive them, in the moment, as the “outrageous experience of now” that they are. And in order to get to experience all “the good” feelings, we have to be open to feeling and experiencing, without judgment, all of the feelings we have labeled as “bad” feelings also. Oh. There’s the rub.

If we begin to feel fully, we begin to feel EVERYTHING fully – sadness, loneliness and despair too. So, it is best to avoid yoga practice. Real yoga classes should have a warning label on them. Warning: These practices have been known to wake humans up to their ability to feel fully alive. Please do not partake if you want to continue to pretend you are in control, are not open to change, and prefer to be right.

Asana, Pranayama and Meditation practices are the beginning stages of Patanjali’s yoga sutras eight stages to conscious awakening to our true self. It’s that simple. It’s that profound. This is why the simple practices of yoga have continued to absorb my attention, interest and dedication for years. These non-denominational, non-dogmatic, foundational skills and practices are where all the “goodies” of life experience lie hidden. Once we have them in our “tool bag” we experience the same dramas of life that everyone else, but differently – with more Witness Consciousness, more deliberate choices available, more ability to accept and feel what is, more freedom – which results in more joy – even when life is handing us things that are not so “joyful” – which a full life does at times.

The results of yoga practice are infinite and endless. There is no bottom, no top, and no sides to what is available through yoga practice. It has been forty years now that I have been practicing yoga, and I always feel I am just beginning, just at the doorway, sitting at the precipice, just getting a glimpse of the endless possibilities ahead. It is like a big night sky, or a deep blue ocean, or a dark unending void that I always enjoy gazing in to.

The Pranotthan Yoga Teacher Training was designed to emphasize the deeper consciousness-raising and transformational processes held in ancient yoga practices. Pranotthan Yoga creates increased awareness (true health) at every level (physical, energetic, emotional, mental). The Pranotthan Yoga School (PYS) creates teachers who increase awareness in themselves and their students. Pranotthan Yoga teachers practice and share the ancient art and science of yoga inquiries and experiments with an attitude of empowerment and compassion. We welcome everyone.