

Is it Yoga?

Posted on October 20, 2013 by svasthanz <http://svasthayoganz.com/2013/10/20/why-yoga/>



“There is a lot of confusion in the yoga world today – it is not that yoga teachers and students aren’t sincere, but they are sincerely confused”

This was just one of the home truths shared by A.G. Mohan on his recent visit to New Zealand. Although he said it with typical good humour – he wasn’t joking! Mohan has studied, practiced and taught yoga for over 40 years and had the great privilege of being a close personal student of the legendary yoga master T. Krishnamacharya for eighteen years. He is undoubtedly one of the most knowledgeable yoga teachers living today. When he comes out with a statement like that, we should all stop and listen!

More people practice yoga today than ever before; that should be a good thing – we need yoga! But is it yoga we are practicing or is it what Mohan refers to as ‘made up yoga’? He is not afraid of ruffling feathers by asking questions such as these and seriously suggests that we ask them of ourselves.

In today’s world many people think of advanced yoga as being able to perform complex physical postures; often with a misguided understanding that something is to be gained from this. Rather, the essence of practice and its power to transform is taking a back seat, as more attention is placed on the external form than the inner journey. How centred and balanced we are during our practice, along with the level of control we have over our breath and our minds is what determines our progress on this path. It has

nothing to do with physical prowess or the ability to perform fancy postures and lengthy, complicated sequences.

There is no one alive today who has greater knowledge of yoga than Krishnamacharya. He practiced, studied and taught yoga with unwavering dedication throughout his life and actually realised some of the higher mental states attained by very few. Krishnamacharya had very specific guidelines around the practice of yoga including what should be practiced by whom and at what stage of life. From deep study of the many texts on yoga and experiential knowledge gained through his own practice, Krishnamacharya clearly defined the necessary components of asana practice:

- It brings balance and cultivates a state of calm and clarity (sattva)
- It has purpose
- It involves proper breathing
- It is done in conjunction with the yamas and niyamas
- It is learned from a proper teacher
- It is a practice of ‘minding the mind’

If these components are not present, it is not yoga!

Let’s face it, any exercise will make us feel better, lighter etc. It will reduce tamas (inertia), but for it to be classified as yoga, it must also reduce rajasa (activity) in order to cultivate the state of sattva (clarity). This will only be achieved with focus of the breath and focus of the mind – long, deep breathing and slow, controlled movements. In yoga practice, the very purpose of movement is to move towards the absence of movement – physically and mentally.

Any practice that considers the external form of a posture over the internal state, any practice that is overly active and/or excessively heating is not yoga. Exercise of this nature may well be enjoyable and exciting but, is it yoga? We must not only be clear about what yoga is, but also what it is not.

If we are only looking for a physical workout, the ability to tie ourselves in to fancy shapes, or wow others with our performance, there are other options available. Why call it yoga?

I believe what calls us to yoga in the first instance is a deep longing to find our way back to ourselves. Do our teachers help us on this journey or do they keep us stuck in the vicious cycle of always striving for more, of over stimulation? Often I have heard teachers justify the physicality of what they are offering by suggesting it is from here that a deeper search begins. Don't be fooled! That search started when you first heard the voice inside say "I want to try yoga" – as soon as you stepped in to your first class – whether or not you were fully aware of it.

As teachers it is our duty to nourish this calling right from day one. As students, we have the right to question if it is yoga we are being taught.

This practice is exquisite in itself, it has the power to heal and to help us find our way back to the Self. It doesn't need to be updated or given a modern twist. It's message is timeless – let's keep it real!