

Interview with Julien L. Balmer

(by Susan d'Arcy, Sunday Times spa writer, September 2011)

Sd'A: I know you had an interesting route into yoga, can you tell me about that and why it made you turn to yoga?

JB: Sure. Ten years ago in early 2001, I had a near-fatal freak accident in Brazil. I was traveling at the time with a couple of guys I had met on the road. We had already been spending a few days on this small paradise island on which we rented a house, when one night the large glass window near which we slept broke into a thousand pieces. One piece of the broken glass cut my artery and left me bleeding. I'll spare you further details, the bottom line is I am very lucky to have made it.

Looking back it is clear that this event marked a turning point in my life. Prior to this, I was living intensely – but very superficially I would say today – trying hard to line up one pleasant experience after the other. In other words, my focus was external. After this experience I felt drawn to explore the inner dimensions, which brought me to yoga within a year after the accident. It wasn't an overnight change though, rather a process of shifting focus. After having faced my own impermanence so starkly I began to develop other interests, some of it was conscious, most of it unconscious. I found myself interested in the contemplative traditions of the East, and wanted to go learn meditation in a monastery. I turned to yoga because I had heard of its healing powers, and since my body was still recovering from the accident I decided to give that a try.

Sd'A: What was the moment that made you commit so completely to yoga?

JB: There wasn't one moment in particular. I mentioned that my initial interest in yoga was to improve my physical condition. I was doing physiotherapy at the time, but when a friend of mine suggested I do some energy work on top of that it made a lot of sense to me. So I started yoga with this in mind, but quickly discovered that yoga had much more to offer than "just" healing. I was fortunate to learn from a very gifted and inspiring teacher who helped me discover the deeper dimensions of yoga. Every time I practiced I had glimpses, brief moments when I felt something new had just happened, something that I had not experienced before. This is what kept me going and eventually led me to devote my life to the practice of yoga.

Sd'A: Can you describe what hatha yoga is, how it differs from other styles of yoga and who hatha is best suited to?

JB: Hatha-Yoga is the one branch of yoga that is by far the most widely practiced today. Like all branches of traditional yoga, Hatha-Yoga was originally conceived as a way to *moksha*, or liberation/self-realization. The goal of all authentic forms of yoga is spiritual emancipation, which means to wake up to one's essential, unchanging, and eternal nature.

Yoga is a very vast and diverse tradition, and it comprises a large number of at times very different practices. Being part of the Tantric lore, Hatha-Yoga is a branch that embraces manifestation, matter, physicality, and with it implicitly the body. It's one of the most technical forms of yoga, and it deals among others with body postures (*asanas*), purification practices (*kriyas*), energy (*prana*), *chakras*, *kundalini-shakti*. It differs from other styles of yoga in that it embraces the body, it's a way of "reaching for the top of the mountain" (*moksha*) through the body. Other forms of yoga are body-negative – the body is seen as an obstacle rather than a valuable vehicle for spiritual evolution.

Hatha-Yoga is suitable for almost all human beings. It's a very complete system that aims at a multidimensional development in the practitioner. On a physical level it will give you a very healthy, vital, resilient, strong body. But the practice doesn't stop there. It will also give you greater emotional balance and allow you to develop your latent mental potential. Ultimately, Hatha-Yoga, like all other forms of traditional yoga, will also allow you to explore and experience higher states of consciousness, the ultimate experience being one of cosmic or oceanic consciousness, or *samadhi*.

Sd'A: How often do you need to practice to see some benefit?

JB: This is difficult to say, as progress depends on a variety of factors. Besides putting in the time "on the mat," certain lifestyle choices conducive to yoga are fundamental to success. I'm thinking of things like appropriate nutrition, abstaining from intoxicants, the harnessing of the sexual potential, and a generally moral and ethical way of life. But to answer your question, I guess some benefit can be derived even from a very moderate practice of let's say once per week.

Generally speaking we can say that regularity is of utmost importance – practicing yoga for 30 minutes a day will give you more results than doing a single 3.5-hour session once per week. Clearly, the ideal is a daily routine over

prolonged periods of time, that's when the power of yoga becomes very apparent and best results can be seen. It also depends what you are after with your yoga, whether you do it for purely "feel-good and general maintenance" reasons or whether let's say you have a health condition and have decided to tackle it the yogic way. Depending on the severity of the condition, you might have to practice a tailor-made program quite intensely to bring about healing, and a few times a week simply won't suffice.

Last, results naturally depend on the quality of the yoga practiced. Most yoga offered and practiced today is very diluted and weak, and it won't give impressive results even if practiced diligently. Good quality yoga is traditional yoga, that means not just a physical workout à la aerobics, gymnastics, or mere stretching. Authentic Hatha-Yoga always is a body/mind practice in which one reaps physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual benefits.

Sd'A: Can you suggest a yoga posture that would be particularly good for relieving back pain?

JB: Many modern people suffer from back pain, in particular issues centering around the lower back which tends to become calcified and stiff as a result of our sedentary lifestyles and lack of proper exercise. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that back pain can have many causes, and it would be presumptuous for me to mention one asana as a panacea for any such condition. Each case needs to be carefully assessed, and once the root cause has been identified, a customized yoga program can be put together.

Different Hatha-Yogic postures bend, twist, and impact the spine in different ways. A program for back pain would typically not consist of a single or even a few poses only, no, we would more characteristically incorporate some 8 – 15 postures that practiced in combination with each other will result in an improvement. The yogic view is that a healthy spine is fundamental to having a good overall level of health and well-being. That's why so many techniques from Hatha-Yoga revolve around the spine.

Sd'A: Are there any national characteristics that show through during classes, so do British students always do a certain sort of thing or French people always ask the same question kind of thing.

JB: Yes, for sure there are such differences. Sometimes it's what people do, sometimes it's what they don't do, but very often in fact it's more subtle. It's the way people move their bodies, the way people interact with others, the way feelings and emotions are (or are not) expressed. Most groups I teach are made up of people who travel internationally to join a [yoga retreat](#) or workshop, and that's when such characteristics become quite apparent and noticeable. But it's not only the people themselves who differ in temperament and energy, but also the places where we practice. A place like a tropical island for example feels very nurturing, vital and vibrant, while a mountain retreat at high altitude feels more sublime and serene.