

Peeling the Onion

(Nick Atlas, June 2011)

I first discovered Yoga during my senior year at university and was immediately hooked. I'd been an athlete all of my life, was obsessed with being in the "zone," and here was a direct line to that magical place without the bruising competitiveness of sports. For years I took Yoga classes all over New York and vigorously practiced the few postures that I'd learned but knew in my heart that something was missing. I did Yoga in my dreams, started praying for a teacher and ultimately followed my intuition across the country until I finally met a master who opened my eyes to the truths of the ancient tradition. After a decade of continual, devoted and highly-disciplined practice both as a student and instructor, here are my thoughts on some of those truths.

I. Yoga is for Everyone

Large or small, young or old, hyper-flexible or stiff-as-a-board, Yoga is for everyone. You don't have to be an athlete, of a certain persuasion, temperament or body-type to practice. While for some it's synonymous with stretching, Yoga is a Sanskrit word meaning "union," and isn't so much something that you do as it's something you strive to achieve. Though students of Yoga may adhere to any number of schools or doctrines attempting to transmit its techniques and philosophies, there is in fact a common denominator among them all; a light at the end of the tunnel, literally. Yogis strive toward *moksha*—liberation, or the cessation of suffering on the karmic wheel of death and rebirth. And here you thought it was all about getting into the "crow"... History tells us that the *rishis* or sages of ancient India who developed Yoga over two thousand years ago were not so much preoccupied with postures and alignment as they were interested in being completely free from worry and the chatter of the monkey-mind.

For most of us, the very idea of *moksha* is as foreign as Mars. The Buddha, amongst others, proffered his experience of enlightenment, lending credence to the idea that such a thing exists and can be achieved, but there are few clues as to what it looks like and how we get there. Who's got time to drop everything to go live in an *ashram* anyway? Liberation has become something antiquated and mythical, and in the truest sense has almost no relevance in our daily lives. We live in a complicated age, and are often constricted by our grasping to the materials that give our lives meaning. Generally speaking, our individual worlds run us as we exhaust ourselves with work, race against time, take on numerous responsibilities and are inundated with over-stimulating (though often entertaining) distractions that blind us from any deeper meaning. Sadly, we measure success in terms of wealth and leisure time, often failing to see that these privileges exist within a socially-constructed yet self-imposed cage. Let's face it, it's tough to lessen our attachments to the material world when we carry the internet in our pockets! But then again, perhaps you're reading this on your phone...

Since the early 20th century, shortly after the mirror found its way into the average household, Yoga has become primarily bodily-centered and the tradition itself is in danger of being reduced to an elegant form of gymnastics. This is a by-product of that same materialism—we strive to make the body more attractive as muscle tone is highly regarded within our culture. Beyond that, exercise makes us feel good, especially when it triggers the release of adrenaline (which caters to our fast-living) and hints at a rich spiritual past (which is what we're lacking). This physical aspect of Yoga, however, only scratches the surface and while it may liberate us from love-handles, provide temporary relief from aches and pains and give us a taste of interconnectedness, will it sooth our emotional turmoil, eradicate the roots of stress and suffering, make us more peaceful and more free over the long haul? Not necessarily, and in some cases quite the contrary.

For example, those that are drawn to any number of varieties of "Power" Yoga are often reinforcing the same hyperactive tendencies that prevent them from calming down. While they may be strengthening their muscles,

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they're not always allowing themselves to expand in a new way, to balance out the depth of their being. Beyond that, getting injured while practicing Yoga has almost become a badge of honor as opposed to an indicator that something is wrong with our approach. Still, we can't blame the practitioners for only seeing this sliver of truth; after all, there are very few who still practice Yoga authentically, and fewer still who teach it.

II. The Meaning of Yoga

So what does “union” mean? And while we're at it, what does “freedom” mean? Many contemporary instructors of *Hatha* Yoga, which is essentially the physical aspect of Yoga including all modern-day adaptations like *Ashtanga*, *Vinyasa*, *Bikram*, and even *Yin*, use distinctions such as “the linking of movement and breath,” or “finding freedom in the body.” These are fine examples of “union,” but they fall short of the big picture. For the ancient *yogis*—the rare adepts at Yoga who'd received a lineage of secretive teachings directly from a master or *guru*—“union” meant surrendering one's being to the Divine consciousness. If “oneness” with God isn't something you've considered while performing *asanas*, does this mean you shouldn't practice? Of course not, but it's important to know what Yoga was designed to do and perhaps more important to ask yourself why you're doing it. Chances are at one point or another you've felt a spark of something much greater, something timeless, perhaps inexplicable and intimately spiritual.

The sort of transformation that Yoga was designed to elicit and that initially made it so popular in the West is one of freeing ourselves from our attachment to the body while cultivating the mind and bringing awareness to our “Higher Self” or *atman*, that which is one with the Universe. You might think of your body as an onion housing your essence or, for lack of a better term, your soul, beneath all those layers. Yogis believe that the individual soul, or *Jivatman*, at that center of this onion is a piece of the Soul of the Universe, *atman*. Suffice to say it's virtually impossible to connect with *atman* during a strenuous boot-camp practice set to loud music, nor are you likely to achieve deep states of union in the midst of painfully contorting your body into a compromising position; or, worst of all, while constantly looking over at your teacher barking instructions faster than you can keep up. However, if we practice Yoga in line with its purpose to relieve suffering rather than to admonish it, the resulting experience of “freeing the body” is a blissful one as it brings your essence closer to the source. Even when you're ready to tackle some major “weeds,” such as the areas where you hold a great deal of tension, there should be no pain and plenty of patience. As you release your attachment to the physical aspect, practice without being in a hurry and relinquish the “no pain, no gain” mentality, you begin to peel away the layers of the onion, can explore deeper parts of yourself and sooner or later you'll arrive at the center.

III. The Practice of Eternity

So how do we go about practicing in such a way as to honor the tradition and reap the benefits of this ancient, magical science of enlightenment? The answer is simpler than you think: slow down. Place yourself in the shoes of the *rishi*, the mystical hermit living in a cave in the Himalayas practicing Yoga with the goal of complete realization, which is also our goal whether we're aware of it or not. It's possible that this person had no sense of time in the way we regard it. A Yogi lives Yoga and his or her practice extends over the course of a lifetime, so while we may be incredibly driven to practice as we sense that we're aiding in our own evolution, what's the rush? In the *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali explains that an *asana* should be *sthira* and *sukha* — steady and comfortable. The body exists within space and time, but union exists beyond space and time. As you let

go of the clock, you begin to let go of the body and can relax more fully into the eternal present moment. This is the place of union. Remember, if you're not relaxed, it's not quite Yoga.

As you practice, keep in mind that flexibility is not the goal in-and-of itself. Rather than wrenching the body, strive to make use of the space that's already available to you. In other words, regularly move your body into places that it can already access but normally doesn't, as opposed to forcing it into places that it's not ready to go. Keeping yourself well-oiled and limber, especially in the joints, is one key to physical health and longevity. As you routinely and safely explore your edges you'll naturally begin to grow beyond your perceived limitations. Better that you take quality breaths while in the *asana*, as if you were cleansing the inside of your body with air, then struggle for that extra inch. In time, your breath and ability to relax will open up more space and your body will more become more pliable because you've steadily purified it.

In fact, success in Yoga isn't measured by how far you can stretch but by how long you can stay in an *asana* and by the depth of your relaxation and concentration. This doesn't mean that you should immediately try to hold your headstand for ten minutes, but it's certainly something to work towards, perhaps starting with a minute-and-a-half and adding a few seconds each day. Building the strength and mental focus it requires takes discipline and routine, the same way you might train for a marathon. When the day arrives where you can rest comfortably upside-down, it will seem like no time has passed at all.

Another idea is to work on remaining completely motionless while in the *asana*, and to practice meditation as if you were in a seated posture. As you find perfect balance in your body, you'll find balance in your mind, will achieve even greater feats of "centeredness," and gradually will recognize union as a state of consciousness much more profound than where we spend most of our time. In fact, the bliss that accompanies union only gets more delicious as we fine-tune our balance and our ability to surrender. The union we experience lingers well beyond the mat and before you know it, your whole being starts to change for the better. Your skin glows, your eyes shine, your mind steadies and is less prone to distractions. You lose weight, stop getting sick, sleep through the night and live full, enriched days. Love and compassion begins to gush forth from your heart, the entire Universe conspires to support your dreams; your feet kiss the ground as you walk, and you realize your place in the great mystery. Freedom comes by simply returning to your center again and again, stringing together moment after moment of blissful experience, and seeing the divine essence in all things. This is the meaning of *namaste*, an expression of our interconnectedness, and a reminder that we practice Yoga on the mat so that we can live Yoga off the mat.