

Yoga: Physical vs. Physiological, Flow vs. Slow, Power vs. Slower

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Yoga continues to expand and evolve within American society, and even Indian society. There was an article in the New York Times a while ago about a conflict in the Indian school system: whether to allow Sun Salutations in the schools as a form of exercise.

That yoga is more available, and cheaper, and is being recognized as an important form of “exercise”, is wonderful. You can find a class even in small towns in small countries, and on the internet. However, like all things American and Global, there is a tendency to believe that faster, hotter, bigger is better.

Like all fads, American and Global, there is an initial enthusiasm that evolves into something else. Sometimes, like Pet Rocks or tulips in Amsterdam², the bubble bursts and there is nothing left. Given yoga’s 5000+ year legacy, it will not go away. However, as it evolves along with our society, it is important to be selective in choosing how to incorporate yoga into one’s life.

This concern is similar to the “slow food” movement growing in response to the “fast food” movement. Better life through fast food and chemistry was promised in the 50’s, along with bottle-fed babies, margarine and other scientific wonders. However, several decades later, we are realizing the long-term consequences of these innovations, to us as individuals, society and the planet. The tremendous growth of the organic and local food movements, and the continuing collapse of the health care system speak to the consequences of this “modern is better” philosophy. There is a reason that yoga is 5000 years old; and that we are going back to it. Like genetic engineering, before we alter yoga’s methodology, we better know what we’re doing and why.

Why We Do and Don’t Do Yoga

So, why do we do yoga? Because it’s the thing to do? Because it’s an efficient form of exercise? Because your friend loves it? Because it doesn’t require expensive equipment or a special court? Because we feel better after doing it? Because it sculpts our body? Because we sleep better? Because it enables us to do other sports and activities (singing, dancing, playing instruments, and paying attention in meetings) better? Yes, for all of these reasons.

That yoga can make us feel and operate better, and even heal from chronic and obscure conditions is a testament to its power. But in our scientific, data-driven society, don’t we want to know more? Don’t we want to understand how it works? Like fast food, fast convenient yoga tastes great, but haven’t we learned our lesson? That faster and more convenient is not always better.

Evidence of the problem with fad yoga is the fact that most of us know someone who was hurt doing yoga and will not do it ever again. When someone gets hurt doing yoga, taking a math class, a medicine, or going to the dentist, we often extrapolate this single painful experience to all similar future experience. We know people who have phobias to school, math and dentists, and we recognize the risks involved in avoiding these resources for life. When someone gets hurt doing yoga, it is rare that the right questions are asked: who was the teacher or practitioner, what was their training and experience, what were the circumstances?

Also, just because a Big Mac tastes good, doesn’t mean it is good for us. Sometimes it is the less tasty, less convenient food that gives us the best health benefit. Organic kale costs more than a Big Mac, and is not as available, but multiple sources of quality information tell us that 300 calories of kale is not only great for us and our kids, it can help undo 600 calories or years of Big Macs. Likewise, just because we feel good after yoga, like the teacher and didn’t have to travel too far to get there, is this the best way?

The challenge is to use all resources—thought, emotion, and science, to determine what is best, even if on the surface it seems inconvenient, more expensive, or even painful. In other words, we must apply yoga philosophy to our yoga practice! We must be aware of what we are doing and why, and strive to increase this awareness.

Yoga: Physical vs. Physiological		
Aspect	Physical	Physiological
Speed	Faster	Slower
Orientation	External	Internal
Class Size	Larger	Smaller
Convenience	More Available	Less Available
Teachers	Less Experience	More Experience
Attention	Less	More
Emphasis	Strength and Sweat	Balance
Metabolism	Speeds	Resets
ANS	Sympathetic	Parasympathetic

Styles, Sequencing, Alignment, Warm-Up, Corrections

There are many styles of yoga being taught, and the list keeps growing. In some way they are all hatha, emphasizing the asanas (postures) and pranayama (breathing) in some combination. However, going back to the yoga sutras, yoga is not defined by its physical aspects, but by its mental/spiritual aspects: “Yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind”. The physical benefits of yoga are a side-effect! While positive, and appealing to our visually dominant, skinny-youth-oriented society, yoga can easily become just exercise. Exercise, too, is positive, and physical yoga, for most, is better than no yoga. However, to get the full benefit, we need to understand and implement a balance in our yoga practice.

The difference between the styles as practiced today, are in the way the postures and breath work are emphasized and sequenced, and the attention of the teacher to individual alignment and needs. “Gym yoga”, where 20+ people are crowded into a class taught by a teacher who stays at the

front of the room, is an extreme form of commodity yoga. The emphasis is sweating and burning; reminiscent of the phrase “no pain no gain”. Internet yoga is similar, in that there is no supervision or individualization. While many people can get away with doing this type of yoga when young, the chances of injury go up and the benefits of yoga go down as we get older.

This mass-yoga is a far cry from the original way it was taught thousands of years ago, one-on-one, with an emphasis on the mental and spiritual aspects. To achieve the full magic of yoga (including the siddhis!), a yoga practice needs to have this sort of emphasis.

Yoga Physiology

In yoga physiology, the emphasis is on prana, or energy. The classic model describes chakras, or energy centers, each of which has a major relationship to emotion and physiology. Energy flows between chakras and other parts of the body through nadis, or channels. Dis-ease, physical and mental, is explained as deficiency, excess or reversal in the flow of energy through these energy paths. Postures and breath are utilized to alter the flow of prana, or energy, through various parts of our physical and non-physical body. A full yoga practice includes all eight limbs, including yamas and niyamas (personal and social precepts), and the “internal” practices of pratyahara (turning off of external senses), dharana (concentration) and dhyana (meditation).

Classic yoga is not just a one-hour class, but a lifestyle. It is a scientific method that has been perfected over thousands of years. Its purpose is to “optimize” us as spiritual-mental-physical beings.

Recent Science and Physiology Begins to Explain Yoga

Recent scientific studies of the effects of yoga and meditation on health validates its ability to improve virtually every aspect of our functioning—brain function, hormonal function, sleep, mood, balance, etc.

In holistic medicine, there is a growing emphasis on the adrenal glands as both a cause and result of illness and trauma. When we are chronically stressed, this system cannot keep up with production of our stress hormones, which then begins to affect our mental and physical functioning, as well as our thyroid, sex hormones and metabolism.

When we over-exercise, or over-yoga, we add to this stress. While there may be short term benefits on our muscles and weight, the long-term effects of stress, though the hormone cortisol, causes a deterioration of most tissues, including muscle, tendons and ligaments, and brain. This is one explanation why people who exercise excessively become injured. And when exercise stops, the altered metabolism then causes weight gain, which then causes more injuries and inflammation.

Yoga, done slowly, is one of the only techniques for resetting this adrenal system. It also can reset the autonomic nervous system, which controls “automatic” functions such as blood pressure, digestion, immunity, sleep, etc.

But I Don't Like Going Slow

Going slow, like having a slow computer or car, is highly anti-American! However, once the physiology of stress and aging is understood, as well as the true nature of classic yoga, it becomes easier to commit. It is similar to slowly eliminating processed comfort foods from the diet, spending a little extra money on organic foods, or going to sleep a bit earlier to get closer to 8 hours. There are certain aspects of our lifestyle that we must consciously change, even if at first inconvenient, or even unpleasant. We often need to challenge ourselves to break out of our comfort zones to get to the next level of mental and physical health. As children, most of us didn't like brushing our teeth or doing math homework. As adults, we clean our bathrooms and put money away for retirement, though this is not fun. Doing slow yoga yields tremendous long-term benefits. It is not difficult to balance a fast, hot class with a slow practice a few times a week.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This general information should not be used to make decisions about medical care without the involvement of a knowledgeable practitioner.

Footnotes and Reading Materials (Books followed by ISBN number)

1. See Dr. Cheikin's website, www.cheikin.com, for related articles on: Cortisol, Adrenal Fatigue, Stress and others as well as other topics, holistic health information and workshops.
2. Tulip Mania occurred in the 1630's, when a fad caused the price of special single tulip bulbs to cost more than a house! http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tulip_mania
3. Ballentine, Rudolph: Radical Healing: Integrating the World's Greatest Therapeutic Traditions... Three Rivers Press, 2000. 0609-804-847
4. Joy, W. Brugh: Joy's Way. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979. 0874-770-858.
5. Cameron, Julia: The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity. Penguin, 1992. 0874-776-945.
6. Sivananda Center: The Sivananda Companion to Yoga. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983. 0684-87000-2.
7. Lasater, Judith P.T. Ph.D.: Relax and Renew: Restful Yoga for Stressful Times. Rodmell Press, 1995. 0962-713-848.
8. Wilson, James L: Adrenal Fatigue: the 21st Century Stress Syndrome. Petaluma CA: Smart Publications, 2001. ISBN 1890-572-152.
9. Moritz, Andreas: Timeless Secrets of Health and Rejuvenation. 2007. 9780-9792-75753

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