

NON-HARMING (*AHIMSA*)... IS IT REALLY WHAT YOGA IS ABOUT?

A recent article in Time Magazine's Health section (October 15, 2007 issue) entitled "When Yoga Hurts" deals with the subject of increasing numbers of serious injuries incurred in yoga classes. It brings to light two very important concerns: one, it is crucial to find teachers who are well-trained, experienced, and attentive to students' needs, and two, students must take responsibility for their own health and well-being while in class.

The need for well-trained, certified instructors is escalating, the article points out. Since attendance is on the rise the demand for classes is also, but out of an estimated 70,000 instructors in the U.S. only 16,168 have been certified. Certification is not the only qualification, however. Experience and a broad exposure to other health-related fields can better equip a teacher to help her students avoid harm. A teacher with a background in massage therapy, chiropractic medicine, physical/exercise therapy, or Pilates can bring a greater understanding of the body to a hatha yoga class. With a growing number of yoga teacher trainings offered nationwide, students need to realize that not all of them are created equal. Although the National Yoga Alliance sets minimum standards for both its 200-hour and 500-hour programs, it does little to ensure that the programs it registers are actually adhering to those standards. With no watchdog policies in action, any studio or teacher can fill in the paper work, send in the money, and become a certifying yoga teacher training program. Therefore, students are advised to check out a teacher thoroughly, and as the article suggests in its "Five Keys to Safe Yoga", "don't be afraid to leave if you're not satisfied".

Another tip the article offers is to "Beware of stationary instructors." This is certainly good advice, for an instructor who is doing his own practice, rather than checking to see if students are doing theirs, cannot possibly give his full attention to his students. A seasoned teacher is entirely able to give instructions, monitor students, make adjustments kindly and compassionately, and offer alternatives for less agile practitioners. This is critical, for yoga was never intended to be a group exercise class. Initially it was taught one-to-one, guru to disciple, and only in recent years has it become a group phenomenon. As such, a teacher must be alert, well-informed, and have a deep understanding of what yoga is really about in order to give the entire group a yogic experience. And that means yoga is not necessarily a vigorous workout. Yoga is a path of Self-development and Self-discovery, in a sense a scientific path to enlightenment, according to the Yoga Pradipika. It might be well to check out a teacher's yoga philosophy credentials as one of the *yamas* (one of eight limbs of Hatha Yoga) is the practice of *ahimsa*, non-violence or non-harming. To really teach yoga, an instructor needs a working understanding of yogic philosophy.

The understanding of yogic philosophy will better equip teachers to give full responsibility to each student in the class for his or her own health and well-being. Yoga is defined as a clear, unhindered mind, free of ego-driven fluctuations: *Yogah cittavrtti nirodhah* – Patanjali Sutra I.2. Three of the five tips to safe yoga listed in the Time Magazine article require the student to mindfully make decisions for herself: informing the instructor of any health concerns, avoiding positions that can cause injury, and stopping if it hurts. These actions require a kind of self-awareness that many folks may not initially possess, however. As the article says: "many

‘weekend warrior’ baby boomers begin yoga without realizing that their bodies are no longer what they used to be.” Both students and teachers need to admit that there can be a strong tendency to push beyond the edge. Ego, competitiveness, and a lack of honesty, compassion and understanding about limitations can drive yoga practitioners to injure themselves. Therefore, it is necessary that the teacher reflect the kind of Self-acceptance that defines yoga, and be an example to her students of compassionate practice. For their part, students need to honestly assess their level of experience and physical capability, and treat their yoga class as something besides a weight-loss program or exercise regime.

Ultimately, as more and more people practice yoga and attempt to stretch their boundaries and explore new heights, more and more people will get hurt. This reality of yoga is not necessarily bad; it is something to acknowledge, and sometimes injury can be the very best teacher. If an instructor does her best to compassionately inform students, and the student does his best to listen to his body, breath, and mind, a union of loving-kindness, presence, and Self-study can occur which will certainly go far to prevent non-harming and cultivate peace and well-being in body, mind, and spirit. This is truly what yoga is all about.

-Lucy Holmes October 2007