

On Practice

Imagine how many different kinds of people are on the planet today. That is how many different kinds of yoga practice there are. However, for the sake of this article, I will say that there are basically two types of yoga practice: mimetic and lived. There are repetitive yoga practices which serve as a conditioning for the body-mind (mimetic), and there is the lived experience of yoga practice that may or may not include postures and breathing exercises (lived). We should be absolutely clear – one is not better than the other and they are not mutually exclusive. Because you happen to doing a mimetic practice does not mean that you are not doing a lived practice, and the reverse is true as well. Rather than being opposed to one another these two are in fact complementary.

Patanjali, the mythical author of the Yoga Sutras (a 100 CE text largely recognized as the definitive statement on classical yoga) said that practice and detachment are the way to experience yoga. Regarding what exactly is meant by “practice”, Patanjali had only this to say:

Practice is the effort to secure steadiness.

This practice becomes well-grounded when continued with reverent devotion and without interruption over a long period of time.

The Yoga Sutras were transmitted via the oral tradition, from teacher to student in what we might consider as yoga classes, and therefore he could not afford to use many words in order to clarify many of the key elements of the Sutras. It is left to the teacher to interpret the sutras and pass along that information to their students. It is not surprising, then, that contemporary practitioners of yoga have widely varying understanding of what exactly is meant by “yoga practice.”

Does yoga practice mean doing asanas (poses)? If we accept Patanjali as authoritative on the subject, then we could answer both yes and no. If the practice of asanas brings steadiness and helps to calm mental fidgetiness, then certainly yoga practice would involve asana. If, however, we prefer to cultivate yogic steadiness by other means, then yoga practice need not involve asana at all. Yoga practice could mean sitting still, or prayer, or chanting, or holding your breath, or simply knowing who you actually are.

A mimetic yoga practice is akin to the practice of a sports team. That is to say the practice is a preparation for the “real deal”, presumably of competitive event of some sort. Outside of the “Yoga Olympics” or some other gymnastic-inspired competitive yoga scenario, there is no competitive event for which to hone your yoga skills. So the mimetic practice of yoga is perhaps more like practicing piano. In most cases the music has already been written and the point of practice is learning to play the music as flawlessly as possible. If we imagine the individual poses as notes and asana sequences as songs, then various yoga teachers are like composers. We first learn the notes and practice our scales, then move on to playing songs as we hone our skills. The height of this practice would be to eventually abandon the compositions become composers in our own right.

A lived yoga practice is less like piano practice and more like a medical practice. A doctor does not practice medicine in the sense that they sit at home and practice their stitches and dressings before heading to the emergency room for the real deal. A medical practice involves the application of medical knowledge on a case-to-case basis. Medical practice must be flexible in order to be effective – stitches and dressings are not an effective treatment for a bacterial infection. So a lived yoga practice makes specialized use of particular poses and sequences in order to meet a particular need. Excellence in lived yoga is not measured in contrast to a pre-determined standard of how the pose or sequence should appear, but on the result of practicing the pose or sequence. In other words, being “good at yoga” would not necessarily mean having “nice poses” but rather being competent at practicing the poses and techniques that meet your needs from day to day.

In most cases a mimetic practice will lay a solid foundation for a successful lived practice. In other cases, students may find that a mimetic style of practice is not necessary and that after very little instruction they are able to adapt the poses to meet their needs. In yet other cases, a mimetic practice may interfere with a student’s ability to successfully integrate the poses and sequences into a lived practice. As with all things in yoga, you discover what works best for you. Nobody can tell you how you should be doing yoga. Certainly teachers can give you pointers, you may even choose to mimic the actions of your teachers in order to learn about your body – but ultimately your style of yoga cannot come from somebody else. Your style is unique to you, and only you are capable of discovering it.