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WHY PRACTICE YOGA?

For yoga teacher Ade Belcham, it took a crisis for him to dive deeper into his yoga and reconcile deeper truths. Facing the realities of needing a hip replacement, Ade found himself questioning what he'd never given deeper thought – why do we practice yoga? Discover the five-point plan he used to dig into his subconscious and how you might apply it to help deepen your purpose

Ten years ago, if you'd asked me why I practice yoga, I'd probably have said something along the lines of 'because I love it', 'it makes me feel good', or, if I was feeling clever, I might have quoted a famous teacher. I've always thought of myself as curious, a bit of an explorer. But somehow the results of yoga seemed so difficult to pin down, that it was easier not to probe too closely and just focus on the doing of it. Writing this, the irony is not lost on me that I spent so much time asking, 'how should I practice' and so little asking 'why'.

Five years ago, all that changed. I had to face the fact that in my early fifties I had a worn-out knee and hip. How could this happen to a dedicated yogi like me? Had I been kidding myself for nearly 20 years that yoga was fantastically good for me? Although it was painful to admit the possibility, I would have been deluded not to consider whether my asana practice had played a part in generating the joint problems. So, I began to look carefully at how I was practising and, as importantly, why I thought it worthwhile to spend hours each day on yoga. I asked friends and students the same questions, and the more I asked, the more curious I became.

Many people said it made them feel better – nothing wrong with that – but by now I was interested enough to want to ask how, and why? I heard others, including myself, admit to being motivated by the ambition to be able to do a particular posture (headstand, handstand, backbends – insert as appropriate). But that only sounded like half an answer. Why make such an arbitrary thing as headstand a goal on which to spend so much time? Or to put it another way – 'what was I really trying to achieve in my quest for headstand?'

I was surprised to find some people felt challenged, even annoyed, by the questions. They said they didn't need a reason to practice, didn't want to analyse their motives. Doing something for the love of it, rather than for some payback or reward, seemed important to them. As with 'it makes me feel better' – 'fair enough,' I thought – especially as so much of modern life seems so goal driven. Perhaps they just enjoy the time out? But again, I was curious. Why yoga rather than gardening or solitaire or TV? Was the choice arbitrary? I confess I was also intrigued that a few individuals seemed almost threatened by the inquiry?

Unsurprisingly, my answer to the question – why practice yoga – is not simple. Yoga seems to serve a combination of needs, not just in different practitioners but within the same person, often at the same time. Before I set out my five 'reasons to practice', I need to make a few things clear.

Firstly, in my opinion each reason has worth and comparing or prioritising them serves no purpose.

Secondly, I've made them up to make sense of my experience as a practitioner and teacher. They arise from self-reflection and direct interaction with a relatively small number of others. I do not claim them as 'universal truths' and certainly not scientifically valid conclusions.

Thirdly, I'm sharing them because asking 'why' seems like something we could usefully do more often – in yoga and perhaps in many other areas of life.

Fourthly – asking 'why' is not a criticism of yoga, nor a rejection of my teachers' instructions. I still practice asana and other techniques daily and yoga ideas permeate the way I see the world. Asking 'why' feels to me like leaning into the tradition of yoga, not away from it.

So here goes, in the hope it might be useful. Five reasons to practice yoga:

- as connection
- as exercise
- to cultivate wellbeing
- to build identity
- as a transformative process.

Yoga as connection

My Nan attended a local yoga class with her friend Gladys through the 1970s and 1980s. 'We used to just go for a giggle,' she admitted, still chuckling. In later years, she also told me that she used her 'yoga breathing' to stay calm when suffering angina attacks. But this was a secondary benefit to Nan. Her main reason for practising for all those years was to spend regular time with her friend.

I've met lots of people for whom classes provide a valued social event, in the same way that being a member of a choir, book club or biker gang can. I know couples who met through yoga, and others,

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'The knee and hip injuries helped me see that I was mixing up yoga as exercise with yoga for identity building...'

like me, who have formed long-lasting friendships that have expanded beyond the boundaries of class.

I have felt seen by key teachers in a way I had never experienced before – clear eyed and without judgement. Heard voices speak truth – welcome and unwelcome – with deep kindness. Just being acknowledged in this way has felt both healing and empowering.

Yoga as exercise

Though I distinguish here between exercise and wellness, I am not suggesting that either is entirely independent of the other. It is a matter of emphasis. Yoga for exercise is aimed at achieving fitness – which we normally define in terms of strength, mobility and resilience. Typically, we gauge progress in terms of our ability to perform increasingly challenging asana. The trickier the asana, the more competent I gauge myself to be.

I confess it was years before I asked the question –

why am I trying to do this posture? It was even longer before I admitted to myself that, while I could talk about health benefits, my main motivation was often 'because I want to be able to do it'. Someone had put a fence in front of me and I had to find a way to jump it.

The knee and hip injuries helped me see that I was mixing up yoga as exercise with yoga for identity building (more on that later). Using asana specifically to recover mobility and strength following surgery (I had a hip replacement at aged 52) clarified what I was doing and made me much more efficient at achieving specific goals. Which changed from what had often been, 'getting over the next fence' to 'being able to walk without pain', and eventually evolved into 'building a strong, mobile body that does not limit my daily work and play'. From the point of view of exercise, I realised that asana was not doing enough in terms of my cardio-vascular fitness, so I started swimming to complement my posture practice. I also began to question which

asana served me well in terms of strength training, maintaining or increasing range of movement or challenging balance. And conversely, which seem to aggravate injuries or create the potential for long term problems.

In short, once I was clear that I was using asana as exercise, I was free to adapt, include or omit, based on what worked for me and my fitness goals.

Yoga to cultivate wellbeing

If yoga for exercise aims to develop strength, flexibility and stability, yoga for wellness considers the more general care of physical and mental health. My sense of wellbeing is a hard state to define or describe. Perhaps this explains why I so often heard people say that they practice ‘because it makes me feel better’. However, I suspect most people would agree that wellbeing comprises a combination of physical and mental ease and resilience.

Just as wellbeing is a personal thing, what we need from yoga in this context is also very personal. Yoga for wellbeing probably still uses asana, but, in my case at least, also includes relaxation practices, pranayama, meditation and cleansing techniques (nauli and neti in particular). To gauge whether these practices are genuinely helpful in cultivating wellbeing I need to look beyond my mat. My wellness criteria include things like daily aches and pains, digestive health, energy levels, sleep patterns, posture and stress tolerance. I’ve learnt that if I start to struggle in any of these areas, adapting my yoga practice helps. Of course, wellbeing is a function of much more than practice. But after years of trial and error, I am confident that yoga plays a part in maintaining my resilience in relation to all these wellness indicators.

Yoga to build identity

For some of us, yoga becomes part of who we think ourselves to be and how we present ourselves to others. We use yoga to build our sense of identity, a process sometimes known as ‘selfing’.

Acknowledging this reason for practice was difficult as it meant identifying unconscious or shadow motivations. I’ve already included the example of wanting to ‘get’ a posture or ‘jump the fence’ in front of me. Defining my self-worth by my asana achievements. Competitive yoga in effect - mostly

with myself, but at times by comparing myself with others. It was, almost certainly, this attitude that compounded old injuries and led to the joint wear and tear that by my fifties was impossible to ignore.

The fact that this was not obvious to me for so long, suggests that goals can be powerful drivers even if they exist in our subconscious and are not apparent to us. In some ways these ‘shadow intentions’ are even more important to explore than the more visible ones. Because, if a subconscious intention is driving my actions then, as my hip experience revealed, it is possible to end up somewhere unexpected and undesirable.

But selfing is not all bad; there are real positives too. Psychology tells us that a healthy sense of identity enables us to relate well to others, see the world in a balanced way and meet life challenges effectively. While a lack of self-worth or an over-inflated or rigid sense of identity often leads to difficulties.

The benefit of using yoga for ‘selfing’ may be as simple as the sense of purpose and achievement I feel when I work with a new asana or sequence. The self-confidence cultivated by learning new skills, especially if initially challenging, can be rewarding. Even more so if such confidence is transferable to other areas of life.

Or I may feel part of something, accepted, supported even, by identifying with a movement or group of people (my ashtanga tribe, for example). I present myself in a way that states my affiliation, that cultivates an image that I want others to see and recognise.

Some of us become teachers, making yoga our work, providing ourselves with a sense of purpose, perhaps some status and respect and, with a bit of luck, a livelihood.

How much we use yoga to generate a sense of identity and worth obviously varies widely. And like all self-defining markers – parenthood, profession, social status, football club affiliation, nationality, etc – yoga in this context can be beneficial or harmful.

Recognising that I subconsciously used yoga as part of how I define myself, prompted me to ask whether the strategy seemed useful. Teaching provided a

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rich vein of exploration. I saw positive outcomes, such as the cultivation of generosity and empathy, humility and honesty. But thinking of myself as ‘the teacher’ at times also fed the ‘Mr Fixit’, ‘Mr Know-it-all’, ‘Man in charge’ tendencies that lurked in the shadows of my personality.

Just as yoga for exercise has kept me fit and contributed to chronic injury over the years, so yoga as an expression of identity has cultivated both positive and not so positive aspects of my personality. Acknowledging this has given me the chance to nurture those attributes that seem useful and limit the influence of the ones that don’t.

Yoga for transformation

The use of yoga practices and ideas as a path of personal evolution is where the roots of the tradition lie. It is directly linked to the efforts of figures such as Siddhartha Gautama, Patanjali, Shantideva and others, to understand the ‘human condition’. The essence is that by clearly and honestly observing how we build our worldview, we gradually create greater flexibility and skilfulness of response to life experiences.

In many ways this is a continuation of the use of yoga for identity building (selfing). But, as we’ve seen, selfing is primarily a subconscious process. When I engage with yoga for transformation, I aim to bring to awareness my habitual attitudes and responses, so that I can choose to meet a particular circumstance in what seems like the most useful way, rather than simply my default way. In this context, asana is used to develop concentration and deep sensitivity to the constant play of sensation, emotion and thought that

permeates our experience. The same posture might be used as when my goal is exercise or wellness, but the intention is now very different. I aim to observe in close detail the patterns that play out as I enter, hold and exit a posture. It does not matter whether I ‘achieve’ a posture, only whether I can maintain awareness of the sensory responses and mental commentary as I make the attempt.

This means that yoga for transformation is not confined to asana, pranayama or meditation practices. Inner awareness can be practised anytime. Ideas, such as the kleshas (impurities) and the brahmavihara (virtues), can be explored anywhere in life.

Transformation outcomes are extremely personal, but there do appear to be some common themes – less rigidity of opinion and preference, more connection to other people and the non-human world, more openness to the whole range of human emotion with less tendency to get stuck in, or cling to, a particular state. Many teachers and traditions refer to this process as ‘waking up’. But it is important to add that there is no final destination. We do not ‘become enlightened’, we just increase the likelihood of acting in a less conditioned and, potentially, more skilful way.

Five intentions in one

It is probably self-evident that the five reasons to practice I’ve described are not mutually exclusive. I may begin with one intention and over time shift into others. Or, as time goes on, I simply expand my horizons to incorporate others.

Perhaps one or more of these headings resonate with you or maybe they’ve prompted a whole other list. Either way it seems likely that clarity over of intentions can help avoid the pitfalls of ineffective or even harmful practice, ceaseless grasping, confusion or creeping doubt. A clear sense of direction greatly enhances my ability to gauge whether I like where I’m heading. It helps me enjoy the journey rather than fixating on the destination. It has significantly improved my chance of being a curious explorer. Ade Belcham is a BWY CPD tutor, yoga teacher and body-centred therapist based in Henfield, West Sussex.

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