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BREATHE IN: Confused About Yoga

Yogini Cathy Woods helps clear things up

Hatha, Kundalini, Amrit, Vinyasa, Iyengar, Ashtanga, Kripalu and so on and so on. There are many “styles” of yoga. In fact, there are so many styles of yoga created recently that Yoga Alliance (the organization that strives to maintain the integrity of yoga) is no longer registering new ones. The different styles can lead to confusion for many students. As a long-time yoga teacher and yogini, students often ask me: “What do all these styles mean?” “Which one is ‘best’?” “Which one is for me?” “What style are you ‘certified’ in?”

Let me begin by pointing out that it seems to be the human way to compartmentalize things and make separateness seem “necessary.” We perceive we’re separated by all sorts of things—race, careers, lifestyles, religions. Let me quote the Buddha: “The source of human suffering is separateness.” The word “yoga” means to unite or yolk, not to separate. I believe that the more we separate yoga, the more it loses its unifying essence.

If we focus on the minutiae of a thing, we sometimes diminish and elude its origin and true meaning. Think about religion: Religion is separated into various sects, and it’s often implied (directly or indirectly) that one camp is better than another. The notion that one style, or camp, of yoga will bring you to self-realization quicker than another isn’t sound. There are many paths that lead to the same truth.

So, it’s up to you to weed through the *mélange* of styles and jargon currently associated with yoga. Admittedly, it can be a challenge, and it can be difficult to answer the questions my students ask (listed at left). But, hopefully I can clarify some of the confusion and mixed messages.

Certification

The certification process can be a quandary. A “certified” teacher isn’t necessarily a quality teacher. Many teachers stress the ABCs of yoga but miss the essence of the tradition. Are many of the Yogis from India are certified? Probably not in the traditional Western sense of monetarily paying for a program and obtaining a certificate, but certified energetically,” through transmission of energy or shakti from their teacher, master and/or lineage—a very different concept than here in our culture. It should be pointed out, too, that some certification programs have become very profitable for those offering them.

Styles

Again, the word “yoga” means to yolk or unite the body, mind and spirit. If your practice isn’t focused on this, perhaps it’s not genuinely yoga as it was practiced in India where it originated. There, it is a path to self-realization and purification, not just a form of exercise.

Some styles of yoga are named after the teachers who inspired them, such as Iyengar, Bikram, Kripalu and Armit. Some are named for the area of yoga on which they focus, such as Ashtanga, Hatha and Raja. Let’s look at these three common practices. (Note that I don’t claim to be a scholar on all of the traditions.)

Yoga is an Ashtanga, which means eight-limbed path. The limbs (to explain briefly) are: *yamas and niyamas* (the inward and outward observances of a yogi), *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dhyana*, *dharana* and *samadhi*.

Hatha Yoga means ha/sun and tha/moon, and also means inhalation and exhalation. This tradition is primarily concerned with bodily disciplines and breathing, which are not essential in all traditions. Asanas make the body strong and purified. Contemplation and meditation are part of this practice. Pranayama/breathwork means to master life through breath control and is also a component of this tradition.

Raja Yoga presents a path of knowledge and wisdom that enables the student to discover his or her Real Self. It's not necessary (though helpful) that a student of this style practice asanas.

As you may have experienced while attending school, people learn in different ways. Some learn through hands-on techniques, others through contemplation, and others with the mind. It's the same with yoga practice; you must find a style that suits your way of learning and that resonates with you. It shouldn't feel forced or confusing, but truthful and clear. You should feel a sense of peace and growth from your practice. This is not to say that you won't ever feel challenged, which is part of the practice, but you can breathe through those challenges and use them as a platform for growth.

If you really want to experience the most from yoga, don't just join a practice because it's popular or because it's the class offered at your gym; shop around for one that suits you. Take classes in various traditions from different teachers. The same style from another instructor will vary, as each teacher has his or her own unique approach. Explore, experience and enjoy your yogic journey!

Yogini Cathy Woods is a long-time teacher of yoga and healthy living. She resides in WNC, and she is available for travel, offering her classes, retreats and workshops all over the county. She currently offers classes in Bryson City and Robbinsville, NC; to learn more about Cathy and her classes, visit her website at <http://www.cathywoodsyooga.com/>, or call 828-479-9373 or email info@cathywoodsyooga.com