

Holistic Asana Practice

An Article for Asana Teachers

What does it mean to be holistic in terms of practicing (or teaching) Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga? Holistic means whole, or even part of a whole, and implies completion, integration and oneness.

Holistic

characterized by the belief that the parts of something are intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole

Part One

In order to be physically holistic we need to look at the whole body. Does the traditional Ashtanga Vinyasa practice access the whole body? In my professional opinion (after teaching for 25 years) it does not. No single activity ever will.

For example, it does not adequately address opening the shoulders and finding space and openness in the upper back. Certainly the Primary series mostly tightens this area vs opening it up. Secondly, there is an abundance of focus on the hamstrings and contracting the front body (jumps and forward bends) and not enough focus on lengthening the quadriceps, front of the abdomen and chest. You get some opening from Urdhva Dhanurasana, but for many student this posture is either too difficult (because they are too tight in the front body and shoulders!) or it is too late, and the core issues above are not being addressed early enough.

Here are 6 areas that I think need to be addressed in everyone's practice, of any kind of Asana method:

Lower body strength (feet, legs)

Lower body flexibility (ankles, legs and hips)

Middle body strength (abdomen and lower back)

Middle body flexibility (lower thoracic and abdomen)

Upper body strength (wrists, shoulders and upper back)

Upper body flexibility (wrists, shoulders and upper back)

There is no Asana method that I know of that actually addresses all of that completely. If you want percentages, then a holistic Asana method will attribute an even 16.6% of time and emphasis on each of those areas in group classes. (1/6 to each area). Rarely have I ever experienced this. And then, when it comes to teaching an individual you will have to scale and weight different areas accordingly depending on constitution, condition and lifestyle. So it's your job as a teacher to start doing some research :)

So here are some questions I would be asking of any Yoga teacher (I am addressing this to Ashtanga teachers but you can apply it to any Asana teacher) who seems a little strict.

Are you:

1. Allowing some variation in the sequence (maybe after a 6 month to 1 year grace period of learning the sequence properly) for most students? Specifically are you allowing for variations in the practice to help with the following potential (and common) problems:

(Many of these are caused by over application of postures in the standard practice in the first place).

Students with:
 Whip-lash injury
 Stiff or injured neck
 Sore or injured wrists
 Weak shoulders/upper back
 Tight shoulders
 Tight upper back
 Scoliosis
 Sciatica
 Twisted/tilted vertebra
 Fused vertebra
 Slipped discs
 Weak or sore lower back
 Imbalanced / tight psoas
 Weak abdomen/core
 Imbalanced hips
 Tight hips/groin
 Tight ITB
 Torn/Tight hamstring
 Tight quadriceps/hip flexors
 Torn meniscus/cruciate ligament
 Weak legs
 Tight ankles/ Weak ankles
 Overweight/Underweight
 etc!



Professionally I think every Asana teacher is obligated to know a little of each area of the body to help students manage injuries, pain and differing body types. Simply adhering to the tradition without learning at least a few of these things is a lot of blind faith and some ignorance. When a student asks to do a variation, simply saying "no" to everyone is limiting. It means you are not willing to learn as a teacher, and ultimately you don't want your students to learn or to be different.

Statistically there are more students who don't finish the Primary series than students who do. And only a few continue with the practice into Intermediate and beyond. So most students become stuck somewhere in the Primary series for a significant time; Primary only for the rest of your life is not physically holistic. (I have written in depth on this subject in a previous article; called the "Evolution of Ashtanga Yoga" please refer to that for more details.)

I know some teachers who say, most of my students are doing some Intermediate. My answer to that is that you are forgetting the thousands of beginners who quit the practice because they found it too hard or too strict. Only certain people and specific body types are able to continue past the Primary series. If you look at a bell curve in relation to Ashtanga body types, there are few variations that fit in a very narrow band. If you are only teaching certain body types then the practice as it's taught is not holistic. It's an unfortunate viscous cycle. It is your job as a teacher to be able to teach any-body.

For example, can you teach someone missing an arm or missing a leg? Or vary it significantly so that it works? What about someone who is overweight? It requires an open mind and willingness to learn beyond the fixed idea of what the practice is "supposed to be". It's not about how it looks, but whether it's actually appropriate or not.

Are you:

2. Encouraging students to go to an Iyengar class or Pilates class or Rolfing therapy once per week or thereabouts - to better introduce alignment and structural integration. As most Ashtanga teachers don't have skills on this level it would be holistic to refer your students to someone who does. Alternatively you should study for some years on this subject to begin integrating it into your regular classes.

Are you:

3. Encouraging students to practice some form of Yin Yoga (passive stretching vs active stretching) once per week to balance Yang and Yin or Rajas and Tamas. As Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga tends to have qualities of being more Rajasic, at least for the first 10 years or so, then integrating this aspect earlier than 10 years would be holistic.

Part Two

What is it to be psychologically holistic? As Yin Yoga crosses the fence between the physical effects of practice and the psychological and energetic the last point above also ties in with psychological holism.

I would ask, are you:

Open minded

Compassionate

Willing to admit your limitations

Willing to admit the limitations of the Ashtanga sequencing

Willing to learn (the teacher not the student!)

Willing to let go as a teacher vs only asking your student to let go

Being vulnerable

For me it's the last one that is most important. A teacher who does not confess to vulnerability, nervousness, error, and admit their own limitations is not capable of psychological holism. By admitting your vulnerability to your students you can open up and find a deeper connection to the universal all.



One of the best ways I have of explaining this kind of psychological holism is through an "I/Thou Relationship". This is a term began by the philosopher Martin Buber:

Human life finds its meaningfulness in relationships. In Buber's view, all of our relationships bring us ultimately into relationship with God, who is the Eternal Thou. Buber explains that humans are defined by two word pairs: I-It and I-Thou.

An I-It relationship is a subject/object relationship. Particularly when Asana methods can rely so heavily on focusing on the body, the technique and the tradition, an I-It relationship from teacher to student is more prevalent than an I-Thou relationship. The typical teacher-student relationship is hierarchical (top-down) and does not typically embrace the student's God-hood and independence.

That is, the body is an object, the technique is an object and the tradition is an object. None of those are true subjects. So if the student is only treated as a body, a mechanical and structural thing, a common experience for the student will be one of feeling objectified, marginalised, and made "less than". The subject is the true self, the person and God-hood inside of those things.

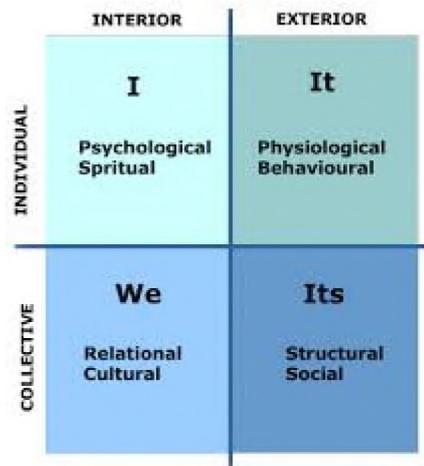
An I-Thou relationship from teacher to student requires the teacher to be vulnerable, open and letting go of control; it is non-hierarchical. Usually a teacher asks the student to let go, but rarely reciprocates. An I-Thou relationship is always reciprocal, shared and in the moment. An I-Thou relationship is not subject/object oriented, it is subject/subject. It is God talking to God. I am writing to Thou, the respected and loved other. If your teacher only talks at you and not with you, then find another teacher who actually cares.

Lastly are you:

Encouraging your students to meditate, actually practicing meditation yourself and/or encouraging the teachings from the great masters: Ramana Maharshi, Anandamaya, teachings of the Buddha, the Dalai Lama, Sogyal Rinpoche, Sri Mooji etc etc to name but a few.

I think it essential for every Asana teacher to reference some introspective/meditation Sadhana or Satsang with the Guru, for the benefit of both themselves and their students.

To use an example from Ken Wilbur, there are four quadrants to human evolution, in his integral philosophy. These can be paraphrased as I / It / We / Its. Or, Psychological-Spiritual, then Physical-Behavioural, then Relational-Cultural, then Structural-Social.



So using this model, such activities as Asana practice, dance, going for a run, and other forms of exercise all belong in the upper right quadrant, or the Physical-behavioural area of development. Meditation, Satsang and Psychotherapy all belong in the upper left quadrant. So it is inaccurate, at least 90% of the time to label an Asana practice as an innately spiritual practice. Asana practice is ultimately physical, it's the main area you are developing. It may, at times, cross the fence into the psycho-spiritual quadrant, so too would any physical activity, including washing the dishes, or doing the ironing etc. So I think it both misleading and at times ignorant to try and place an upper right activity (Asana) in the upper left (Spiritual) where it doesn't belong. If you care to read more on Ken Wilbur's view on this, it will confirm what I write here.

Having said that, if you are complementing your physical Asana practice with an introspective practice - such as sitting at the feet of your Guru (an enlightened master, not an Asana teacher) - then you can approach balance in the two upper quadrants. It will require an extra practice of meditation or introspection on top of what you may be doing with Asana. Asana is doing, meditation is being.

There is also more work to attend to than just these two, even though for some of you, that may seem like a lot. In the lower quadrants there is the relational-cultural area and social-structural-environmental integration. Developing your social skills, and helping improve your society and the environment are grave and important concerns for both personal and world development. Yoga includes all of these.

So much to learn!
Love to all
Matthew Sweeney

For more information on my articles (The Evolution of Ashtanga Yoga I and II)
<http://www.yogatemple.com/#!about1/cuzd>

For more information on Martin Buber
https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Buber

For more information on Ken Wilbur
[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ken_Wilbur](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ken_Wilber)