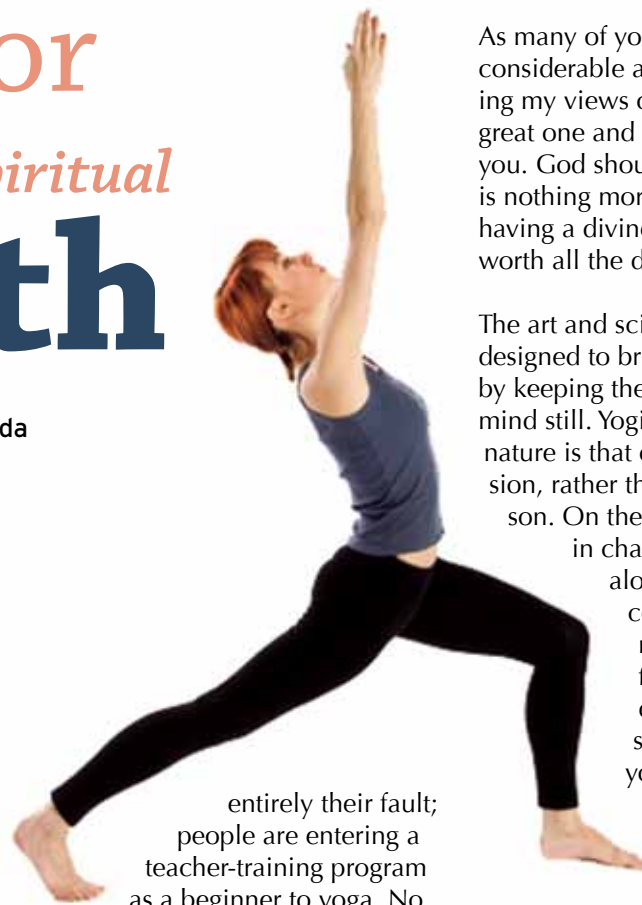


Yoga for Physical AND Spiritual Health

by Dawn Yager, Swami Ambikanada

With popularity comes attention. Some is good and some is fear based and media driven. Let's start at the surface level by dealing with the recent *New York Times* article titled "How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body," which touched on a handful of yoga injuries as far back as the early '70s and managed to upset every yoga studio for the past several weeks. Nearly 4,500 people were treated for injuries while doing yoga practice, while in stark contrast, more than 600,000 injuries occurred from basketball and 270,000 were caused from using exercise equipment. The author concluded that the reason for most injuries was "egotistical"—competitive students pushing themselves too hard. Experts agree that some injuries may come from practicing a style that is simply inappropriate for the individual.

All authentic styles of Hatha yoga are valid and beneficial. But you must be careful not to become attached and believe one style is superior to all others. This is known as Bhoga yoga, or when one enjoys the physicality only. As stated in the *Hatha Yoga Pradapika*, the 15th century manual for Hatha, Bhoga yoga will surely lead to injury. With a good teacher, you will learn to pay close attention to your body and the signals it gives you. However, not all teachers will teach their students to be mindful and patient with their practice, and, frankly, some teachers have no idea themselves. It's not



entirely their fault; people are entering a teacher-training program as a beginner to yoga. No one can be expected to learn how to safely lead an asana (yoga postures) practice in only 200 hours, without the years of practice behind them. These problems occur when inexperienced yogis are leading others. Whenever there is potential for business, people are going to capitalize on it, and let's face it, the yoga teacher-training "business" is one of them. What used to take years of training and discipline is now available to anyone with a credit card, asana not required.

The real question is what will keep the practitioner safe during a physically demanding yoga practice? The answer is *bhakti*, which means devotion, or to love and adore. This is the true sense of a yoga practice. It is my belief that without *bhakti*, injury is more likely. To practice and be present and aware of the body without attachment to the outcome (the posture) is the correct method for asana practice. But does that mean that a yoga practice is a religion or can influence spiritual beliefs?

As many of you may guess, I spend a considerable amount of time explaining my views on this question. It's a great one and I am glad it matters to you. God should matter to you! There is nothing more beneficial in life than having a divine connection, and it is worth all the dedication it takes.

The art and science of yoga was designed to bring you closer to God by keeping the body healthy and the mind still. Yogis believe that our true nature is that of peace and compassion, rather than greed and comparison. On the yoga mat, you alone are in charge of your prayer; you alone are in charge of the content of your mind. It is my sincere hope that a few deep breaths, some quiet time and a lot of sweat will not distract you from your spiritual path, but strengthen your tie with your true nature.

All around us we are bombarded with media telling us what to think and believe, who we should vote for and what we should buy; the yoga studio is a quiet respite from that noise. In a yoga studio, the goal is to allow the answers to emerge—the truth is already within.

Here in America, we have an opportunity to bring this transformative practice to the people and places they are needed the most. In a much larger perspective, we as humans are all far more similar than we are different. We all seek happiness, peace and to be loved. We all move away from suffering, sadness and pain. On that basic fundamental element, a yoga practice provides valuable health and wellness benefits to all.

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