

Response to "How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body"

Recently the Washington Post called me the "Godfather of Yoga in the West" because most of the major teachers around the world have been trained by me. Having been a premier international yoga teacher for over 35 years, I found the concept that yoga is dangerous difficult to swallow ("How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body," New York Times, 1/5/2012). Let me explain.

First and foremost, there is a big difference between *yoga* and *asana*. Yoga is a vast system which provides the process to discover, and the tools to fulfill, one's own life mission. Asana, on the other hand, is a physical preparation of the body for that mission. What most people in the West call yoga is merely asana, only a small part of yoga.

Next, since we are now talking about asana, let me further clarify its role in injury. First, the likelihood of injuries depends upon which *school* of asana is involved, and where an individual teacher has had his or her training. Some schools of asana are more vigorous and hence, tend to produce more injuries. Other schools are designed to open and stretch the body safely.

A second issue is the *teacher*. Some teachers are aggressive, pushing on students' bodies without the proper training and pulling on different parts of the body without knowing the anatomy and the techniques.

Third, the *student*. If the student is aggressive and wants to compete and be the best in class, or if he or she wants to improve too fast, that too can cause injury.

Finally, we must look at the *method* of asana which the teacher is using. Some methods do not emphasize proper alignment and care, and hence can cause injury.

Therefore, you can never say that yoga is injurious to the body. However, in the worst case scenario, we can say, *if* the student is extremely aggressive, *and if* the teacher is only concerned with the student performing excellent postures, *and if* the system being taught is not an alignment-based system, *and if* there is no awareness of the actual movements while the teacher is adjusting, then, yes, perhaps *asana* can cause injury.

I myself have practiced yoga since the age of seven, and, being one of the senior most teachers in the western world, I can honestly say that my practice only caused me injury when I was not paying attention. I have injured many parts of my body, from my Achilles tendon to my neck - including severe lower back, shoulder cuff, neck, hip and knee injuries - all from the practice of aggression. The injuries came in my youth when I was trying very hard to be the best *performer* of asana. My own teacher, BKS Iyengar, taught me personally for over 30 years and all my injuries came from *my* aggression alone. I can only blame my own ego and not the system.

The system of asana (not to be confused with yoga) is exceptional for the physical body. Just as a knife that can be used to cut vegetables can also be used to hurt another human being, so also can the practice of asana be done for self knowledge or for fulfillment of the ego. The knife is not to blame. The user is to blame. Yoga is not to blame. Asana is not to blame. It is the individual's ego and aggressive application of this ancient system that deserves the credit for injury.

Since I have suffered so many injuries myself, I understand how to prevent them. That is why the system I teach - called Purna Yoga - is carefully designed to prevent injuries. Our teachers around the world follow a safe and sane system of asana - and the accompanying system of yoga which includes applied philosophy, nutrition and lifestyle and the powerful meditations that are taught by Savitri.

It was a gentle and sensible practice of asana that helped me heal my injuries, while my aggressive practice of asana caused them. Please do not blame yoga. Please do not blame asana. It is the practitioner who has to take responsibility for finding and applying the appropriate knowledge through a sensible system. Please remember it is the style, the teacher, the ego and the application that causes injury, and not yoga.

Sincerely,

Aadil Palkhivala