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LEARNING AND TEACHING YOGA

This article in two parts was inspired by classes attended during a trip to Pune in December 2010 and talking further with Prashantji.

It explores some issues around learning and teaching yoga. There is a danger that we become stuck at a basic level and never properly get to grips with what it really means to 'learn' yoga. We might "know" a lot of biomechanical points (i.e. generally have picked them up second-or third-hand), how to adjust etc but we need to understand that learning and teaching yoga involves much more than this, that it is a culturing process at all levels of our being, not only body. So we should not get stuck at this basic level in our learning and teaching. We have to keep moving forward, not become impressed with what we 'know', congratulating ourselves on how far we have come-that way lies arrogance and stagnation.

Part I – Learning

What is learning and how do we do it?

The initial stage of learning is learning *how to do* and we attend class and practise in order to do. In this rudimentary stage we need a certain amount of spoon-feeding to get us started so it is appropriate that the teacher gives us various biomechanical instructions, such as lift this, press that, rotate here, extend there etc.

“Work on learning better not doing better”

Consequently we might mistakenly think that learning is soaking up more and more points, equating accumulating a longer list of “known” (actually second- or third-hand) technical points with having learned more, especially as we become more skilled and fluent in their execution. But, even as these points become more connected and intricate, this is still learning how to do, albeit in

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a slightly more sophisticated way, it's still at the rudimentary end of a learning continuum. In other words beyond the elementary stage learning is not merely a matter of memorising and applying information given to us by someone else.

Actually real learning might be said to begin when we start to explore ourselves, to apply and generalise what we have begun to grasp in one contact to others, for example to consider whether a technical point applies more widely than we have been specifically told, to explore the links between asanas and begin to discover for ourselves. It has to sprout from our own experience. Importantly we need to shift from applying and generalising points to applying and generalising a process of study and exploration way beyond the biomechanical, which, if we are fortunate, our teachers are guiding us towards. In other words moving into a real learning culture, and beyond that into *studying* yoga.



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I use the word study carefully, not in the casual way which has become commonplace—one might hear it said “I have studied yoga for twenty years”, meaning “I have (erratically) attended classes once or twice a week for twenty years (and barely gave yoga a moment’s thought between classes) that is definitely NOT study!

“You are all learning to do and you are never doing for learning and that is why you are missing the studentship”

This time-serving mentality is missing the point; we don’t get anywhere with yoga just for physically turning up! It is possible to attend classes for decades and learn nothing at all or else only pick up biomechanical points.

In-dependence

In learning and studying we are endeavouring to become independent. Not in the sense of being without dependence on others (delusional since we can never be independent of others; interdependence is reality) but in the particular sense of realising our ultimate dependence on our own core Self (as distinct from ‘I’ or ‘me’). Over time one is depending less on the teacher to feed points, but the teacher remains as a guide in a more subtle way. So in their teaching Guruji, Geetaji and Prashantji are helping to discipline and organise our thinking and approach so that we can move closer to yoga. Thus teaching is the other side of the learning coin; we have to teach ourselves even if we are not intending to teach others.

Moving along this Learning Continuum

There will of course be individual differences in rate of moving along this continuum but generally it will be gradual. It is a process in which, with the guidance of our teachers, we become more aware of the possibilities, engage actively with it, get more organised in our

“It is possible to keep on only with biomechanics for thirty years, but what is missing?”

approach, develop understanding, become more sensitive and disciplined and our discriminative powers improve, as yogic culture is instilled and our discriminative is instilled. This process is well beyond technical point gathering and performance. Yoga is a transformative setting-right process, not only physically but in all aspects of our Self is revealed. We have to put our intellect to this and question whether our endeavour is fit for such a description. Can we honestly say “I have *studied* yoga for 20 years?” Do we even qualify as learners never mind students?



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Some pointers for learning

We have to want to learn and we have to cultivate in ourselves our ability to learn. In class we have to make ourselves teachable; if we are arrogant, complacent, inattentive, casual, forgetful then we are un-teachable, no matter how good the teacher.

We should move towards being process-rather than goal-oriented in the sense of engaging with the process rather than being concerned with being able “do” ever more difficult poses (though we should be goal-oriented in the sense of keeping in mind the real of yoga). The process is investigative, involves developing our sensitivity and awareness and of course involves lots of practice. To learn well we have to practice well.

Initially we are practising in order to do or do better what we have been taught in class, to consolidate points etc. But we need to move beyond this specific content to apply the methodology implicit in our classes in our own investigation, to really begin to study, so we start to find out for ourselves. We have to actively engage with it, not mindlessly repeat and just be stuck there. Thus our teacher might have taught us something about the connection of the stretch of the inner ankle and the inner knee in a certain asana, but we shouldn't stop there merely etching that piece of information onto our consciousness. What about that connection in other asanas? What about the myriad other connections between inner ankles and elsewhere in the body? And the effect on the state of mind and the breath? And how the breath and mind can be utilised to help? Or what about how I should approach it when I am in such and such a condition tired body, tired mind, sick emotionally disturbed, hot, cold etc. (we shouldn't always be running to the teacher to sort us out; we have to try to work it out ourselves, this will deepen our understanding and will help us devise a process(es) through which we can investigate and learn better). Through our own investigations we should become more skilled in knowing what we should do and how and when. Crucially as practice goes on we have to use our prepared state to learn something of yoga.

Thus, assuming we have found a teacher who is not merely passing on biomechanical points, then we have to as Prashantji says, “read between the lines”, so that rather than passively soaking up points, consider why we are being asked to do things, why now and not then, why this sequence, why they used this word and not that word and so on. This requires and cultivates attentiveness and develops our own skills at choosing the right word, understanding sequence and links, develops awareness and sensitivity etc.

We can't reasonably expect our teacher to tell us everything-there simply wouldn't be time. Moreover, it would not be helpful since the time when the teacher tells us something might not be the right time for us to understand it-hence the common experience of “I know I was told this lots of



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times but I've only just 'got' it". There has to be a certain readiness to learn something which isn't solely about wanting to learn it.

Other question yourself what am I learning? Or am I doing?

A class situation is necessarily artificial, there are time constraints, hence Prashantji says a class is too short to enable a longer process such as learning to occur. Moreover, there are differences between class members in potentialities, condition, aptitude, ability, stage etc., yet learning is indigenous and individual. So whilst beginners learn in the class, when we are more experienced we should go to class not to learn in it but rather to learn *what we should learn and how we should learn*. Every class should give you projects to work on yourself. The real and most important learning is done in one's own practice outside the class.

So we should work on learning better not doing better. We need to get out of the habit of incessantly *doing*: we should be clear about what we are learning, and that must be justifiable according to our level of preparation (both within a practice and over time). By the end of a practice we should not be so much doing the pose but rather using that elevated, prepared (physically, intellectually, reflectively) condition to learn yoga from the pose.

Some Pitfalls for learners

Demanding Spoon-Feeding

A common pitfall is being drawn to, even demanding spoon-feeding. We have to take responsibility for ourselves and endeavour to find out for ourselves. The teacher can guide and support us when necessary but they are not a substitute for personal effort and understanding. When a teacher gives us information it might not be at the right moment for us and in any case second-(or third or fourth-) hand learning is inferior to first hand. Isn't it also in some sense unethical, a kind of parasitism or dishonesty, if we try to pass it off as "What I have learned"?

(After the beginners' stage) go to class not to learn in it but rather to learn what we should learn and how we should learn.

Sometimes people are heard to say "didn't learn anything in that class", the implication being that the teacher was at fault (rather than themselves!) because they did not give the person any new technical points to add to their list. It reflects a consumer's mindset "I have paid \$xx therefore I am entitled to xx points in exchange" (!) We should be very vigilant to prevent of this sort of mentality creeping in. Learning yoga does not mean gathering points.



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Why do we have this tendency? It seems that we want to accumulate but also we want reassurance and certainty. It is also manifest in trainee teachers or pupils demanding to be told the way to teach/do a pose and becoming frustrated when one set of instructions appears to contradict previous ones. This desire for certainty is a manifestation of fear, as such as ultimately a manifestation of abhinivesa. The problem is that looking for reassurance and certainty from outside will always be limited and disappointing; we have to look and find certainty within. If we limit ourselves by only looking outside, and our teachers cultivate that in us, then we lose confidence in ourselves and further undermine our ability to go within, so actually we get further from yoga. No one else can ever tell you everything: you have to feel it and articulate it from within and this inner ability is massively greater than the ability of anyone outside to convey to us.

Becoming Puffed-Up

When we meet with some success for example gaining some mastery over a pose, knowing a lot, developing sensitivity, etc. there is a danger that we think “I learned this”. Inevitably this will prevent us from attaining yoga. Instead we should cultivate a sense of reverence for the teacher within (divinity) and in so doing allow that teacher to teach us (in-tuition). It is only through divinity that our faculties function and we get knowledge. If we remember this then we cannot become arrogant.

Looking for Comfort

We should not be seeking comfort or to feel good in class or practice. That is to miss the point. Some discomfort, not only physically but also mentally and emotionally, is necessary. If you only go to class or practice to feel nice during and after it then you are not going to get anywhere with yoga, that is *bhoga*.

Misapplying Positive Qualities

Practising yoga cultivates positive qualities in us, such as tolerance, patience, courage, determination, capacity for hard work. However, these must be applied with discrimination. For example, tolerance. It is inappropriate to be tolerant of being told endlessly the same basic points as if we didn't know them (of course we have to ensure that we don't need to be told by applying them without being reminded!). On the other hand we should be tolerant of our uncertainty and unease, of not being able to immediately acquire a point or “do” an asana, of a sense of frustration in class when for example the teacher interrupts an interesting avenue we were beginning to investigate.

Imbalance of Practice

Prashantji tells us that historically we have been “asana-mad”, so we need to redress the balance. This does not necessarily mean to cut down on asanas, but if we are not doing pranayama sufficiently,



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try do develop an attitude of pranayama preparation by doing static poses, becoming more breath-aware and more breath-profused so we slowly become more qualified to do more pranayama also. If we suddenly decide to cut down 40% asana time and increase 40% pranayama we may not be able to do it. So in asanas we should try to work on breath aspects and learn breath culture-breath-considerateness, breath-mindedness, breath-application, breath-management. We should slightly shift our paradigm so we become more breath aware then we can become prana aware.