

Yoga and Social Media

In this age of social media it is becoming more and more important for spiritual practices like Yoga to maintain greater integrity. If you can accept the premise that Yoga at any level is about well-being, whether it is physical, psychological or something deeper, the question is, at what point does social media start to have an adverse effect? Although marketing and social media may help your Yoga business to grow, if overused they also tend to have a negative impact.

For example, what is the effect of gaining Instagram followers, or Facebook friends or "likes" for a favoured post? What do these points of status or accomplishments actually indicate? No doubt they can help your business to flourish, the question is, what is actually flourishing? If the goal of Yoga is well-being (ultimately well-being can only be liberation from suffering, but for now, it's enough to say well-being...) does having more followers indicate any real well-being? Maybe it indicates the well-being of your social media account... or the "well-being" of your attachments. So the question is not whether social media helps your business, it is whether it's building your attachments versus reducing or eradicating them.

The kind of well-being we are after is tangible, real, and not imagined. The primary goal of Yoga is something clear and demonstrable. So the developmental line for Asana practitioners would go something like this:

1. Physical health 2. Psychological health, and 3. Freedom from attachment.

My first point is that number 3 is not dependent on the number 1. You do not need to be physically healthy in order to be non-attached. But it can help. It is useful, but not necessary.

Secondly there are aspects of using social media that can clearly indicate ill-health, the opposite of well-being, and therefore the opposite of Yoga. For example, an addiction to getting "likes", the competitiveness to gain more followers than your peers, placing your business solely in the hands of a media that is both fickle and divorced from tangible reality, or simply showing off with advanced Asana.

I am not saying don't use social media. I am cautioning on how.

So, there is nothing inherently wrong with social media. Like so many things in life, it's not so much about what it does, it's how you use it. I would like to highlight the following three points:

1. Yoga > Asana > Body Identity > Social Media = not Yoga
2. A Yoga Teacher is an Educator not a Movie Star
3. The Importance of Meditation

1. Social Media

Asana and Meditation often seem to be in conflict for many Asana teachers and Asana practitioners, to my mind. The question is the relative importance of the body. Is it important at all, ultimately? Ultimately, no. Personally, yes. So, by being identified with your "personality" and with your body, you're not yet practicing or accessing higher consciousness. It's not that you have to abandon the body, but you do have to put the mind, and therefore the body in the right context.

If the body is given too much importance, the mind and ego are always given too much importance also. Conversely, once the mind and ego truly start to experience they are in service to the self, and secondary to observer consciousness and true spirituality, then the body becomes a willing vehicle, rather than an obstacle. Initially however, it is something of an obstacle, to be treated with respect no doubt, but not to be indulged.

So... in relation to social media; am I prepared to be nobody? If you're trying to be somebody, you've missed the point.

If you follow the direction of the first point above, (Yoga > Asana > Body Identity > Social Media = not Yoga), for most students the beginning attitude to Yoga practice might be good, but if you focus solely on Asana, you tend to focus solely on the body. The more identified with the body you become, the more attached you become. This line of development is reductionist, not expansionist. One outcome of this shows up in social media addiction; the overuse and indulgence in gaining likes, friends, popularity and superficial success. Ultimately this moves you further from the path of Yoga not further along it. Don't be misguided.

Are you constantly posting pictures of yourself doing advanced postures, handstand deadlifts, bikini beach shots, or hundreds of instagram hashtags to try and gain followers? If so, it is highly likely you

are increasing your attachment to the personal-self and the body rather than letting go. There is a line in the sand - suffering comes from attachment, and attachment comes from mind-body identification. Only if you can truly start to let go of your conditioning, your body, and your personality are you actually practicing Yoga.

This is not to say that someone who ISN'T doing those things is always accessing higher consciousness, it is just that in the former case (Yoga educators and Yoga practitioners) there is greater chance they will, in the latter case (social media addicts) a much lower chance. So I implore students and teachers, stop giving importance to the outward, external and visual. Stop abusing social media. And don't support the teachers and practitioners who are indulging in this kind of addictive behavior.

I recently saw a good post from a Yoga teacher who was making some great key points on how social media is being abused. However, she was also hosting a well known Yoga teacher who clearly uses social media in a way that is, IMO, indulgent and not representative of the essence of Yoga. It completely undermines the article when she's supporting one of the teachers that she was in fact complaining about. If you're going to make a stand, then be clear on what you support and what you don't.

Here's a list of cautions that I ask all the teachers I train to be mindful of.
When posting on Social Media:

1. Minimal advanced Asana. Ideally I would say don't show advanced postures in more than 1 in 10 posts, if ever. Occasionally it might be nice to show what you can do. But it's not really benefiting others, it is showing off. If you want to benefit others, show a basic posture and explain how to scale it so students with different conditions can find benefit.
2. No more handstands (well frankly I am entirely bored by the number of people demonstrating handstands). If every post starts with a handstand and/or handstand dead lift, you're showing off and rather stuck. Stop practicing handstand for the next 12 months, and start meditating.
3. Minimal (or no) Bikini/Underwear shots. I think it is unnecessary to post yourself semi-naked, and advertise the body in this way. It also tends to sexualise Yoga, and given the current social norms, not ideal to promote Yoga this way. More importantly, it indicates an attachment to the body, a building of the ego-body relationship versus letting go of the body and letting go of your attachments. You do not need to be proud of your body, nor ashamed, neither of those is you. Be nobody.
4. Personal boundaries. Be cautious on how much personal information you post, particularly as a teacher who is in a role of responsibility. When dealing with students both in person and via social media, you should have some boundaries, an ethical line that should not be crossed. Be self restrained in professional circumstances. Talking about your personal life in the hopes of getting moral support from all your online friends is typically a sign you are not self-supporting very well. If you need that kind of support, no problem, just find an authentic real-life therapist. Or chat about these things with your real-life friends, in person, or over the phone...
5. Avoid posting every single day just to get more and more followers. The social media addiction is a modern phenomena, but make no mistake, it is debilitating for a lot of people. The constant drive to get more friends, more likes, more followers simply indicates a lack of Yoga, not an abundance. It indicates insecurity and attachments, not freedom and contentment.

2. Be a Good Educator

I have been giving lectures recently on the importance of a Yoga teacher being an educator more so than a would-be movie star. An educator might use Facebook for writing articles, or YouTube for talks on Yoga philosophy etc. There are many avenues that social media can be used for education, illumination and being of benefit to others. Unfortunately it is also used for self-aggrandizement, showing off the body, and popularity.

Popularity should never really be a goal for a Yoga teacher, being a great educator should. Popularity might come from a being a good educator, it's simply a by-product, not the goal. There seem to be many Yoga teachers online these days who have this backward - popularity first, education and experience second.

The way out of this mess, is to focus on what is important: personal contact and education. You cannot properly teach or practice Yoga online. It requires you to connect with your body, and for a teacher, for you to actually connect with real, live, independent human beings. Beings who may agree, disagree or something in between, but in an environment that is real and tangible.

Focus on education and experience. Be a good educator, not a movie star. For example, if you haven't been teaching for at least 10-20 years, don't even consider running teacher training. Get the

experience first. If you don't know much about anatomy and physiology, don't be embarrassed, admit your lack of understanding, and start to learn. If you don't know about meditation, don't procrastinate. Start today.

If you're willing to learn as much as you can, you will make a great teacher. If you're only interested in building a business, probably you won't. Social media does help to build business, but please keep in mind that is absolutely secondary to learning and self-discovery.

3. Meditation

One interesting point when you look at the majority of Yoga postures, is the predominance of flexibility for the hips than any other area of the body.

I took a sample from my book Vinyasa Krama. In the back there is large Asana library with over 100 groups of postures and over 400 individual Asana. I divided them into four groups - postures which predominantly affect the hips and legs, postures which predominantly affect the shoulders/arms, postures which seem to affect both equally and postures which affect neither.

Total sample: 154 posture groups

1. Hips and legs: 92 of 154 = 60%
2. Shoulders and arms: 34 of 154 = 22%
3. Both: 18 of 154 = 12%
4. Neither: 10 of 154 = 6%

It is interesting that there are three times the amount of postures for the hips than the shoulders. In addition over 70% of the hip and leg postures were flexibility based more than strength, and over 60% of the shoulder and arm postures were strength based more than flexibility. So not only do we see more emphasis on the legs and lower body than the arms and upper body, we also see more emphasis on flexibility in the lower body and strength in the upper body. So this trend can be seen in most Hatha Yoga classes, whatever the tradition.

The point I am making with these statistics is to show that traditionally there has always been more importance placed on opening the hips than other aspects of the body. Why?

Simply put, one of the primary goals of practicing Asana is to prepare you physically and psychologically for meditation. Whether that's your goal or not, it is one of the primary functions of Asana. You can use the physical practice just for physical health, but it's definitely not the only or even the primary goal. Psychological health and liberation is the goal.

Therefore, if you profess to teaching "Yoga" but you don't actually meditate regularly, at best you can call yourself an Asana teacher. There is nothing wrong with that, you may be of great benefit to your students and community. But I do think it's important to be accurate.

For me, I don't try to label Asana practice as something overly spiritual, when for the most part, it is not. The same trend can be seen via social media - the more body-centric a person is, the more likely they are to be trapped by body-centric media. The less body-centric a person is, the less likely they are to be trapped by it.

For example, do you see any long term meditators posting shots of themselves semi-naked, showing off at the beach? No, never. So the clear conclusion for me, is anytime I see someone thrashing social media, they have immediately gone into my "not-likely" category, so I am highly unlikely to attend any of their classes or workshops.

On the other hand, if I do see an interesting, educational and informative post, I give a like, I show some support, or I share it with others. It's good to be positive and to support the practitioners and teachers who are being genuine and educational without being self-indulgent and needy. It's fine to enjoy social media, but not to indulge.

Om Shantih
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