

Questions and Answers

A selection of questions and answers over the years from John's classes, workshops, and e-mails. These may be informative regardless of training with John or his Teachers. Please see available books and other web sites for greater depth and more information. Views expressed below are John's and may not accurately express his Teachers methods or explanations.

Yoga

1. Do you need to follow any particular religion to practice yoga, or be spiritually orientated. I don't have an interest in either. I like the idea of relaxation and stress relief, and I'd like to be more flexible, but I'm not really religious and don't actually feel the need to be that way.

Simply no in my and many others opinion its not necessary. Most who take up Yoga in the west have no particular religious orientation, have a rather vague idea of spirituality, and spirituality and themselves. Its really a very personal thing that brings anyone to Yoga.

For me its helpful for any one taking it up to just to have an open mind to what they might discover about themselves, and how this may change over time. Not having preconceptions is ideal but not always possible. I don't 'push' spirituality of any kind in any of my classes, I'd be no better as my teachers teacher said 'than being than a drug dealer'. I personally have a primary personal interest in it but that's just my thing. That's not particularly of any bonus, or position of superiority. It certainly is not a means to impress as some try and use as. Those who just 'latch' on to someone else's 'way' unfortunately invariably end up with not a lot that's particularly really useful to them and a spirituality that can be a charade. There are spiritual/religious leaders/groups who don't cause this problem, but too many that unfortunately do.

My first love and source of solace was Zen Buddhism in my teens, but it was quite superficial. Also I liked a lot about Japanese aesthetics and design which influenced me then and now in my photography, design, painting and sculpture. Also my early interest in martial arts had a lot of references to Zen which made me seek deeper truths. I was probably what experts describe as practicing an egotistical and 'dead' form of Zen, or 'dead sitting'. Aloofness can easily be mistaken for 'detachment'. Being all 'Zen' and 'cool' can lead many astray into a culdesac of understanding. It took a few hard knocks and reality wake up calls to bring me to my senses.

By birth I'm Catholic, but I don't practice that path, my first Yoga teacher was a Sikh, my Tai Chi teachers have been agnostics, Christians, Buddhists, and Taoists, and I've received blessings and peak experiences while visiting Sufi, Buddhist, and Christian temples/churches/shrines. However I've had similar experiences in places of great natural beauty. I just have a thing for serene spaces.

Yoga is what you make of it- if it unifies as it intends, mind and body, the outcome can be anything it depends upon the individual. For most that's a positive thing.

2. What style of Yoga do you teach?

I originally learnt 'Kundalini Yoga'-so it's based on that. I teach some what more gently than my Teacher did as many of students are not up to the same approach. This maybe because of their age or simply level of flexibility and energetic {as in the amount and ease of prana flow} fitness. On the recommendation of Shiv my teacher I have also included Chi Kung elements and other yoga practices too.

3. What is Kundalini Energy? I don't understand what were doing in Yoga with all these repeated movements. They just make me feel really uncoordinated, or just weak and inept!

This energy is a latent potential in every human being. It's recognised by other methods and approaches, as different things and by different names. 'Raising' it or activating is brought by different approaches, some slow, some fast. It can also happen without any training spontaneously as with some religious experiences. In KY it's often activated by strong rhythmic spinal and pelvic movements with or without arm and leg movements. Also coupled with various breathing methods. They are not easy in the beginning hence why I teach with lots of rest periods, and ask that this method is followed until they can be performed without these necessary breaks.

These strong pumping movements bring and move a lot of energy into the higher centres of the body, the glands, and the brain. The idea is to purify the body, mind and emotions of the obstacles that prevent an experience of the Divine. It's really just a prep for Meditation and or Prayer. It's a method of 'Fire', whereas gentler Yoga methods {some Taoist Yoga for instance}, are more of 'Water' quality. 'Fire' burns up, past, or through obstacles, 'Water' washes over them, dissolves, engulfs, or gently wears them away. Fire methods can be very tough on the body, but tend to be faster.

KY is not really that fussed about the western ideal of a beautiful body but more of a beautiful mind and consciousness. This is not the objective of many Yoga's or yoga practitioners in the west where its all about the 'body beautiful' and often nothing much else. There maybe little concern for the mind or morality of the practitioner. I don't have a huge problem with that, its a limited endeavour, but least they're doing something of the Yoga curriculum which should be commended.

4. What's the benefit of doing Kundalini Yoga over others?

Its said that all genuine Yoga's are about 'raising' or activating Kundalini Energy, but not all include that kind training in an average or even advanced class. I was told that KY contains all the different approaches of other Yoga's and is known as the 'Mother Yoga'.

KY is a fast track method but its not every ones cup of tea. One simple advantage I ve seen is that it can be practiced even by those who are not or may never be very flexible. Most Yoga's available really push this extreme physical aspect of Yoga which can just end up as gymnastic expression without any content. I was more flexible than my teacher when I started, but in no way approached his depth of understanding, wisdom and stamina then or even now.

5. You say you teach differently to how you were taught, and that the classes with Shiv were a lot harder, both physically and mentally. I find your classes really tough going sometimes, both physically and mentally, I know Im just a beginner and quite unfit, but I thought Yoga was about relaxation!

This has come up quite a few times. Relaxation is part, but not the total of Yoga training. Obviously its a good thing to want and have, and many really need it.

When I was learning this style of yoga most of the class then were in their 20's, and I was very fit already and quite flexible. We would go to a class on monday night, Id sleep like a log afterwards, and tuesday was a day of deep dark torment. 'Terrible tuesdays' I called them. This went on for a few months and i really struggled to go back to the class each week. I realised though from various personal experiences that hiding away from all your internal clutter and rubbish was not living. It was sleep walking through life feeling little, denying a lot, ignoring more, and having no sense of the repercussions of your actions or inaction's. Let alone caring. I vowed to sort myself out what ever it took.

Its not always a pretty experince doing this kind of self work, and most don't want it once they realise what's going on, they literally run out the door. Its too heavy. Most of us want more denial and distraction not less, want to feel less of the unpleasantness of life, not more. Its a personal choice. It maybe free choice or free will to decide which, Im still not sure if that exists or not. One of my other KY teachers Guru Singh put it simply like this-

'Life is a school-do you want to graduate or not?

Don't worry though if you don't, you can come back and do it all again. If that's what you want" he said this smiling, it wasn't heavy, but it rang very true.

Most of my students when they come to me are not young, are not very fit or flexible, and often although very intelligent have little personal insight into why they are what they are, and why they are where they are. I try and gently coax them into seeing and dealing with their limitations, physically and mentally {by mentally I mean everything that comprises of them as beings with feelings, motivations, personal attributes, karma, all qualities whether known, unknown or unknowable}. Everyone has different capacities of understanding but everyone can advance. Real yoga wants to take you beyond what you think is possible and into a new relationship with everything it means to be you as a human. Then a relationship if you want it, to what is simply seen as the 'Divine' which exists within all of us. Name it anything you want, or deny its existence, it doesn't matter. Its still a relationship.

That's why my approach is softer than how we learnt, even though my students don't think that sometimes! I don't push people as I did in the beginning of teaching, it may be quicker but most find it too difficult. It can be counter productive. A good teacher tunes in to the needs of the student, not their own wishes, or simply 'this is how its done so you all have to do it like this'. Its why the class is multi layered. You go at your own pace, rest when you need to carry on when you can. Shiv would push us to go beyond difficulty, literally saying "keep going, come on keep on going'. So we would go through our limits, and see possible what they were in us. Unfortunately most are so worn out by doing this in general life they have nothing left. It's worse that ten years ago life is even more stressful now. I really wonder what another decade will do. I thereby increase the students stamina first, then move them on. This might take years with some, months with others. So give yourself time. There is ultimately no rush;-}

6. I really enjoy you're classes, but I find it hard to practice at home, I get really distracted! Have you any tips. Thanks.

Simply put out your yoga mat, and just lie down-you're already now doing Yoga. Your making an association with this simple act and the more often you do it the stronger it will become. Do a few of the warm ups and rest. Start with a few minutes a day doing this and gradually build up. Then eventually it just becomes second nature, you wont even need the mat. Enjoy what you can do,

to what ever degree, and don't judge yourself against others, or an ideal you've set yourself. That can be too counter productive to really making it a positive experince.

7. What are the most important practices to train in?

First- Do No Harm! Cant stress that enough to beginners. Its not always possible to advance without some mistakes including over doing it, but many are hard wired to go beyond their limits physically, mentally, spiritually. They often have done so and come to a class with very little left. This is particular obvious in those suffering a lot of stress, ill health, those over thirty new to training, and anyone with young families who is not sleeping much.

In general relax into the practice you are doing. Notice whether under pressure you react by creating counter pressure inside your system. The archetype of the hot headed business man exploding with rage when the deal doesn't go through or at the slightest bit of stress is something many witness or are.

So don't destroy your mind and body in pursuit of something even as lofty as deeper awareness, spirituality, health etc. There is the idea of sacrificing the body in eastern practices including yoga, but its in terms of using its energy wisely and not ignorantly, as this can lead to excessive denigration on one side, or lassitude on the other. Its about balance, a quality very much in need in so many aspects of our lives.

In India there is a tradition that exists still, that stretches back before the time of the Buddha, of physical austerities practiced to liberate the individual from the 'dust' of the human condition and the world. This could be holding your arm in the air permanently till fixed it withers away, self full castration, not wearing clothes, and living in a cemetery meditating in the dust of corpses, and other extremes. In some ways Yoga is a gentler part of this kind of tradition. The Buddha tried these extreme methods for many years while travelling and living in forests, and near death from starvation and no closer to his goal of liberation deemed it excessive and a dead end. Having been a lazy wealthy prince with everything he could want, he had seen life at both extremes. Once enlightened he set out his message of a 'middle way' in all practices-neither too little or too much basically. That's what I follow. What is too little or too much,well that's the 'art' of any practice, all of us have to find.

8. I often get quite emotional after practice in class, how do I integrate the things that come up and everyday life. I find some of it quite upsetting?

Firstly have a regular practice outside of the class, but be flexible enough to know when to give it a break, go out with your

friends, go to the cinema etc. Both during a practice and outside of it is used to accommodate the insights that arise, and use the techniques you learn to balance the body and emotions. This is for instance so that the chemicals/hormones in your glands don't jack up what's uncomfortable, and make it worse, creating a descending cycle of experience. That leads me to my second point. Be gentle on yourself, and aim not to make things worse, be prepared to make things better, but don't fret when the ride is less than comfortable. A sense of levity and humour can help. We are only human, not perfect nor meant to be. We all need time to develop. It takes seconds to make a space a mess, a lot longer to clear it up. The mind and the body are the same. If we're serious about being more complete and balanced human beings it's going to take some effort and time.

One practice for those who do have a strong emotional reaction is first they must get adequate rest both during the practice {in or out of a class} and after any practice. Again neither do too much or too little, but in this case definitely not too much. Rest and recuperation are particularly necessary for those who are mentally or physically under par.

Next gentle Meditation and contemplation. This could later include but not be limited to the exploring ideas about fragility, humanity, mortality, and impermanence of the human body, and the persona. This should ideally be under guidance while practicing what it means to be humble, light hearted, compassionate to oneself and not just others.

Feelings surface or rise, they come but go or change, we learn to be patient and still, calm when there's a 'storm' in our own thoughts and feelings. One of the reasons there is the smile on the faces of the statues of the Buddha.

I also suggest of course that if in doubt always seek some professional counselling. It can be a real support during difficult times. Shiv did provide this for me and taught me how to do it although I only do it occasionally. He himself took many years to get himself together, even spending time homeless and destitute. While he still lived teaching in the UK he spent time counselling and teaching in a drug rehab unit.

Don't try and integrate it all by yourself, work it all out, and be perfect! Very few can, that's why a class and a Teacher is a support mechanism but not a crutch.

9. Are you a member of the 3HO?

No. I have a spiritual name from the late head of the organisation, Yogi Bajan, and Shiv is a part of the org, but I never have been. Some of my friends are though. I now teach differently from them, a slower gentler approach. Same relative aims though.

10. How did you become a Teacher in Yoga?

My Teacher Shiv Charan Singh suggested I teach after I'd been at his class for a bit, and then he trained me to that end when I agreed. It was a bit of a shock, I remember the bus ride home from the class with my mate who had actually introduced me to the class after Shiv suggested I teach. I was pretty flummoxed! At some point later I can't remember, Shiv's class moved location, He then sprang a new surprise on me and gave me his class as my own to run, as a blessing and learning experience. It was bewildering, and his level of compassion and foresight was and still is humbling, while incredible. His action put my life on an entirely different track circa 1989/90. As his name indicates, Shiv from Shiva-destroyer of worlds- he very much took mine apart. I had to reconstruct it while under his guidance, and on my own.

He also suggested also that I combine Chi Kung and Yoga, as he knew I had an interest in that art. To that end I've studied various Chi Kung methods and I have melded aspects into the way I teach and practice.

11. You said a funny thing in last night's class, well a lot of funny things- I do like your jokes, you talked about feeling 'Fat' as a good sign in Yoga practice. I know I'm probably having problems with that as you said women have so much negative conditioning about body shape. Can you explain more about what you mean about the feeling in context of attaining benefit please? Thanks.

Ha Ha- glad you enjoyed my daftness! Can't see the point of doing all these arts unless we can have a bit of a laugh now and then. See the funny side of it all. Sometimes think I over do the jokes but seems to make classes more fun for everyone and lightens up the mood. It lifts everyone's spirit too and the winter blues really gets a lot of students.

'Fat' the word as I use it, describes an expansive healthy energetic state, abundant chi - also a sense of emotionally unbound boundaries, and an open expanded awareness, not any of this feeling fixed, bound, small, limited, or contracted, . That is a state of 'thinness'.

'Big' personalities aren't always in big bodies, nor 'presence' isn't determined by body size. It is determined by vitality and the degree the person is alive in themselves and their body. The majority of adults are very locked down, or really don't know what to do with their vitality, if and here's the biggy, if they have any left. Many sadly are really quite feeble after the age of 40. For others it's a huge prob where there is no healthy release, especially sexual. Religious types try temperance or even chastity, but you can see that's had a really 'bad rap', and few can do either really well. We need to 'transform' our vitality {once we have it or haven't lost it} into something useable. That's what religions started off as, ways to cultivate the spirit and the energy of the person to a

positive end. Not empty complex alienating ritual that now prevails {of course not everywhere or with every follower} doing nothing but causing division and misunderstanding. Secular Society on the other hand though provides few really healthy outlets, not that I'm saying there aren't people who are balanced and getting a lot from their way of life. Often though they don't have the science of why they do what they do, and how it works. Good practices teach 'why' 'how' and 'when' to the practitioner.

This feeling of abundance is necessary as much in Yoga, Chi Kung and Tai Chi. Typically as in Tai Chi, physical shape in Yoga usually falls in too very skinny or very big, but always with lots of vitality if the person is well developed in their art. Many can overdo aspects of yoga though and get to energetically 'thin' and create real problems. I've met a lot of teachers who have this.

For women who obsess about feeling thin, often 'throw away' consistently their vitality to feel contracted, tight, and even boney. This may be through diet and or exercise. At the extreme Anorexia is form of chi depletion causing and caused by derangement of perception and reality. We don't see with our eyes remember we see with our brains. This organ is not infallible, and is easily mucked up.

So to sum up. One's abundance from training should cause an expansion of expansive state, hence I call it 'Fat', and not because we're physically getting bigger. Most are not- they may think they are getting a lot bigger, but they are just getting more vitality. I suggest they weigh themselves to prove not. Often they have actually lost weight!

Health is not about contraction and tightness, it's a freedom of the body limber and relaxed, strong yet gentle, a sense of embracing 'shapelessness', but it's not listless, a sagginess of mind and body, it's a roundness that can feel as big as the room or more. It's the same feeling we notice of person with huge presence enter a room. They occupy the space, the 'wall flower' does not, they are lost in the wallpaper. Tell me who is having a better time!

So get chi 'fat' not chi 'thin'! Hope that waffle was clear.

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