

Yoga: Health or Gymnastics

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When practicing yoga we are often challenged not only by the level of intensity of the poses but by the choices of the poses themselves. Whether one is inverted upside down or straining to balance on one's forearms a quintessential question might be, "What exactly is this pose doing for me?" While many poses might look good to the outside observer they might also be creating more stress in the body. In fact, there is a stark contrast between doing yoga for health reasons and doing yoga as a gymnastic experience.

There are many yoga poses that drive our ambition. Unfortunately, there is also a common disposition among many yoga practitioners who believe that the more gymnastic one is the more spiritual and the healthier one is as well. Both are myths. People who are extremely gymnastic do not necessarily live any longer or have healthier lives.

Gymnastic yoga is closely aligned with the world of fitness. Fitness, while attempting to represent itself as health, is not. Fitness is about looking a certain way. Health is about the optimal functioning of the body. Just as nobody in the fitness world is any healthier with bulging biceps or washboard abs, nobody in the yoga world is any healthier for being able to stand on one's head or balance on one arm.

We seem to have a distorted view of health that attempts to equate a gymnastic experience as the foundation for health. Often the only thing exercised is the ego mind. Feeling a sense of accomplishment as one masters a gymnastic pose might feel good. This type of practice has little to do with changing one's health.

In fact, many yoga practices might even be considered a detriment to one's health. Let's take the traditional breathing technique taught by many called Ujjai breath. In this style of yogic breathing one must constrict the glottis and throat area in order to prevent the release of air from the lungs. Muscles of the throat and neck are used to create this muscular constriction. In doing so over time one learns to have a tight neck and throat, long after the yoga session has ended. You just end up reinforcing tightness.

The Thyroid gland is an important regulatory gland situated in the throat region. Continued tightness in the throat often leads to an imbalance in the Thyroid. As the Thyroid becomes imbalanced other areas of the body will be affected, like the growth of bones or the metabolism of the body. As one continues to practice Ujjai breathing over time the health of the Thyroid gland begins to become jeopardized.

Let's look at a forearm balancing pose. How does this pose prepare you for relaxation? It doesn't. How does this pose open up your joints? It doesn't. How does this pose expand and lengthen the body. It doesn't. While it may look good to the observer there is very little health benefit. Many of the more gymnastic poses are for ego and show and have very little to do with improving one's overall health.

There are thousands of poses to choose from. Many would claim that such gymnastic poses have just as much tradition as all the yoga poses. Yet many of these traditional poses create more tension than they release. This is especially true for the more gymnastic poses. Just because something is old does not necessarily mean that it is right.

There almost seems to be a mythological belief associated with yoga. This belief states that if one is practicing yoga then it must be healthy. Not so. There are many damaging and stressful poses and practices that create tension and distortion in the body. This is especially true if one has a pre-existing injury or is not ready to be engaged in such a pose. This mythological belief attempts to label anything done under the yoga umbrella as being good for you. Health is about peeling away the layers of tension, not creating more of them.

When describing the concept of health we need to be clear what that means. Balancing on one's arms has very little to do with health. Neither does standing on one's head. These poses look good in a class or on the cover of a magazine but they certainly do not enhance one's health. While strength and tone is an aspect of health a tight and hard body is anything but healthy. While certain poses might help to build strength they may negate one's health in many more ways.

When it comes to health and yoga it is important to notice the wonderful benefits that can be created when we choose the right poses. Our hips can open so we do not have to walk with pain. The spine elongates to create freedom and flow of energy up the backbone. Shoulders begin to be freed up to create an overall ease of movement in one's life. These and many more results are seen with yoga when the right poses are implemented.

As we age yoga also becomes an important tool to keep our bodies energized and alive. Nobody needs to stiffen, harden, and shrink as they age. A regular yoga practice has the ability to optimize our health every day. Choosing wisely the poses we engage in will either add to our health or take away from it.

Unfortunately, a person who is under stress will practice yoga in much the same way. His body is already in a state of war so he just recreates this war state with the poses that he chooses. In this case, instead of reversing the affects of stress on his body he is adding to it. Choosing many of the more gymnastics poses often only reinforces this internal stress by hardening and tightening the body.

Yoga has so much to offer to us. With the right choices of poses we can transform and heal. Vibrant health and fluidity of movement become natural and easy. The wrong choices in the yoga practice only add to an already imbalanced system. When choosing the type of yoga you wish to participate in become clear of your intentions and your goals. As you become more aware of your internal desires your external practice will begin to take shape as well. When practicing yoga are you sacrificing what it means to be healthy in order to look a certain way?