



Yoga As a Tool for Addiction Recovery

The ability for yoga to heal is an essential part of every class that I teach, so when an opportunity came up to explore yoga at a famous rehabilitation facility located in the mountains in the northern reaches of Thailand, far from the stresses of big-city living, I thought that it would be a terrific idea: Why not take the healing to those that need it the most? After talking extensively to the management team, however, I quickly realized that the great sensitivity of the process of addiction recovery should not be taken lightly.

In Patanjali's "Yoga Sutras," one of the most ancient and respected texts on the subject, the second verse is often translated as "Yoga is the Calming of the Fluctuation of the Mind." What we have then, is a very tangible definition of what yoga is. Many modern practitioners have been influenced by later developments and interpretations of yoga, so the meaning has become a bit unclear, with definitions ranging from "union" to "postures." In fact, there are so many variations in yoga that the essentials taught at certain institutions can be viewed as nonsense at others.

Yoga began in India thousands of years ago as a method of transcendence from ordinary, unconscious living. Through discipline, devotion and management of the mind, one can facilitate the process of evolution. However, our modern age tends to value the visible more than the subtle. As such, some physically demanding yoga studios will proudly proclaim: "Burn calories, not incense." Classic schools stemming from a common lineage are not immune to this need to differentiate. The Iyengar tradition promotes the usage of props (chairs, blocks, straps) in order to aid proper alignment, whereas the Ashtangis tend to view such objects as a hindrance to the flow of energy during the dynamic, fluid practice.

Contributing to the confusion is the common desire to be correct. Countless yoga texts emphasize the devotion to the guru (teacher) as one explores yoga. This often leads to a warped perception, with some schools declaring another's method as harmful and irrelevant. The potential for yoga to unite is then destroyed with too much differentiation and too much thinking. Many religious people often say that the original message is pure and simple, but humans corrupt the essentials with too much thought and procedures. While yoga is not a religion, it is fascinating to see the current state of the practice after more than 2000 years of existence. Just as simple houses of worship gave way to grand, ornate churches, yoga is

quickly transforming into a stylized regime, complete with organic rubber mats and expensive clothing.

An optimist might say that this progression is a sign that something is alive, for anything worthwhile must adapt to our changing world and attitudes. And they do have a point. If your life is easy and pleasant, then indulging in a cup of designer coffee before heading to yoga and then treating yourself to a massage might very well be a harmless way to spend a Saturday afternoon. However, for those whose lives have been affected by heavy drug usage, yoga, at its most basic, offers a chance for recovery through self-empowerment.

Recovering substance users will often say that they use drugs in order to satisfy physical and psychological needs. Yoga, then, gives an opportunity to regain balance of mind through the control of the body. Through learning the basics of how to stand on two feet, how to breathe deeply and how to make choices that contribute to healthy living, yoga can empower those who may feel that their lives are out of control. When life is on the table, priorities shift. To understand yoga is to understand the self: We begin by reconnecting with the basics of what the body can do in order to gain confidence in what is possible.

While stylized differentiations within the vast ocean of modern yoga can be entertaining for those looking for maintenance of their bodies and minds, the practice at its most basic can be quite potent, and truly lifesaving, when the one is in need of transformation. When the student is ready, the teacher appears.

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