

Choosing a Yoga Teacher

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Yoga has exploded in Seattle as in much of the country. For every coffee stand, there is at least one yoga studio lurking nearby. With so many places offering yoga, how do you decide who would be the best teacher for you?

I have encountered many individuals whose primary consideration is location. This makes sense as yoga is ubiquitous. Why not just walk down to the neighborhood gym and pick up a class?

Yoga is different than a typical exercise class, and the potential for stress and strain is far beyond what you could do to yourself in aerobics at the gym. As yoga has proliferated, so have yoga injuries. Part of the intrigue is also what makes it risky: Increased flexibility is helpful for everyday living, and the ability to stretch can produce breathtaking forms. However, uncontrolled flexibility can result in muscle strains—or worse. For example, overstretched ligaments result in the destabilization of the structure, such as a knee joint.

Common yoga injuries include hamstring pulls, sacroiliac dysfunction, rotator cuff injuries, strained lumbar vertebra, and medial collateral/lateral collateral ligament damage in the knees. Alignment is crucial in posture work, as is an understanding of how to stabilize joints through strength while muscles are being stretched. It is time well spent to do some research on a potential teacher and include factors besides location.

Cost is also a consideration. Why pay extra at the yoga studio when you can get it free at the gym? The subject of how and what we value is a complex question in itself. So, I simply say, is anything free? Hidden costs are not always clear, and somehow, somehow, someone is paying for that “free” class.

The following items are usually listed in a teacher’s bio and are a good place to start the winnowing process. Is he or she certified? By whom? How long has she been teaching? How old is he? This last question is an important factor that is often over looked.

When friends ask me about starting yoga classes, I recommend they look for a teacher within 10 years of their age. This recommendation is especially applicable if you are over 40. A teacher in your age bracket will understand what happens to the body as it matures and how this relates to the art of practicing yoga postures. Of course, there are highly qualified young teachers, “old souls,” as it were, especially those who come to teaching from other health care professions, such as massage therapy. These individuals are able to bridge the age gap through empathy.

At some point you make your best judgment and take a class. I do not

recommend observing a class. You need to be in it, feeling and experiencing it with your body, because your research isn't done yet. Below are some thoughts to consider once you are in class.

- * Good teachers will be able to adapt the work to you when necessary. If they stick to a regime and cannot or will not modify postures, it's a good sign you should not go back.

- * A sense of humor is a must. Really serious tends to go with really rigid, and that's a really good reason to exit.

- * In cross-cultural arts, your common sense is still valid. People are people, no matter what continent you are on. If you think something is weird or fishy, it probably is.

- * Can you understand what your teacher is saying? With a component in spirituality, some teachers will use yoga jargon or "buzz" words that may leave you wondering what planet you are on. A competent teacher should be willing to define terms, and do so graciously.

- * Look at the other students in the class. Who does this teacher attract? It will help you understand who this teacher likes to work with and how qualified they are.

- * The following saying illustrates the next point: Give a man a fish and he can feed himself for a day. Teach a man to fish and he can feed himself for life. Teachers who practice the poses at the same time you do are, in essence, taking class themselves and not watching you. Without an eye on students, they cannot make adjustments to your alignment or teach good form. Look for someone who offers more than a "follow-the-leader" aerobics format. Think of your teacher as a coach.

Yoga is traditionally a solo art and developing a home practice is one of the aims. Ask yourself: Am I being given the tools to begin a practice on my own? Am I engaged intellectually and theoretically so I could start to build a home practice? If you can answer yes to these questions, you are on the right track.

Finally, for those of you who like to fine tune here's a parting thought. When you study and learn from another person, you are subtly taking on their ideas and values. Sometimes what is taught "between the lines," often through nonverbal cues, goes in under our conscious radar. We begin to think like our teacher and may not realize it. So, the question is, is your teacher someone you admire? Someone you trust? Do you want that person in your psyche?

Yoga can be a deeply rewarding endeavor. The yoga practitioner has the opportunity to work with both body and mind. It's worth the time investment you make to locate a qualified teacher and ensure a safe journey.