

Connecting Your Yoga Practice to What Really Matters by Michael Stone

The heart of yoga is the practice of connecting with what really matters. These days when what passes as “practice” is a focus on the external geometry of yoga postures, it’s important that we let the postures be a doorway into the truth of our lives. There are 84,000 dharma doors and even more layers in this body and mind. All we need to do is truly enter.

The human world is continually speeding up while the nonhuman world of plants, insects, and animals, with its once vast range of ecological diversity, is rapidly declining, causing irreversible imbalances throughout the web of life. A spiritual practice exclusively concerned with my enlightenment, my transcendence, or my emancipation from this life, this body, or this earth is not a spiritual practice tuned in to these times of ecological, social, physical, and psychological imbalance. The declining health of our ecosystems and the call for action in our cities, economies, communities, and families remind us that we don’t have time to wait for enlightenment in isolated caves or inner sanctums; instead, it’s time to consider action in the world and inner practice as synchronistic and parallel. Action in the world is not an externally imposed duty or simply a preliminary stage on the path to greater awareness but is in itself a valid spiritual path and an expression of interdependence, freedom, and awakening.

By seeing the inseparability of psychological change, ethical action, and spirituality, we can avoid the common fragmented and problematic view that spiritual practice takes us away from the world, thus excluding the body, householder life, and pressing contemporary issues like poverty, injustice, environmental degradation, or other forms of inequality and suffering. Yoga teaches us that everything is connected to everything else in the ongoing flux and flow of reality, beginning in the microcosm of the mind and extending all the way through the myriad forms of life. Yoga also claims freedom from suffering as its primary objective. It is from these realizations that our spiritual, ethical, and contemplative practices originate and mature. Wherever there is imbalance and suffering, yoga shows up.

Because of the sweeping changes of the modern era—including genetic research, the telephone, the Internet, high rates of literacy, swift air travel, two-column accounting systems, and faster and faster lifestyles—the Iron Age worldview out of which yoga teachings began to be described and refined can only offer us a partial platform, path, and set of truths. We begin in this culture at this time, so we must begin now to articulate and envision a yoga that is responsive to present circumstances—rooted in tradition yet adaptable and alive in contemporary times.

Yoga has always represented a radical path that leaves behind stiff metaphysics and doctrine and instead turns the practitioner’s attention inward to the immediate experience of mind and body. The yogin studies the nature of reality as it presents itself here and now. As we turn toward the mind-body process, we begin to open to the temporary nature of our lives as well as the fact that we are inextricably woven into the very elements that constitute everything else—we are the natural world. For too long, yoga has been mischaracterized as an inner practice without understanding the teleology of practice. Yoga practices tune us in to reality by waking us up to the inherent transience of earthly life, the freedom that arises when wanting is relinquished, the truth that no thing is “me” or “mine,” and the basic intelligence of the mind, body, and the life that supports us. The term “yoga” connotes the basic unity and interconnectedness of all of life including the elements, the breath, the body, and the mind. The techniques of yoga—including body practices, working with the breath, and

discovering the natural ease of the mind—reorient practitioners to the very deep continuity that runs through every aspect of life until they realize that mind, body, and breath are situated in the world and not apart from worldly life in any way.

When I began practicing yoga, my primary focus was the physical practice of yoga postures, and every morning for the first six years I woke up to practice at five o'clock, six days a week. I sat in meditation for an hour, followed by standing postures, twists, forward bends, an hour of back bending and inversions, and finally breakfast. When I had any free time, I attended academic lectures on Indian philosophy, completed two degrees in psychology and religion, and studied Sanskrit; but the formality of my practice began to feel separate from the world I moved through, and I felt that formal practice and daily life had little in common. The connection between meditation, the physical practice of yoga, and the spiritual discipline to which it belonged became ambiguous and vague, and though I could intellectually grasp the connection between waking up the body and stilling the mind, I didn't understand how to put these practices into action in everyday life. While I was having significant insights in meditative practices, I felt formal practice and daily life were not seamlessly interwoven.

This is true for many contemporary yoga practitioners, and as I now teach extensively, the most common question I hear is how to integrate philosophy, body practices, meditation, and daily life together with our role in relationships, concerns about the world around us, and the desire to take action in a world out of balance. Even when students begin having genuine experiences of insight or meditative quietude, I always ask them how they are going to incorporate these experiences into their daily activities. How does spiritual practice support and motivate our choices and ambitions? How can my personal enlightenment be the goal of practice if there is so much suffering around me? If the domain of any spiritual tradition is the relief and transformation of suffering, what does yoga, one of the great spiritual traditions, have to say about contemporary forms of suffering and existential disorientation? For the practitioner of hatha yoga—the meditative practice of waking up to present experience in mind and body—the link between yoga as a “practice” and a “spirituality” is often realized through an intuition rather than through intellectual articulation. However, intuition is not enough; nor is it enough to imagine that yoga offers a complete set of codes or truths that can, like mathematical equations, tell us what to do in every given situation. The world is too complex, too nuanced, and it's always shifting. Therefore, we need to investigate the practical ways that yoga practice matures both in formal study and in everyday life. Today, our personal, ecological, and social situations present unique and direct challenges to every one of us to respond to the great existential questions of life and death, to look deeply into interdependence, and to fully actualize our awakening in a world distressed and in need. How is our awakening going to contribute to the world at large? Why is our spiritual path important for the great rivers, the butterflies, and the architecture of our cities?

Every spiritual teaching opens us up to universal truths like impermanence and the inevitability of death. But there comes a time when we have to make the universal relevant. How is our practice relevant?

The only way I can really respond to this question is to look closely at my life and see where healing is needed. Sometimes it's in the body and sometimes the body politic. Practice needs to reach inward and outward. If we can define “practice” as making our ideal a reality, then we have an obligation to every sentient being to wake up. To serve.

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spirituality and social action. He has written four books with Shambhala Publications on Yoga, Buddhism and ethics and his forthcoming book, Awake in the World, is due this coming Spring. His website is www.centreofgravity.org and he can be found teaching regularly in Toronto and internationally.