

The Benefits of Instructional Yoga

By Eli Thompson



Fitness

America has had the pleasure of experiencing a yoga revolution in the past decade. New yoga studios are sprouting up in every town. The benefits to mind, body, and spirit have been documented in numerous studies and millions of Americans are healthier for their practice. Unfortunately, few studios are able to dedicate the resources to actually teach yoga.

Yoga was originally taught by a master to very few disciples at one time. This ensured each student was practicing yoga specifically tailored to his or her body and its unique history of injuries and limitations. Beginners would advance only when ready. However, this individualistic teaching method doesn't mesh with the mass-market of the West. Yoga simply would not have flourished here under such focused instruction. The teaching methodology had to be broadened and generalized enough to teach larger classes and make yoga studios financially sustainable. However, now that yoga is here to stay, perhaps the yoga community should re-evaluate their current "follow the leader" instruction of beginners.

Following the Leader

For those readers who have never practiced yoga, most classes are led, not taught. Ten to 80 people line their mats while a teacher speaks the sequence, occasionally adding one or two well-intentioned instructions

per pose. Often the instructor or an assistant will walk around the class, offering hands-on assistance here or there. This is great for a competent yoga practitioner who has a basic understanding of how to perform the poses correctly and safely. It's not a good introduction for the uninitiated.

Beginners are expected to follow by example, mimicking the others' movements as best they can. Their struggle with the new postures may draw extra attention from the instructor, but in a large class, there simply isn't time for individual teaching. With persistence and perseverance, new students will learn to approximate the poses and eventually become proficient enough to be mimicked by newcomers themselves. But this doesn't mean that they've learned correctly.

This process of visual emulation is a poor learning

method for this rich and intricate art. Vision is inherently superficial, while the complexity of even the basic yoga poses runs deep. The beginner is forced to fudge the poses. They will use those areas of their bodies that are flexible to overcompensate for the areas that are tight and hard to open. A yoga practice develops which increases flexibility and health in most of the body, but misses those areas that are locked tight. This formation of islands of tightness will often increase instability and dysfunction for beginners. They may feel looser and stronger, but will actually be at greater risk of injury, both on and off the yoga mat. They won't enjoy the full benefits of yoga which arise from a balanced opening.

Taking Medical History into Account

Another aspect of the beginner's dilemma is the uniqueness of that person's medical history. Past injuries such as breaks, tears, dislocations, repetitive strain injuries, reconstructive surgeries, etc. may pose an increased risk to re-injury. Yoga can benefit most of these a great deal, but the yoga practice will often need to be modified. There is no room in a led class for the beginner to learn how to make yoga work for them.

This inherent risk of the educational methodology of yoga in America is greatest for the beginner. The risk will slowly diminish as students piece together the bits of information learned through occasional direct assistance. Competence, and thus safety, will grow as they gain a fuller understanding of the poses with their deeper intention of balanced opening. This may take years, but can be accelerated by a simple solution – Instructional Yoga.

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Instructional Yoga

I was inspired to teach Instructional Yoga when I noticed how many of my yoga-practicing clients were missing some of the basics. As a Structural Integrator, I specialize in improving my clients' chronic misalignments: postural, old injury, or surgery-based (see "Taking the Pain out of Chronic Pain," *Our Town Brookline*, May 2007.) I often use yoga as a language to help clients explore their bodies. I was surprised to find even experienced yoga practitioners unable to focus the poses into their locked areas.

My Instructional Yoga sessions have grown into a one-on-one, hour and a half exploration of how yoga uniquely fits that client. I start by reviewing his or her medical history. This tells me how aggressively we can work and in what areas we will have to be cautious. I then evaluate the client's standing posture. Using my Structural Integration background, with its strong anatomical foundation, I determine where their very tight and hard-to-reach areas are.

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I can then begin to strategize how to modify certain poses to keep them safe and effective. Slowly and methodically we explore how to do each pose correctly. I teach them how not to overcompensate and how to focus the poses into those tight areas to begin opening them in a balanced way. We explore the range of sensations experienced during yoga and what may be too much. We talk about the breath, focus, and intention – how to make yoga more than just stretching. Most of all, I create the opportunity for my clients to ask questions specific to them.

Fine-Tuning Your Practice

Instructional Yoga is designed as an occasional intensive study to supplement and advance a regular yoga practice. Within a few sessions, beginners learn enough about their bodies and the basic principles of yoga to be able to practice safely and effectively. This knowledge helps build confidence and security on the mat. Beginners become self-reliant, and can attend any led yoga class at any studio. Even experienced practitioners gain from the anatomical and structural expertise, discovering things they had been missing all along.

Instructional Yoga is not something new. It can be taught by any experienced yoga teacher in any yoga studio. It does not necessitate a return to the master/disciple model of old. It simply requires taking the time to ensure that students learn yoga accurately. Private or semi-private lessons can achieve this and are offered by most yoga teachers. "Fundamentals of Yoga" classes, based on the principles of Instructional Yoga, could be offered to small groups, allowing enough time for personal attention. Such classes, though not as profitable, would ensure a constant flow of educated students into the more advanced classes. A few studios already offer such classes. There are many people who would like to learn yoga but are intimidated and need a little extra attention. The principles of Instructional Yoga would guide them to the full benefits of yoga.

Eli Thompson is a licensed massage therapist, a certified KMI practitioner, and a certified teacher of the School of Kinesis. He offers Massage Therapy, KMI Structural Integration, and private Instructional Yoga classes at 15 St. Mary's Court in Brookline. You can learn more at www.EliThompson.com, or by contacting Eli at 617-776-9494 or BostonMassage@yahoo.com.