

The Perfect Pose

When your goal is picture-perfect asanas, are you missing the point of yoga?

By Phillip Moffitt

You know the feeling. There you are in yoga class working unsuccessfully to do one of the so-called “advanced” poses. Right next to you is a student who has only been coming to class for a short while, yet is easily able to do the pose. It doesn’t seem fair. You become frustrated and fantasize about quitting. You leave class wondering, “Why am I doing this? Why not just go back to running or working out at the gym?” You struggle with these periodic waves of discouragement, and it’s not easy to get yourself back to class, but somehow you do it.

Or maybe you’re another kind of student—the “perennially flexible.” You do most of the poses really well, are very absorbed in your practice, and can focus forever on getting your sit bones to lift or your groins to lengthen. But after a while, you begin to realize there is a sense of stagnation in your yoga. Others in your class tell you your poses look great. But you experience a vacuous feeling in your practice, or as one of my teachers describes it: “There’s no yoga in your yoga.”

What do the two of you, the periodically discouraged and the perennially flexible, have in common? As unlikely as it may seem, you both suffer from what I call “yogi flu.” The yogi flu is a psychological infection which causes you to start thinking about your yoga practice as though its purpose were to achieve the mystical, eternal, Perfect Pose—the one where your life is suddenly going to be filled with happiness, deep under-

standing, and the admiration of those around you.

When infected with the yogi flu, like the common flu, your mind gets a bit hazy. You start dreaming of the perfect pose and not doing your pose. You cease paying attention to the “here and now” in your yoga practice and become lost in wishful thinking—“If only...” or “Why can’t I...” or “When I am able to...then I will....”

In periodically discouraged types, this is only a painful, temporary infection; the symptoms include comparing mind, and lots of self-judging, which in turn cause tension, self-loathing, and fatigue. The perennially flexible, on the other hand, have a chronic version which is far more difficult to cope with. You may experience feelings of disassociation, self-absorption, and lethargy which may lead to entropy in your practice and may mirror a pattern of avoidance and nongrowth in your life. It’s as though you’re doing yoga in the Swiss mountain clinic described in Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain* (Vin-



tage, 1996), where nothing really happens and everything is enveloped in a kind of ennui that prevents access to the edge of each moment. For someone infected with the chronic version of the yogi flu, it’s as though you are using yoga as a drug to escape from life.

I’m someone who suffers from periodic bouts of the yogi flu. Even in childhood I had a stiff body and an unusually limited range of motion. Then when I was in my mid-20s, by a fluke I found myself taking a yoga class.

I was by far the least flexible student, yet it felt like coming home. Since then the limitations of my body have given me plenty of opportunities

to get periodically discouraged and lost in “if only” thinking, or to push my body beyond what it’s really capable of doing. But gradually I’ve learned to be more accommodating of my body and more present in the moment. I’ve realized the only yoga available to me is the yoga that I can do with this body, just as it is. In turn, I’ve gained a felt sense of occupying my body that is really quite wonderful and is available to everyone, but relatively few people discover it.

Whether you're the periodically discouraged type or perennially flexible, you probably lust after at least one perfect pose which causes you to get pulled into comparing mind or self-judging—the early symptoms of yogi flu. Maybe it's a 15-minute Headstand, or a fully extended Backbend, or a Scorpion with feet touching the head. There is nothing wrong with this, you might say, for it motivates you and gives you something to measure your progress against. This is true insofar as it stops there, but does it? How many times in class or in your home practice do you tune out what's actually happening in your body in the moment and start to fantasize about what your pose will look like in the future? How often do you begin to judge your poses as lacking, force your body into how it "should be," or start comparing yourself negatively to others? In each instance you are infected with yogi flu. Your mind is delusional and caught in desire and rejection. There's no yoga in this mind-state; the body is being abandoned to fend for itself, and the mind is missing an opportunity to learn how to accommodate itself to what is arising in the moment.

In the type of meditation I teach, vipassana, the heart of the practice is being present with mindfulness and equanimity. In vipassana we use sitting on a cushion and walking meditation as our two primary forms of practice, but we also emphasize that the practice happens in each moment of your life, not just during the times of formal meditation. The same is true for hatha yoga; the time you spend on the sticky mat is your formal practice, where you learn to strengthen and stretch your body and to concentrate your mind. However, the deeper intention of yoga is to create a state of fluidity and flexibility in body and mind such that you can handle the inevitable physical and mental stresses and strains that arise in your life. If you practice with this intention, it doesn't matter what your poses look like.

This principle of orienting your practice toward your life is known as "inte-

gration," a concept espoused by the Indian mystic, Sri Aurobindo, creator of Integral Yoga. Integration is what elevates yoga beyond a workout. Unfortunately, because of the way yoga is often taught today, this principle gets overlooked. There's too much focus on challenging students to get postures perfect or to progress to the next level of a particular

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practice. Such emphasis on a goal only encourages yogi flu. It can infect a whole class or even a yoga center for long periods of time.

If you want to integrate your life with your practice, it helps to remember that the asanas are merely tools, not an end in themselves. They're a means to a deeper, freer experience of your life in its entirety. One of my vipassana teachers tells a story about a sign in a Las Vegas casino that says: "You must be present to win." He explains that the same is true in meditation: You must be present—be mindful—to deepen your practice. When you are lost in the yogi flu, you cease being in the moment. Whether that state lasts a few seconds or is habitual, there is no yoga in your yoga.

When you view your yoga from the perspective of a perfect pose you've created in your imagination, seen in a book, or observed in your fellow students or teacher, you no longer have access to yourself. You are doing yoga by rote, and your mind doesn't gain the strength to stay present in the difficult situations that arise in life. Nor do you learn to stay present to the needs of your body as you sit on a plane for too many hours, or run a meeting where you're under great stress, or carry a baby around on your back.

When you experience your yoga from the mind-set of the perfect pose, you are no longer doing yoga. Instead you are transforming it into a kind of gymnastics, as though there are judges from whom you hope to receive as close to a perfect score as possible. Gymnastics is a beautiful sport, but it is not Patanjali's yoga. Your teacher may have forgotten this truth. I know of one teacher for

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whom this is true; I've learned a lot from this person and have sent others to study with him. Each time I say to the person I'm referring, "Learn the brilliant techniques this teacher has to offer, but don't become mired in his view, for there is no sense of life beyond the sticky mat in his teaching and no sense of life itself being the true yoga practice."

A number of teachers have told me that they find students who suffer from the chronic yogi flu very difficult to teach because they have such ease with the postures that they aren't challenged in the same way as less flexible students. One teacher said it breaks her heart to see people with really flexible bodies come to class and become bored or ambitious without ever being forced to encounter themselves.

When I work with perennially flexible students, my approach is to bring their emotional selves into the class. I select one aspect of the physical postures, something in the hips or shoulders for instance, and bring their attention to this detail. Over and over again, I ask them what they're feeling, what their minds are doing, and what their intent is in the moment. The idea is to get them to stop using yoga to escape and to encourage them to fully experience themselves in their yoga. If they're feeling lousy in class because of a difficult situation with their spouse, then the feelings become part of the posture.

A few weeks ago I was teaching a seminar at a large conference center and went to the morning yoga class that was offered to everyone there. The instructor was a young man with a very flexible body who was doing poses when I walked in. I watched as he assessed me as someone with strength and stability but weak in flexibility. It was an assessment I was accustomed to receiving. As the class began warming up with Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog), it quickly became clear from his comments that he viewed people from the perspective of flexibility, not body awareness. When we got to standing poses, he came by and whispered with surprise in his voice, "You have a beautiful practice." By this he meant I occupied my practice; my intention was visible within the limitations of my body. When I heard this I once again thanked my teachers, for it was a compliment to their patience, and I thanked my body for having withstood my bouts of yogi flu.

There will be times when you too are infected with yogi flu, not present to the actual experience of your body or your mind. This is inevitable. The yoga, however, is not in avoiding these bouts, but in becoming aware of when you are infected and bringing yourself back to the present—to this body, this mind, just as they are—and treating yourself with loving-kindness and compassion. When you start to master this understanding, your yoga practice will start to appear in the rest of your life. Every moment of your life is just the same as when you begin a pose. In some manner we must find the best possible emotional posture, act with as much understanding as we have available, and stretch ourselves to honestly be present for what is arising. *This is perfect yoga.* ♦

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