

How to Have a Safe Yoga Practice.

Published in Yoga and Health Magazine

As the New Year starts many of you will be enrolling for Yoga classes at specialist Yoga centres, health clubs, local halls and gyms. For many of you it will be the first time that you have sampled the delights of Yoga and I hope that you derive as much benefit and enjoyment from this ancient set of practices as I have.

One question that you should ask yourself before you embark on your new class is a simple one, but one that is often overlooked: Just how qualified is your Yoga teacher?

It sounds like a silly question. "Surely the person standing at the front of the class is qualified to be there?" you ask yourself. Well maybe not. Let me explain. Teaching Yoga is totally unregulated by government legislation in the UK and that can lead to a confusing and potentially dangerous situation. Just how do you find a competent teacher to meet your needs?

There are three main points to consider here:

Anyone, with no qualifications or experience, can set themselves up and teach Yoga. Secondly, many of the existing training courses are not of sufficient depth and duration to adequately train teachers and lastly, regardless of what paper qualifications the teacher holds, experience both as a teacher and as a Yoga practitioner is a vital ingredient for any teacher.

Even if your teacher has attended some form of teacher training you need to be aware that many of the existing teacher training courses may not offer high quality tuition nor produce competent teachers. Many of them do not require previous experience, some are done by correspondence and few have a continuing education requirement. There are some excellent teachers out there with no formal qualifications but who are extremely dedicated and have years of experience and study on which to draw and who are extremely loyal to a particular teacher.

At present the lack of government legislation that definitively states who is qualified to teach Yoga in the UK means that literally anybody can hire a venue, put up a few fliers and start to teach class. Given the current 'Yoga boom' some people are attracted to Yoga teaching as a way to make a fast buck. Many have little or no real experience and may have only been practicing Yoga for a few months before embarking on their new career as a teacher. Other well intentioned students take a few classes and decide that they want to spread the good news about their new found passion. This is very admirable but it does not ensure high quality instruction for you, the students.

The majority of teachers have some ethics about teaching and many have undertaken teacher training courses. However the quality and duration of these courses vary dramatically and it is advisable to question your teacher before you commit to studying with them to ascertain that they have a reputable qualification. Courses from the British Wheel of Yoga and the Iyengar Yoga Association and some others all provide excellent training for teachers.

However, many other studios and individual teachers offer one week, two week or even one month teacher training courses. These courses seldom have a minimum entry requirement, and with the majority of these courses you simply pay the fees, attend the course and receive a certificate at the end. There is simply no quality control and this is what, in many cases can make these courses worthless. Courses like these offer training, but not assessment of a potential teachers ability to actually teach. Some Indian yogis and organisations, such as the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres, have spread centres around the world and now offer teacher training courses that are detailed, broad in approach and offer excellent tuition.

In other cases would be teachers embark on a length and often expensive trip to India to find a guru (teacher) and train with a 'real' Yoga master. This can be an incredibly fulfilling personal experience for the individual but there are many pitfalls, little quality control of Gurus in most cases, and can leave the potential teacher having spent years studying but with no paper credentials to show for it. Many of these yogis return to the UK and teach and have a lot to offer. Many have very disciplined and rigorous personal practices and a real depth of experience that no teacher training course could ever offer. Their dedication to their own practice and the benefit and joy they have received from it gives them a real insight into how to teach and inspire others.

As a guide I would always advise students to check out their teachers before making a long-term commitment. Ask around and find out what other Yoga students have to say about a particular teacher. Two local teachers may both be of an excellent standard but by asking around you may find that one will better suit your needs as a student.

Also talk to the teacher. Do they practice asana (postures) regularly? How many years have they been practicing and teaching? Who is their teacher and do they still continue to study with them regularly? If you feel comfortable with a person then enrol with them even if they are not brandishing a fresh teacher training certificate. As a teacher I always welcome questions from students about my credentials to teach. I am one of the few UK-based teachers authorised by the Ashtanga guru Pattabhi Jois to teach this method of yoga. I practice asana and pranayama for two hours a day, six days a week. I return to India each year to continue my studies with Pattabhi Jois and refine my teaching style. I have a close relationship with an Indian philosophy teacher and a Sanskrit teacher and study with them annually.

Lastly, always check to ensure that your teacher has adequate liability insurance cover. If you are in any doubt ask to see an insurance certificate. I always carry a copy of mine to every class I teach. Insurance provides security and peace of mind for students and teachers alike, but is not something that all teachers have.

I hope all of you enjoy your new classes and really discover something that resonates deeply with you. Whether you are taking yoga classes to find calm, get fit, improve your health, assist your pregnancy or just for a bit of fun I hope you stay with the practice and discover the many unseen benefits and joys.

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**authorised by Sri K Pattabhi Jois, the leading proponent of this style of yoga.
For more information go to www.DoAshtanga.com**

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