

The conscious

YOGI

There's a lot more to yoga than just a physical practice, writes **EMMA PALMER.**

When we find ourselves sitting in the eye of the storm, challenged to our core by external events, our inner guidance and belief system goes into overdrive as we navigate our way through. We call on everything we have experienced on life's journey thus far and ride the waves of doubt, fear and unknowing with all the courage and strength we can muster.

It is precisely during these times that the teachings from one's yoga practice can really come to life and a person's desire to understand them more fully awakens. The end result is often a reminder that the strong root system that sustains and gives light to the path we are treading is firmly anchored within us, and will guide us safely to the other side.

Yoga mat or life raft?

The physical practice of yoga immerses us into the self when observing our reactions to thoughts and emotions on

the mat. Today, there are an increasing number of yoga practitioners searching for the deeper meaning of life, a curiosity that naturally comes with a dedicated practice. Students are more open than ever to the rich teachings of yoga and feel the need to understand themselves and others more fully.

So how can yoga provide us with the tools we need to live in a more conscious, mindful, thoughtful and integral way, and to find deeper, more meaningful relationships with self, others and the world around us?

The conscious search

In the modern world of yoga it's common for students to be drawn more to the physical practice, known as asana. However, a sincere and genuine shift has occurred in recent years, which affirms that the physical aspect of the practice in isolation is not enough. Sure, one can learn how to do a handstand or balance





on the tips of the fingers, but without the richer teachings, the student is left feeling quite empty. The paradox of that emptiness becomes the catalyst to seek out something more. Usually that quest will involve a deeper meaning, a search for a more conscious way of living and being, underpinned by yoga's spiritual teachings.

Consciousness as mindfulness

The word consciousness takes its roots from the latin word *conscius*, meaning to know or to be aware, and it underpins the very essence of mindfulness. The practice of mindfulness means to be in a state of conscious awareness about what we say, do, think and behave, and the impact of this on our sense of self and others. Through mindfulness we gain insights into making conscious decisions – we learn what to change and why, and can follow through with action.

When we are conscious of our inner reactions we can move towards self-growth and development. This wisdom especially comes alive when it's used to move beyond the initial ego response. It is then that the spiritual teachings of yoga have the space to come to the fore. If instead the ego responds, the teaching is lost and the cycle of recurring themes in our lives continue until the lesson is finally absorbed and understood.

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The inner revolution

In today's media-dominated world, we are consistently bombarded with graphic images and catastrophic events. Is it any wonder we question how can we contribute to making a significant positive change? At a conference in Sydney last year, Ruby Wax shared, with her usual amusing and sarcastic humour, that we are daily hounded by imagery so grievous that our brains' biochemistry repeatedly responds but is unable to do anything about it.

Yet Gandhi's wisdom proclaimed the importance of not only being the desired change that we wish to see in the world, but taking that change, that inner evolution, out into the world and making real change happen.

This is precisely why yoga classes are packed each and every day, because through our practice we are experiencing

an inner shift of epic proportions. People are starting to remove the barriers they've built to hide their true identity and to block the genuine connection we have with the world around us.

The ethics of yoga

The most commonly known framework of ethics in yoga is discussed in the second chapter of *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, an ancient and highly revered yogic text. The framework is known as the yamas, codes of ethical restraints, and niyamas, codes of lifestyle observances.

Patanjali says it is our attitudes, morals and behaviours that lead us to sustained happiness. The interpretation of these codes is largely left up to the individual and will be influenced by one's belief system, morals and ethics. It is, however, made clear that when we align ourselves with these ethical precepts, we feel most at peace and connected to the aspect of the Divine that exists in us all.

In essence, the yamas and niyamas reveal a process that guides us towards a state of pureness.

Yoga with others – the yamas

The yamas highlight the need for establishing yoga through relationships and healthy interactions with others. These relationships can be disrupted when motivated by hatred, grasping attachment, intentionally wanting to harm another by word or action, or by the constant desire for excess. Our own moral compass is further compounded when trying to understand and process (with compassion, if possible) the behaviour of others – especially when it may differ so greatly to our own.

Yoga with self – the niyamas

It's natural to question who we are and where we're going in life. The niyamas remind us to be conscious about the actions that fuel our own wellbeing. To 'know thyself' comes from the 10th century Greek theory that alerts the individual to be aware of the potentially negative influence of others. Alternatively, we are encouraged to have a healthy relationship with self by establishing a

barometer that honestly measures what and why we feel what we do rather than relying on others' opinions. We achieve this by operating from a place of integrity, by mindfully integrating all aspects of who we are in our decision-making process with conscious awareness of the collective impact this has on the self and others. It is only in this self-aware state that we can establish compassionate connections with others.

Yoga as life

Moving beyond the circumference of our mats and taking the lessons and teachings from our practice into our daily lives is where our practice really bears its fruit. In the act of bringing yoga to life, we come to realise that we are in fact not separate from one another, but connected more than we realise. Through our commitment to the inner work of the self, we have the opportunity to really make a difference. And if we are brave enough to live consciously, yoga comes to life. ANH

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