Yoga is a personal matter

When we need a guide and when our own rhythm · Yoga Loznica · 14 December 2021

A guided class teaches us, and personal practice makes us independent. Here is what is good and what is weak about each, and how to combine them.



> **Note.** We practise according to our own feeling and abilities. No text, this one included, can see our body for us; both a guide and our own sense are only aids, and the responsibility for the practice stays with us. Yoga is a complement to therapy, not a substitute for it.

A yoga class usually begins with a voice: “breathe in, raise your arms, deepen the posture”. The voice is useful, but the body does not listen to it; it listens to itself. That is why every practice has to move, at some point, from other people’s words to our own sensations. This text looks at both sides without embellishment: what a guided class gives us and what it takes from us, and what is left to us when we practise alone, at our own rhythm.

> *An instructor sees our body from the outside, and only we feel it from the inside. Practice begins when those two views meet.*

What a guided class gives us

- **Knowledge and skill.** The shapes of the postures, their order, breathing and safe variations: what we can hardly discover alone and can easily learn wrongly. Passing on knowledge is the main purpose of a guided class.
- **A view from the outside.** We cannot see the alignment of our knees, pelvis or neck on ourselves. An instructor sees it at once, while alone we can miss errors in alignment for years, because we get used to a wrong shape too.
- **Frame and company.** A fixed time, the people around us and someone who leads help us to start. In a review of studies with older people, supervised exercise gave somewhat better results than unsupervised exercise; the difference was small, and in stricter checks it held only for muscle strength [1]. Alone, we easily return to what is pleasant and familiar, so the new stays undiscovered.
- **Safety.** Injuries in yoga are rare relative to the time spent practising: a national survey reported on average 0.60 injuries per 1000 hours of practice [2], against 8.1 per 1000 hours in professional football, 3.7 of them in training [3]. The comparison is not exact because injuries are defined differently, but the authors conclude that yoga is as safe as or safer than other types of exercise [2]. Injuries are mostly mild and transient, most often strains and sprains [4], more than three quarters of acute cases recovered fully [2], and in controlled trials they were no more frequent than in ordinary exercise [5]. Practising only alone, without supervision, was associated with a higher risk of both acute and chronic adverse effects [2].
- **A check on our feeling.** We often do not know the real reasons for our behaviour [6], and we describe inner experience more precisely only with training [7]. The feeling “this is how it should be” is not the same as “this is good”, so it helps to have someone who looks at us from the outside.

What a guided class takes from us

This applies to every guided class. However much an instructor tries to speak less and leave silence, a guided class remains a compromise.

- **Our own rhythm.** The room has one voice and one tempo, but as many different bodies and days, from those who slept well to those who did not. The body is not the same every day; when we choose duration and depth ourselves, the practice fits the actual state and not the plan of a class.
- **Sensations as a guide.** While we listen to what we should do, attention is with the instruction, not with the body. The sense of signals from our own body (interoception) matters for the feeling of presence and well-being. According to the authors of a review, we often misread bodily sensations, and contemplative practices may soften that tendency; for now this is more a hypothesis than a proof [8]. A meta-analysis of twenty-nine trials showed that mindfulness programmes slightly to moderately improve self-reported awareness of inner sensations [9].
- **Other people’s eyes.** We look at others and please the instructor, so the depth of a posture is measured by other people’s eyes, not by our own feeling.

- **Independence.** A theory of motor learning holds that greater learner autonomy favours learning [10]. It is a theory, not a proof, but it matches experience: what we have felt ourselves stays.
- **Persistence.** In a review of trials with older people, home programmes held up better in the long run than programmes in a centre (in the largest trial 68% against 36% after two years) [11]. In a six-month yoga trial, participants attended 77% of the classes and practised at home on 64% of the days [12].

A review of research on yoga, interoception and pain found only three studies linking those three things; its authors conclude that attention to sensations and acceptance of them is a key mechanism in many body practices, but that evidence for yoga is scarce [13]. The figure on persistence [11] rests mainly on one trial with sedentary older people, so it should not be generalised.

Two findings that change how we see instructions:

- **Deeper does not mean longer.** A review of research on stretching states that gains in flexibility after one session and after short programmes (3 to 8 weeks) mostly come from a change in sensation, that is, greater tolerance of the stretch, and not from a longer muscle [14]. The depth someone asks for therefore does not prove that the body is ready; a sensation we have learned to tolerate is not a measure, so the feeling “I can still bear it” does not mean “it is still safe”.
- **Even the science of instructions has no single answer.** For two decades it was claimed that, when learning a movement, it is better to direct attention to an external goal than to one’s own body [15]. A re-analysis of the same data, corrected for publication bias, showed that the average effects are small to negligible and depend on circumstances we do not yet know [16]. An instruction is therefore a suggestion, not a rule.

The research on instructions concerns learning movements in laboratory tasks, not yoga directly, so we read it as a call for caution, not as proof. The same holds for stretching: the review was written about muscles and stretching in general, and its authors stress that long-term effects (more than eight weeks) have not been studied [14].

How to get the most from both

A guided class is a school, personal practice is life. A good class leaves the practitioner more independent than it found them.

1. **With a guide we learn the shape, not the depth.** We ask about variations and ask someone to look at our alignment. 2. **We repeat alone, without words, at our own rhythm.** Sensation decides, the instruction only suggests. 3. **We come back for a check.** From time to time we show how we practise, not to be judged, but to get a view from the outside.

Three questions before we deepen a posture:

- Am I breathing freely, without holding my breath?

- Is the feeling a stretch and muscular work, or a sharp, stabbing pain? (Sharp pain is a reason to come out of the posture.)
- Would I stay here without the voice that guides me?

Children learn by watching and playing, so they practise with an adult, for shorter periods and without being judged. Inverted postures, breath holding and long holds are not for children to practise alone.

About the module

The module is designed as a course of eight classes about the idea that yoga is a personal matter: we practise with a guide so that we learn to practise alone.

Photograph

Photograph: Yoga Loznica.

Sources

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