

## **The madness in our method and how yoga helps**

I recently discovered that I've spent more than 7000 hours on my yoga mat. Why? What am I really trying to do in yoga? What impact does it have on my life? Friends, family and students have asked me these questions before. I've always come up with an answer of sorts but it seemed time to pause and reflect a little more deeply. It also seemed important to speak from my own practice and teaching experience rather than immediately resorting to philosophy and psychology from the texts.

Such reflection has led me to a 'story' - about human learning and our 'story-telling natures'; about the way I make sense of the world and create an identity within it; about the sub-conscious and conscious processes that take place in yoga practice and about the potential for a radical 'relearning' of the way I think, feel and inhabit my body.

Most of what I consider to be 'myself' - the way I walk, talk and think about things - is learned. As I write this sentence, I'm turning a pen around in my hand. I couldn't have done it as a baby - I began to learn this dexterity as a child. These words and the ability to write them came through imitation and conscious learning some years later. The ideas I'm trying to communicate have appeared well into my fifth decade.

Some learning occurs below the level of consciousness and is purely physical eg my posture and movement patterns. Other learning combines physical and mental aspects that begin at the conscious level and then drop into the subconscious eg driving a car. Often, learning is responsive rather than 'self-generated' - I am in an accident or contract some kind of illness - either of which may generate physical and psychological consequences. However, even in such examples, there is always my response to the event. This is simply another experience that may or may not generate a pattern or learned response.

Frequently it seems that learning evolves from an experience, idea or lesson into repeated patterns of response or explanation. Some of these become fully formed narratives or 'stories' that deeply influence my behaviour and understanding.

This process might be seen as very useful in evolutionary terms. Identifying signs of predators or food sources, and having a strategy to deal with each, is helpful. We seem hard-wired (I'm pretty sure it's not just me!) to try to 'identify patterns' in order to try to 'make sense of our circumstances', 'to know what to do'.

Examples of how my learning talents work 'for me' include my ability to drive safely along a busy road, to walk, talk and count. However, the same learning process also seems to produce less useful outcomes. My posture as an adult, may literally give me a pain in the neck! Negative attitudes, fixed ideas, even cultural beliefs (all learned or evolved) may deeply influence my sense of well-being.

It seems our talent for learning and 'story-telling' is one of our greatest assets and also a source of considerable difficulty. There is madness in our method!

Yoga directly engages with this pattern-seeking, narrative-building characteristic. Asana challenges us to attend closely to patterns of posture, movement and attitude and to cultivate what is useful in the moment. My 'must try harder story' makes little headway with deep hip openers - but can be useful in developing a long-term dedication to practice! Conversely overusing the 'just let go' narrative rarely works in arm balances but is vital in savasana.

This version of 'how yoga works' does indeed seem to correlate, at least in a simplistic way, with the teachings of Patanjali and the Buddha. Both present tales of evolution within each individual lifetime. By bringing these unseen patterns and adopted stories into awareness

we can begin to cultivate those that serve us and reject those that do not. We achieve 'discrimination' (viveka), 'awakening' (bodhi) - and thereby avoid 'suffering' (duhkha).

The more acutely we become aware of effort and balance within our bodies, the more gracefully we may perform yoga asana (and, by extension, move and hold ourselves in daily life). The more attuned we become to the patterns of reaction and association in our thoughts and emotions, the more able we are to react skilfully 'in the moment' rather than being driven unconsciously by pre-existing fears, prejudices or desires.

At its simplest, asana may lead to more ease in the body through increased mobility. At its most influential, yoga seems to change the way we inhabit our bodies and interact with the world. How far it goes depends on how deep a programme of 'pattern busting' we engage with. Something to think about for the next 7000 hours anyway!

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Ade Belcham teaches yoga in West Sussex and is Director of the Mettahouse 'Yoga Deepening' programme (a 200 / 500 hour teacher training course accredited by Yoga Alliance UK). He is currently running a 1-day workshop around the UK titled 'Stories on and off the yoga mat'. The workshop explores our 'story-telling' tendencies through yoga philosophy, psychology and physical practice. In doing so, it considers the implications for positive change through yoga asana.

To find out more contact your regional officer, visit [www.adebelchamashtanga.co.uk](http://www.adebelchamashtanga.co.uk) or e-mail [ade@mettahouse.co.uk](mailto:ade@mettahouse.co.uk)

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