

YOGA AND YOGA AND YOGA....

Historically the yogi was an outcast – the rebel and the dissident shunned by society. Times have changed: yoga is mainstream and socially acceptable. One long-termer remarked how strange this change was: it used to be that yoga was for hippies and drop-outs, the freaks of society – and now it's the bankers and the lawyers who are practicing (not that there is anything especially wrong with banking and law firms – or is there?).

An example of this change is a new book with the title *Slim Calm Sexy Yoga*. Its author – Tara Stiles – is a 30 year old New York entrepreneur who boasts of her lack of teaching lineage and is a personal yoga instructor to Deepak Chopra. An advert for the book quotes "I lost 35 pounds and went from a size 8 to a size double zero!" That is what it's about: fat burning, smooth skin, better orgasms. One commentator proposed different titles: *Smart Relaxed Free Yoga* or *Inspired Intelligent Amazing Yoga*. Unfortunately Ms. Stiles decided that her title was better thereby ignoring that premise in yoga of self-acceptance which is somewhat contradicted by her publicity.

She certainly divides opinion: one class participant said that it was a demonstration of her athletic prowess but others have talked about how she makes yoga accessible and that she is personally approachable: a sign of different strokes for different folks. This is a reminder of that old parable about a beautiful person: to the lover an object of desire – to the hermit a distraction – and to the wolf a good meal. But Ms Stiles' claim to be 'anti-establishment' (she talks of being "the yoga rebel") is slightly ridiculous because she is clearly part of the establishment: she puffs out publicity that is snapped up by major publications (like *Vanity Fair* and *New York Times*) and her yoga career is backed by a large modelling company.

In contrast there is another recent publication which attempts to establish the principle of questioning within practice: that doesn't present neatly packaged answers but offers up queries. It's called *Yoga 2.0 – mala 1: shamanic echoes* and is a wonderful read: an entertaining and provocative study of the modern yoga situation. The authors – Matthew Remski and Scott Petrie – have been practicing for a long time (unlike Ms Stiles) and are involved in discussions about meanings of practice. They write of "yoga...something that humans simply do, like music or art or physics or baseball, for better or worse, to express ourselves, learn to live more deeply and to ply with grace the uncertain waves of life". And instead of dogmatic assumptions: "both of us settled on yoga when we experience the pleasure of inquiry eroding dogma". Such an important pleasure and so easily forgotten because it's safer to stay inside.

Their approach starts at the beginning: how the human species evolved from having large jaws to having large brains – "over countless generations we transformed from beings who physically chew all day to beings who mentally chew all day as we ruminate on how to experience more sweetness". Humans went from eaters of berries to seekers of honey with the desire of "there is something better than what I have". Humans go from hunters ("the earliest forms of pranayama may have developed as a way of increasing the power and accuracy of his blowgun") to agriculturalists to covering the world with industries. And what might the yogi do in these circumstances....

“A family member tells you over dinner that there is a catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and that it has been caused by global human consumption patterns that drive an ever-more reckless extraction industry which has been both grossly mismanaged and cynically leveraged to foster economic and environmental imbalance to line the pockets of oligarchs. Having heard quite enough, you would rise from the table with your dinner half-eaten, put your fork in your back pocket, and walk out the front door. You would walk to the nearest highway and begin hitching to New Orleans. Between rides you may shriek at passing cars to stop driving, or to at least stop driving with one passenger only. The paradox of hitchhiking and yelling at cars wouldn't bother you in the least: after all, you need to go as fast as you can, and it is also true that your means of transportation is destructive. The fact that many contradictory things are true does not cause internal doubt but rather further enflames your desire for justice. You would eat and drink whatever you could find and whatever you needed. You would go directly to the beaches and begin cleaning the sea birds. If the oil company executives came to the beach for a photo-op you would murder them all with your fork. You may be shot dead on the spot. If you avoid being shot, your rage would be immediately and completely satisfied, and without a shred of guilt or misgiving, you would return to bathing the birds. This is actually the yogic story of Rudra, wrathful aspect of Shiva, with his trident (your fork) protecting the world's defenceless creatures with blood-curdling war-shrieks. The modern yogi, typically very uncomfortable with this role, must learn creative ways to avoid aiding and abetting the abhorrent behaviour he witnesses in the world as he sits behind a veil of self-protective 'peace', munching his organic vegan power bars”

That is one option (or we could read *Slim Calm Sexy Yoga*). Another option is a mapping of what it means to be human: “this is the beginning of modern consciousness, characterised by comparison, consideration, observation, the capacity for emotional detachment, ambivalence and an intense complexity that yoga will seek for generations to both develop and unravel. The jewel of modern consciousness is compassion. But its worms will become confusion, world-view overload, self-doubt and paralysing narcissism. The purpose of yoga will be to dig carefully through the worms to extract the jewel”.

But there is so much stuff surrounding us that making that connection has become a great challenge: “a lioness in the midst of chasing an antelope will never think ‘I hope I do this correctly, I wonder if I am extending my shoulders far enough in my stride, I hope this goes better than yesterday when I missed the antelope and looked inadequate before the rest of the pride because when that happens I feel lethargic for days...and hmmm am I getting fat?’.....The yogi hunts experience and connection and the exhilaration of her chase stills all self-consciousness“. But instead of stillness what virtually all of us experience is “our bodies become like what they used to say about Victorian children: they should be seen and not heard”.

Has yoga become another contemporary consumer commodity (it's now available on Wii and Sony Playstation – “technologies accomplish a stunning paradox of disembodied embodiment”)? Or are there other possibilities? These are the questions that probably won't be answered in *Slim Calm Sexy Yoga* – but might be perhaps bought up in a

reading of *Yoga 2.0*. This is now available as an ebook (see below for link) and of course there is space for continuing discussion of which this piece is merely a small part.

Keep contemplating being and doing....

Many thanks to Matthew Remski and Scott Petrie for their book – it's available at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B004NSV9DM> - and you can contact them at www.renaissanceyoga.ca and www.yocoto.org.

Thanks to blogs at www.yogadork.com and www.namasteph.com. For more details on Tara Stiles there is an interview at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/nyregion/23stretch.html?_r=3&pagewanted=1 and her website is www.tarastiles.com. And recent article of interest from Matthew Remski is available at <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2011/02/yoga-is-performance-art/>. Matthew will be speaking in London on Tuesday 19 April 2.30pm at Globe House Yoga Studio (the Tanneries beside 20 Crucifix Lane SE1).

Happy hunting....

Norman Blair
26 February 2011

www.yogawithnorman.co.uk

Norman108@clara.co.uk – please feel free to distribute and to comment....

All quotes from *Yoga 2.0*.