

STRETCHING...

There is this story that will be familiar: those men and that elephant. The Jain version of this story says that six blind men were asked to determine what an elephant looked like by feeling different parts of the elephant's body. The blind man who feels a leg says the elephant is like a pillar; the one who feels the tail says the elephant is like a rope; the one who feels the trunk says the elephant is like a tree branch; the one who feels the ear says the elephant is like a hand fan; the one who feels the belly says the elephant is like a wall; and the one who feels the tusk says the elephant is like a solid pipe.

What is the moral of this tale? That having different maps can help us understand this reality. That the more maps we are manipulating, perhaps the deeper our understanding of this stuff can go. Of course there is also the danger of using too many maps and so getting completely lost.

Sometimes when we are involved in this business of stretching, we lose the smiling. It gets too serious – sure, we have to be sincere and clear hearted but there is a need to be light and be able to laugh. Too often too many books on yoga/transformation are both overly serious and also not that well written. Perhaps the most famous light-hearted read is that *Eat, Pray, Love* which personally I enjoyed. A less well-known version is *Solitude*. It is the male version of that woman eating and praying and loving – and there are not that many jokes per page. A man decides to deliberately abandon himself on a remote island off the coast of Patagonia for a whole year. It is just himself and his hopes and his fears and his dreams and an endless array of the life that is all around him. I liked it...

There is the wonderful *Hell-Bent* that I have written about before: that is highly recommended. There is also *Poser* that I enjoyed – a woman's journey through asana and life. And now I have just consumed Neal Pollock's *Stretch*. I must admit that there were doubts. A tattered copy had been sitting on my teacher's books to borrow shelf for several months. Was I being put off by a subtitle that declared: "The unlikely making of a yoga dude"? Or this back cover quote: "the hilarious true account of an overweight, balding, sceptical guy's unexpected transformation into a healthy, blissful yoga fiend"? Eventually on the mission to find a light-hearted yoga read, I decided to give it a go.

It is good to try the unexpected – because to my surprise this is a great book. He writes sharply and with a wonderful sense of humour: "this, in yoga terms, is called samadhi, the divine perception of universal consciousness, though the realisation may have come to me because I was in the middle of a five day drug bender". He becomes a fan of Richard Freeman (the man has good taste) and recounts his attempts to bring the Boulder Guru down to earth while on retreat in Thailand. Their first meeting is at some frighteningly large American yoga conference. Neal is late to the ashtanga self-practice class and asks the teacher (who is Richard) what he should do. The reply is perfect: "It's a great opportunity to do nothing".

At that Thailand retreat there is this exchange: "Richard said... 'you have to re-create and re-understand the sutras constantly. Even when you reach the highest state, you have to practice continually'. For the past two weeks, Richard had been saying that 'yoga ruins your life'. I was beginning to understand what he meant. It was a lot of fucking work".

Neal writes with honesty and clarity: about his Bikram experience ("my brain felt scrambled – Bikram had fucked with my head...the muscles in my left bicep and right calf wouldn't stop twitching") – and his own injuries. As he becomes proficient in

practicing ashtanga, he begins to explore the waters of what is known in the trade as 'dropping back'. In response his body rebels and he reaches the sensible conclusion: "I vowed to cut that out of my practice".

Amongst the comedy – and there are a fair few funny lines – there are nuggets of wisdom. As another addition to the groaning shelves of yoga books, I happily recommend *Stretch* – and hallelujah it is written well. At the end he is taking steps into teaching: "When I'd started practicing yoga seven years ago at the Lance Armstrong 24-Hour Fitness in Northeast Austin, I had stick arms, a donut belly and a really bad attitude. I definitely didn't think I would end up teaching other people... Sure, I was a little drunk and more than a little stoned, when I said that yoga was my calling... I was humbled by everything my body could do, and even more humbled by everything it couldn't. I saw the world more clearly than ever before. Admittedly, that wasn't very clear at all, but occasionally, surprisingly, there was an open spot in the fog".

Elizabeth Gilbert *Eat, Pray, Love*

Robert Kull *Solitude*

Benjamin Lorr *Hell-Bent*

Claire Dederer *Poser*

Neal Pollack *Stretch*

Norman Blair

www.yogawithnorman.co.uk

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