

MEN IN YOGA

(©Hamish Kenworthy 2013)

Yoga is done by and is for flexible women, right? Wrong. Women have made the business of yoga a viable one in the western world over the last fifty years, give or take a decade, but historically it was men who practiced the ancient art.

Men in Yoga

One of the first poses one learns in yoga is Warrior. Later one learns Warrior 2 and Warrior 3. Thunderbolt too. Hero's pose. The list goes on. These are not actions simply for flexible women. Their antecedents are the training actions for soldiers. Some styles of yoga, such as power vinyasa taught at Apollo Power Yoga, are tremendous strength and conditioning exercises.

When one lists some of the great yoga masters and teachers who have brought the practice to the western world one finds many men. B K S Iyengar. Pattabhi Jois. T K V Desikachar. T Krishnamacharya. Baron Baptiste. Bryan Kest. John Friend. David Life. Certainly, there are great women yoga teachers and pioneers but men have been at the forefront of the practice with equal if not greater significance. Before yoga came to the west, women were, for many centuries, excluded from the practice.

One of the most influential yoga texts is the *Bhagavad Gita*. In this book the young prince Arjuna consults his charioteer, Lord Krishna, about the uncertainties he is experiencing on the eve of battle. The text traverses notions of fear and being courageous in the face of fear, of tapping one's internal resources of power and of selfless service, along with other themes.

Yoga and Male Sport

Gentlemen, put away your stereotypes and open your minds to the limitless potential that the practice of yoga has for you. My teacher, Baron Baptiste, worked on the coaching staff of the Philadelphia Eagles National Football League franchise for a number of years seeking to confer upon the players long, lean, functional strength. He sought to improve the players' resistance to soft tissue injuries, enhance their ability to absorb impact in the body through joint mobility and muscle flexibility, and to increase the athleticism of sportsmen carrying significant muscle mass. Key elements of the practice used by Baptiste and at Apollo Power Yoga are strong breath, steady gaze and core stability.

Many sporting codes have embraced yoga as a means of off-season strength and conditioning and as a means of re-aligning and restoring players' bodies after hard training or matches. Teams in the Super XV, the Australian Football League and the National Football League all use yoga as an integral part of their physical and mental preparation. Ian "Thorpedo" Thorpe, Novak Djokovic and Kareem Abdul Jabbar are all yoga practitioners.

Benefits of Yoga for Men

Quite apart from the physical benefits of yoga, the mental benefits are of great value. By placing one in a stressful position (thunderbolt with prayer and twist is not exactly gentle stretching on the floor) yoga asks the practitioner to learn to relax with what is and to filter one's thoughts and reactions. Instead of fleeing from or struggling with the pose the practitioner firms their muscles

where they need to for stability, relaxes where they can to preserve strength and stay poised and connected with a strong, calming flow of breath. These tools for equanimity can be used not just on the yoga mat but in any walk of life. The term “Mantra” comes to mind.

Men’s bodies tend to need yoga. Jobs which either see men deskbound or highly active in trades both tend to have the effect of tightening up the hips, constricting the chest and rounding the spine. Men’s greater muscle mass and imbalances associated with that cry out for the actions of a yoga practice that will align their bodies for better posture and physical health. Yoga practice improves the nervous system and relieves stress. Yoga enhances breathing. These things combined give greater overall health and can have immediate benefits simply in terms of practitioners getting a better night’s sleep.

Getting Past Competition

Men tend to approach their activities in a competitive way and want to be successful in the sense of being better than others at that activity. That competitiveness does not serve the yoga practitioner well. Try easy rather than trying hard. Concentrate on your breath and your body rather than what other people – with completely different DNA and life histories from you – are doing. Let go of the need to be the winner and simply let yoga be good for you.

Finally, some men feel reluctant to step into a yoga room because of how they will look. The answer is that no one else in the room is looking or judging. Yoga is non-competitive and practitioners are encouraged to set their eyes at the wall, or the ceiling or the floor, depending on the pose, and concentrate in upon themselves. In yoga we are not concerned with how it looks so much as how it feels. And it feels great! Yoga is not just for women nor is it just for men. Every body was made for yoga and every body can participate in some form of yoga practice.

Apollo Power Yoga has a practice for everyone, whether the fun and freedom of the All Levels classes, the foundational strength and enjoyment of the Basics classes, the music-driven rhythm of the Groove classes or the deep relaxation and opening of the Restore classes. Get along, give the practice a go and have fun.