



Who teaches the teachers?

You love yoga. You'd like to pass on your passion. But beware — you are about to enter a minefield. Words & photos: Chico Kidd

I'm quite evangelical about yoga. I will hold forth about its benefits at the drop of a hat, and I'm certainly not above suggesting asanas that I know can be beneficial for various conditions — back or leg pain, stiff hamstrings — to my friends. After some seven years or so of practice, I've also reached the stage (one that many practitioners reach) of thinking about training to teach yoga.

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And this is where we run up against a big obstacle. Recent attempts at regulation notwithstanding, it is still awfully confusing. The British Wheel's course lasts two years. When I spoke to David Life earlier this year he told me that Jivamukti teachers train for 300 hours, then 800, and then can move on to further study. Of course it seems to me that in many ways the longer the training, the better, as it is one of those things that you carry on learning forever.

But I, for one, sadly can't see myself fitting in an intensive course while working full-time. And there must be a lot of people like me, and some of them will be tempted by the apparent "quick fix" of shorter courses that are advertised. Learn to be a teacher in a weekend? Sounds great, but it's not much different from the government deciding that every student has to have straight As and dumbing down all the study courses so that they will. Unfortunately the exam candidates then have no guarantee that their qualifi-

cation will be acceptable to any prospective employer — or, for the yoga teacher, student, who understandably doesn't want to learn yoga from someone with the equivalent of half a GCSE. (Not everyone is cut out to be a teacher, anyway. A BWY teacher-trainer I know regularly despairs that some students seem to lack any understanding of how to put together a lesson, let alone impart it to anybody.)

So where does this leave the prospective trainee yoga teacher? Well, it depends in one sense on how she views yoga. In the west there is a long tradition of deep suspicion about anything spiritual, and so a lot of people have got around this by pretending that yoga is just another form of exercise. Not that there is anything wrong with going to the gym to do your yoga class — it was where I was introduced to yoga myself — but it can be a one-dimensional exercise (no pun intended). This is by no means the fault of the teacher, who may be more than willing to introduce his class to

more than just asanas; but is likely to be constrained by time as much as by the gym-bunny mentality that is more interested in competing with the student on the next mat than achieving inner peace. (As Yogi Bhajan said, "No-one wants to save their soul; all they want to do is save face.") But this is missing the point.

Indeed, it was partly as a reaction to the straitjacket of the fitness industry that the Independent Yoga Network (IYN) was set up. The Register of Exercise Professionals (REPS) instituted a National Occupational Standard for Yoga, a regulation that applies to teaching fitness regimes at NVQ Level 3 — implying that it viewed yoga as fundamentally little different from aerobics and step classes. The IYN was also concerned that this move implied that the fitness industry thought it had some kind of moral right to say who could and could not teach yoga; more, that it had "a higher perspective on yoga than yogis themselves".

Unfortunately one of the things that

the west is really, really good at is putting things into categories. Look no further than the modern mania for lists, if you want any further proof! But trying to squeeze something as encompassing as yoga into any category is a bit like trying to hide an alligator under the bed. No matter how hard you try, there's always a bit poking out.

The IYN saw, crucially, that the National Occupational Standard is not only quite inappropriate, but that it risks compromising yoga's essential independence, and gives the wrong message to the public about the real nature of yoga: saying, in effect, that it's actually OK to ignore all that "eastern mumbo-jumbo" and carry on twisting yourself into a pretzel just because you can. Which would be a serious setback as yoga, in its entirety, is at last moving into the mainstream of western culture. And the next generation of teachers deserves a clear vision and clear advice on how to bring this about.

The IYN's viewpoint

[This initiative] "rests on an inadequate consideration of the transformational element in Yoga education. It underestimates just how radical the transformation of the human being that Yoga education promises is and how it is of a wholly different order from the undeniably beneficial transformations in an individual's confidence, social integration and so on that come from gaining a university degree or becoming literate or acquiring skills in plumbing.

"Yoga education, if successful, re-orientates one's whole being, not only at the surface but in the very depths." (Peter Yates)

"The purpose of the IYN is to bring together established, reputable, and dedicated yoga teacher-training organisations in order to establish safe working standards for yoga teachers without putting them into a straitjacket of conformity which can only restrict their ability to be good yogis. I think everyone will agree that training standards are necessary and desirable as long as they do not restrict the ability to perform the task in a caring, holistic, and spiritual manner. 'Times are a-changing', and we must make sure that they change for the better." (Peter White)

"Yoga cannot be guided, regulated, from ignorance. Neither from ignorance of the integrity of the human body; nor from ignorance of the spiritual heart of yoga and being human. Therefore it is clear that the yoga community itself, must meet this challenge with clarity, conviction and commitment." (Godfrey Devereaux)

For further details of the debates about the future of yoga and the history of the IYN and The Yoga Register see www.independentyoganetwork.org.

Thanks to Chris Harrison for letting me take pictures in her class

