

What Buddhism Can Give to Modern Yoga: An Interview with Shinzen Young

Shinzen Young became fascinated with Asian culture while a teenager in Los Angeles. Later he enrolled in the Ph.D. program in Buddhist Studies at the University of Wisconsin. Eventually, he went to Asia and did extensive monastic training in each of the three major Buddhist meditative traditions: Vajrayana, Zen, and Vipassana. For the past 30 years, Shinzen has been teaching his innovative version of Vipassana in the US, which links western technological science with Eastern internal science. He was recently awarded an honorary doctorate by the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. Shinzen is the founder of Vipassana Support International.

Rick Colella is the founder and owner of Insight Yoga studio in Pasadena, CA. A long-time student of Shinzen Young, Rick has been teaching Insight Yoga—Vipassana techniques within asana practice—for the past 7 years. For more information, visit www.insightyoga.com.

Rick Colella: In a recent talk, you mentioned how a person can actually realize the full extent of classical yoga as formulated by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras by using Buddhist Vipassana techniques in asana practice. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Shinzen Young: If you look upon yoga from the perspective of the Yoga Sutras, then what is ordinarily taught in a yoga class is only two of the eight limbs – Asana and Pranayama. Yama and Niyama, the ethical basis of yoga and the virtuous spiritual customs of India are rarely mentioned. Pratyahara, the restraint of the senses is sometimes given some mention in the last five minutes of class, for instance, in savasana a teacher might say withdraw from everything, relax and let go of all sensory experience, but Dharana (initial level concentration), Dhyana (mid-level concentration), and Samadhi (absolute concentration) are not usually explicitly mentioned. The bulk of what is taught as “yoga” is asana and pranayama. So although most yoga teachers in some way give lip service to the yoga sutras, in point of fact, they don’t emphasize the classic goal of yoga as something realistically attainable. But that goal is attainable! The classic goal of yoga is Samadhi, the ability to take any object, any time, and pour so much concentration on it that you merge with it and both you and it disappear into an experience that transcends time and space.

There are two ways to look upon the pranayama and asanas that constitute most of what is taught in modern yoga. They may be looked upon as exercises to prepare the body for the long periods of intense sitting that may be required to attain Samadhi. On the other hand, they may be looked upon as a venue within which you cultivate intense concentration in lieu of those long periods of formal sitting practice. The former point of view would seem to be implied in the yoga sutras themselves. If we take this point of view, then clearly, modern yoga, although spectacularly effective in creating health and vitality, is failing dismally to achieve its ultimate goal because very few students of yoga ever go on to do intense sitting practice. If we take the second point of view, that the yoga session itself is the venue for developing the inner limbs of the Yoga Sutras, then a little formal training in Mindfulness technique can go a long way towards facilitating that goal.

Most yoga teachers would probably say that while doing asanas and pranayama their students are developing Dharana, Dyana, and Samadhi. To which, I would say that the kind of concentration power that Patanjali is talking about is utterly extraordinary and although people develop a certain amount of concentration when they do yoga and focus on the breath or focus on alignment, this typically doesn't begin to reach the industrial strength of intensity that Patanjali is asking for. It's just a temporary state of light focus that dissipates as soon as the workout is over. **It's not the earth-shaking, paradigm-shifting dissolution into cessation that is the goal of classical yoga.**

RC: So how might we change the situation?

SY: Mindfulness from the Buddhist tradition can be very useful here, because Mindfulness gives the yogi systematic formal focusing techniques that they can use during the yoga practice to assure that the development of concentration is high enough to achieve Samadhi in Patanjali's sense of the word. This is what you are trying to develop with Insight Yoga.

In this way of working, the body sensations that occur during the yoga session are the objects with which one attempts to attain Samadhi. The asanas are actually the ideal venue to penetrate the materiality of the body. By systematically noting types of sensations in the body, locations of sensations in the body, or aspects of sensation like *solidity*, *restfulness*, *flow*, and *vanishing*, then, eventually, with time, you will come to Samadhi on your asana while you're doing it.

How will you know that you've achieved Samadhi on the asana? First the sense of a physical body will break up into a lot of waves and vibrations. Then those waves and vibrations will die away into Cessation. Nirodha. Mind, body and surrounding scene collapse into a dimensionless point. In other words, you have had such a complete experience of the body sensations of the asana that there's no time to fixate those sensations into a thing called a body. With that, you have achieved the perfection of the posture internally, whatever it may look like externally. You've achieved perfection of the posture because the posture has become not somewhat formless, but *literally* formless, because through the asana, the body has dropped into the unborn state. After the yoga practice, the perception of body and mind will of course return, but your paradigm will have permanently shifted.

RC: Is there a gift that Yoga could give to Buddhism?

SY: There are some Buddhist teachers who have this weird prejudice, that if you're doing Buddhist practice you shouldn't mix yoga in with it. But I think that bringing yoga sessions into Buddhist retreats will greatly facilitate the Buddhist practice.

There are four reasons for this. First, yoga postures tend to induce pleasant sensations and this gives meditators something interesting and pleasant to focus on in the body. I like to have something pleasant and fun at retreats so that the practice doesn't become a grim endurance exercise. Second, the yoga postures tend to produce energy flow states in the body and this helps the meditator get insight into what we in Buddhism call *anicca* or impermanence. Third, when mindfulness meditators work with body sensation, it is

desirable to be able to contact sensation anywhere in the body. The yoga postures induce sensation over the whole body making it easier to contact sensation globally through the body and facilitating the detection of the more subtle levels of sensation that often go unnoticed. Finally, on a purely physical level, the yoga increases health and vitality and prepares the body for periods of formal sitting practice. So Buddhist meditators that practice yoga will live longer, have more energy, and be able to sit more comfortably and therefore be more likely to achieve enlightenment.