

YOGI WRITINGS - Kirk Kernen

Brenda asked me if I would be interested in writing a column for this Newsletter. I think she wanted my unique perspective on taking yoga classes. Part of what makes me unique is the simple fact that I am male. Since I began taking level 2-3 classes at Valley Yoga in October, 2008, I am usually the only man in a studio of women. Perhaps I can provide some insight as to why yoga is less popular with men than women. Also, I am somewhat unique in that I have been lifting weights in the gym for over 25 years. I was a weight-room instructor with the Santa Barbara YMCA for 7 years, and still work hard to maintain muscle mass and ward off the dreaded paunch of middle age. As such, I find certain yoga poses particularly challenging.

I am no newcomer to yoga. I took my first yoga classes in the mid-1980s, but never had the heart or discipline to stick to a yoga regimen for any period of time. After a month or two of classes, I would quit. Then years would pass before I would find my way into a yoga studio again. This time, however, I am not going to abandon my practice. At the age of 47, I finally understand how yoga is essential to my holistic health and well-being.

But what took me so long to get it? To begin with, there still exists a widespread perception by male America that yoga is not macho. I have been kidded by my friends and co-workers about being a sensitive new age man getting in touch with my inner female. As a younger man, this kind of jibe probably bothered me more than it should. Now, my retort is a challenge: If you think yoga is for sissies, then come to just one class with me! Of course, I have never had a taker. I tell them that doing a 1 ½ hour vinyasa flow class with Brenda is much harder for me than a 1 ½ hour workout at In-Shape City. It is not even close. But thanks to yoga, I have increased my "core strength." My newfound

suppleness and power radiates from the inner core of my body and flows outward to the tips of my fingers and toes. I do not think it possible to acquire this kind of strength by any other means—certainly not from bench presses, bicep curls, leg squats, or tricep extensions. Inevitably, yoga will strike the collective American male psyche as a manly, irreplaceable means to achieve peak physical condition. It just makes too much sense.

Yet there is a more deep-rooted reason why men resist yoga. Guys are more rigid and mechanical in their movements than women. That most guys would want to avoid at



all costs the stretching and bending demanded by yoga is obvious. But even greater than the physical hardship is the emotional discomfort that yoga can stir in the beginner's heart. Yoga unleashes the body's energy in unexpected ways. Every chakra, before it opens, threatens a Pandora's box of pain. Guys sometimes have trouble expressing their feelings (have you noticed?). If life's stresses and frustrations have no other outlet, they get "liberated" and surge through the body during yoga. He must summon the faith and fortitude to persevere through this initial storm of emotional resistance. Otherwise, he will quit soon after he begins. As I said before, doing yoga is sweat and travail for me. I struggle and

require discipline each time to get myself to class. But it is definitely getting easier; the more I come, the easier it gets. A few of my fellow students tell me they can not wait to start class, and experience the release and joy that yoga brings. I hope to know this joy one day.

Did I mention that I am just beginning to learn what yoga is? Especially over the last few months, I have really begun to absorb on a deeper level what Brenda is trying to teach us. To demonstrate the remarkable progress I have made, I am going to quote snippets of Brenda's instructions in recent classes (and, in parenthesis, my inner response to her).

"Left inner thigh rolls to the ceiling. Right side of the pubic bone deepens. The tail-bone curls under and lifts the pelvic floor and connects to lift the sternum." (Huh?)

"Keep your back leg strong, with your hips facing the far wall and your chest opening toward the ocean." (Why is everybody else turned the other way?)

"Take the psoas deeper toward the spine." (Psoas? Do guys have a psoas?)

At about the time I confirmed that I indeed possess a psoas (a long muscle attaching the vertebrae of the lower back to the head of the femur), I also discovered that the women of yoga are a little different from the women I meet outside the studio. For example, if I wanted to compliment an attractive woman in yoga class, I would never say, "You have a beautiful smile," or "I love the way your eyes light up when you laugh." Instead I would say, "That was a wonderfully balanced pose. Your psoas is just exquisite!"

Yoga enlightens us in so many ways!

Photo by Alicia Buss