



Back on the mat

Confessions of a lapsed yoga practitioner

By Michael Hollingworth

What if, after 10 years of doing yoga two to four hours a day, seven days a week, and teaching all you knew, you woke up one morning and heard an inner voice say, “Actually I don’t care whether people learn to stand on their head or tie their legs in lotus”?

And what if you took an honest look – and saw that your own practice was becoming more and more ragged, infrequent, and unenthusiastic, even completely absent?

Now what?

If you believed your integrity as a yoga teacher was grounded in teaching from your own practice, your first step would be to stop teaching. Stop preaching what you’re not practising.

Then you might take a break from yoga, just a short break, to “think about it all”.

That’s what I did – but the break lasted for 20 years. I had given up two careers for the love of yoga, taught full-

time for six years, and then stopped dead. How could that happen?

The Course in Miracles says, “You are never upset for the reason you think.” So the truth is, I don’t know why I stopped. However, while my confessions are only of passing interest, it may be useful to explore some factors that could stop practitioners persisting and experiencing the profound true value of yoga.

What happened?

With the benefit of 25 years’ hindsight (if that’s a benefit? maybe I just forgot and am making it all up), these may have been factors:

- I was frustrated at a lack of progress, particularly with the advanced poses I loved, such as back bends and balances.
- I no longer had a teacher, and apparently had forgotten the huge shifts in learning from Dona Holleman and BKS Iyengar. Traditionally, the guru provided wisdom, an intense

source of inspiration, a strong tradition, and a focus. In contrast, I was now doing it all on my own.

- I was seduced by the idea of more ‘free form’ activity, especially running.
- I wanted to get back to the world of business and being a wordsmith (having previously been a journalist, a student of literature, and a translator).
- I was (am) rebellious.

Looking back, what emerges as the strongest element is the lack of a teacher. Having a teacher has been the core of the yoga tradition for 3,000 years.

Why I’m back

Perhaps one’s sixtieth birthday provides a wake-up call: it is time to attend to unfinished business (or there won’t be time). I saw that my affair with yoga was unfinished.

Fifteen years’ running was exhilarating but had punished my feet, ankles, and lower back. Cycling was

easier, but cars are fast and harder than flesh. Swimming expanded the lungs but the view of a pool floor can become tiresome. Pilates was intriguing and invigorating but where was the stillness? Cross-country skiing was the most demanding of cardiovascular workouts, in exquisite empty landscapes, but the snow was far away and the season short.

When I began to practise again, the asanas were hard – but not forgotten. A major support was attending the led classes of my ex-partner, Pixie Lillas, who has taught in the same studio for 28 years, continuing to deepen her mastery of Iyengar yoga.

I've also returned to Pune, 29 years after my previous two-month stay at the Iyengar Institute. It is much more crowded, still demanding, and still able to push a western body forward on the path.

The asanas are delivering once more the exhilaration, that sense of clarity, balance, expansion. The body resists a full return to iconic back bends (as in Kapotasana, Viparita Chakrasana), lacks the flexibility for full forward bends (Kurmasana, Yoganidrasana) or

the strength and twist needed for balancing, such as Parsva Bakasana. But life has returned to the spine and to the inner body.

Most rewarding has been the rediscovery – actually the brand new discovery – of pranayama; what Rodney Yee calls “the infinite mystery of the breath”, the daily opportunity to “drop into a place of delight and wonder.

Lessons I may have learned

The following exhortations, or realisations, are addressed more to me than to any aspiring practitioner or teacher. I just hope I am listening.

1. Keep learning. Find a teacher, read books, listen to others, and above all observe your own body, mind, and breath. One day every session, every asana, will teach you something new.
2. Be deeply grateful for the opportunity to do yoga. As popular as it may have become, few people are privileged to taste deeply of its real nectar. Gratitude also centres you in the moment and deepens your experience and your practice.

3. Don't allow setbacks or barriers to stop you. What can you learn from an injury, a sickness, a distraction? How can you practise in a simpler way?

4. Be patient. You may not be able to reach full extension or flexion or torsion. Explore and learn from your limits. But don't give up. Keep your fire and ambition.

5. Don't take yourself too seriously.

Finally, if you do stop practising, don't indulge in blame or self-flagellation. That's putting out the fire with kerosene.

Just get back on the mat. And keep breathing. Deeply.

Michael Hollingworth learnt Iyengar yoga from Dona Holleman in Italy, where he lived for 10 years. His life has more twists and turns than asanas. He began as a journalist, studied literature in Canberra and Italy, and has worked as a translator, tourist guide, public relations consultant and trainer. He is now a facilitator of leadership and change management programs.