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STYLE

FEATURES

Health: Yoga Madness

We have surely become a nation of devotees with mats. Everyone's breathing, meditating, wearing looser clothing and treating others with reverence. Celebrities led the way, no surprise. Early on, Sting and his wife, Trudie Styler, made yoga-based Tantric sex a household technique. Then, on *Oprah*, Madonna mentioned that she'd discovered yoga, and classes around the country instantly filled.

But to what are we devoting ourselves? Have we merely traded in our running shoes, mountain bikes or Rollerblades for the latest fad? Is it possible that we enjoy a placebo effect from our devotion of the moment? When I hear of classes like Disco Yoga and Ei Ei Yoga for kids, I find myself wondering.

I turned to Mary Dunn, the senior teacher at the Iyengar Yoga Institute of New York, known for maintaining a purist tradition, to discuss this typically American phenomenon. I had two questions: Is it necessarily bad to be a half-baked fanatic? And what are we missing by jumping on the bandwagon without the intention of staying on for the whole ride, or even knowing the destination?

We talked about what happens to a discipline like yoga when it becomes...McYoga. "If all you get is 'That was a great workout,' that's just the tip of the iceberg," says Dunn.

But even a superficial practice can provide benefits. Dunn enumerates: "Improved posture (which profoundly influences how you look and feel), balance, stretching, strengthening, relaxation, pain relief, protection from injury, and support for other sports you engage in."

What the less-than-serious student or teacher may miss are the psychological, emotional and spiritual rewards of yoga's higher levels.

"Yoga is a practical thing," Dunn observes. "By doing it, we learn to stand on our own two feet. This means both standing up and handling the physical and psychological weight within oneself. *Yoga* means 'to link,'" she adds. "Not just body, mind and spirit, but also left leg to right leg, physiological to intellectual. It's a scientific exploration of yourself, and you are the scientist. Yoga teaches a relentless focus on reality, going from your center outward. A good class emphasizes this focus and provides practical revelations, too, so people really learn how to relax -- around the eyes, for example.

"Then," says Dunn, as if saving the most fragile and challenging benefit for last, "yoga helps us to understand that we are about so much more than our appearance, our job, our external circumstances. Yoga teaches us how to live in line with our core values effectively and with few obstructions in our path, whether it's how to stretch our legs or how to relate within our family." Hmm...maybe I'm not too busy after all.

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