

Noncommittal Students:

When and how can you get your students to commit to one practice—and should you even try?

By Sara Avant Stover

Walk down the street and witness the shapes and sizes of pedestrians, the colors and makes of passing cars, and the dazzling array of merchandise in shop windows. Abundance bombards us from every angle.

This smorgasbord of options also seeps into yoga. Ashtanga, Anusara, Bikram, Iyengar, Sivananda—the list goes on.

At a certain point you need to make some important decisions. Just as you determined whether or not you would be a vegetarian, how you would earn a living, or in what neighborhood you'd live, must you also settle on one style of yoga?

Does dabbling in a medley of teachings support your journey to fullness or dilute it? At what point does all this shopping around stop making you more savvy and start making you more confused?

The Power of Diversity

Stephanie Snyder, a yoga instructor in San Francisco, finds cross-disciplinary studies beneficial.

"Adding as many tools as I can from various styles enables me to be of utmost service to my students," she explains. "This is my primary purpose as a teacher."

World-renowned Ashtanga yoga instructor David Swenson also appreciates fresh perspectives.

"It is best for students to pursue whatever approach inspires them to practice," he says. "One does not have to take a vow of practicing only one method. Just as a musician may wish to learn more than one instrument, follow that which makes the heart sing and brings joy into life."

Confronting Confusion

Such exploration can, however, unearth contradictory information and generate confusion.

"Confusion is not a bad thing," Swenson persuades. "There is life in the questions."

Snyder agrees. "A profound and beautiful gift of this practice of yoga is questioning. I ask students to find out what is true for them. This applies to asana as much as to every other facet of our lives."

Instructor to the *Yoga Journal* staff Sarana Miller reveals how she resolved conflicting approaches in her own practice.

"I have studied both Forrest Yoga and Anusara Yoga," she says. "These styles have different views on shoulder placement, and this was confusing for me. I tried the different styles with my students and found that some shoulders worked better with one method and some with the other. If the method I showed them did not work, I looked at their individual bodies and helped them find a shoulder placement that felt comfortable."

Digging the Well Deep

For John Scott, an Ashtanga teacher who teaches worldwide and codirects the Stillpoint Ashtanga Yoga Retreat Center in New Zealand, the disadvantage of having too much choice is that it "unsettles the mind and gives it an excuse to make preferences when there should be no preferences."

"What is yoga?" he asks. "Becoming one with the object. If we split ourselves between two or more systems, then it is impossible to achieve yoga."

Through his own commitment to the teachings of K. Pattabhi Jois, Scott has not been distracted by conflicting methods.

"I have been able to remain focused on the practice, which is difficult to do," he attests.

Shopping around vs. Settling Down

Although Scott believes that students should ultimately settle on one teacher and one method, he encourages some initial experimentation.

"The only shopping that can be allowed," he says, "is at the very beginning, to find the right system and teacher."

Snyder also encourages initial exploration. And she also stresses that, with maturation, students should commit to one approach in order to gain maximum benefit.

"It is easy to stick with one tradition until the inevitable plateau, and then move on to the next entertaining tradition," she says. "It is often in those times of plateau when the practice really begins for the practitioner. This is where discipline can serve our spiritual growth as human beings. "

Such a commitment must come from the student's desire, not the teacher's imposition, Swenson feels.

"I have explored many systems of yoga. I keep coming back to Ashtanga because I love it," he says. "It is not because someone told me to commit to it. Commitment should come from within."

Having the Conversation

When you see a student grappling with different approaches, invite her to speak with you after class. Do this with a student who comes to class regularly and whose practice you are familiar with.

Broach the conversation gingerly so that she doesn't feel reprimanded or challenged. Let her speak first about her experience. Listen attentively, with an open mind. Then, if appropriate, share a personal anecdote about how you have handled confusion in your own practice and life.

Encourage her to follow her heart and investigate her motives. Is she experimenting to avoid discomfort, or to get to know herself better?

When Snyder has such conversations, she says, "There are no 'shoulds.' I encourage students to become intimate with their own experience and build an intelligent practice around that. It is my job to meet them where they are and guide them with open dialogue until we find out, together, what is appropriate for them."

The Bigger Picture

Ultimately, everyone must forge an individual path. Through times of confusion and times of clarity, remember the bigger picture of why you are practicing yoga and what you value most in life.

"We are all headed in the same direction," says Snyder. "The question is not which way is right or wrong. The question is, 'Is this evolving my spiritual growth or isn't it?'"

Sara Avant Stover is a yoga instructor and freelance writer who divides her time between Chiang Mai, Thailand, and New England. Visit her website, www.fourmermaids.com.

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