

yoga perspectives

practising alone, practising together

by Mia Forbes Pirie



Photos: Frank Klinckenberg

“Class is where you gather resources for self-practice” states Sarah Powers (Yin and Insight Yoga). The truth of her words strikes me – yes, that is how it fits together. Both class and self-practice are important for our development and bring us different benefits. Each form of practice speaks to different parts of our learning and development, giving us a variety of tools for our lives and spiritual journeys.

Class is where we learn. Class also fulfils valuable social functions: meeting like-minded friends, finding support in practice and in life, and experiencing a sense of togetherness. Practising with 1 or 2 other individuals can be a bonding experience - a deep experience of

the dog or cat. Why not just roll up our mats and head off to class?

On occasions that may be appropriate, but nonetheless it is worthwhile, even necessary, at some point to develop a self-practice. According to Sarah Powers, self-practice is where we see our patterns of self-deception and gain clarity. If, however, the choice is between class and not practising, class may well be the better option.

what is right for you?

As Paul Grilley (Yin Yoga), explains, it depends which rung of the ladder you are on. For many people, the group of people who are going to make them do what they are unable to on their own is invaluable. Ultimately, however, Paul hopes that people will reach a point where they are sufficiently motivated to practise on their own.



Above: Mia and Frank Klinckenberg practising together Left: Mia Forbes Pirie, in self-practice.

sharing and unity. It can equally allow us to experience a deep connection with ourselves, focussing on ourselves whilst sharing with and being respectful to another. A valuable skill both on and off the mat.

In class people learn to give up some elements of control, to trust another human being, to accept support. But class is not just about putting our faith in the teacher and following blindly. Class is an opportunity to develop healthy boundaries and to put them into action. Our bodies and our practices are always our responsibility. We learn that invaluable balance between openness and trust on the one hand, and self-care and self-love on the other.

Many of us find practising alone difficult. We get on our mats in the morning only to find ourselves distracted by our thoughts and desires, a cup of tea, the ironing, starting work, tidying up, feeding

He, himself is totally self motivated in his practise, and always has been. He says he does not need to be ‘cheer-led’ to do what he thinks should be done. On the other hand, he acknowledges that in other areas of learning, class is invaluable to him and would be his primary resource. In Paul’s opinion, “It just depends on who you are as a person and where you are in your practice”. But at some point Paul believes that it is healthy to arrive at an independent living of our lives, and to stop looking for other people to tell us what to do, when to do it and how to do it. He goes as far as saying that to him, “It is abhorrent to think that people would not arrive at that in every phase of their lives”.

According to Kino Macgregor (Ashtanga Yoga), this is also in line with the way Sri K Pattabhi Jois taught: “Guruji always left us that ability to explore our inner body”, she says. “He was never a teacher

to give you all the answers.” People say that Guruji did not teach alignment. Kino found that beautiful about Guruji. She says that he cared about the individual student’s journey and sometimes giving too many answers stops students from exploring. “The truest form of knowledge is not that which is experienced as true by someone else, that which your teacher tells you, that which you read in a book or see someone else doing. It is the knowledge that you experience first hand in your body. I think that for Guruji, the most important thing was that we experience the practice in the laboratory of our own body: that we go in and we do the work, not him doing the work for us but that we do the work of exploration so that we get to experience the inner growth and the inner transformation that the Yoga path represents”.

Hamish Hendry, leading UK Ashtanga teacher, has never had

practices individually at their own pace.

When I passed my final Iyengar-style Karuna Yoga teacher training exam, Ruth White had some feedback for me: I was a good teacher, she said, able to hold the attention and focus of large classes, in a way that not everyone is. But, I was not a very good student.

My ego had soared and then plummeted in rapid succession. When the hurt subsided, I was confused: what did she mean by ‘not a good student’? She explained that when I was in someone else’s class, I often moved ahead of the instructions, and went deeper into postures before I was told it was time. I had to confess that she was right. Although I had never intended it, I could see that it was not respectful towards my teachers. Not only that, but Ruth helped me to understand what I was missing out on the experience of letting go, trusting and just enjoying being present in the class. All that was

available to me, and all I had to do to attain it was just follow instructions and not think (or move!) ahead.

That was the day I learnt to really enjoy led classes. Now, in a led class, I let go of having to ‘know’ what is going to happen next and surrender to the teacher’s words. OK, sometimes I still have a few reactions and try and compensate if a teacher holds one side longer than the other, but overall it is a much nicer journey and I get a lot more out of it!

To some people whose main practices are led classes, this story may sound strange and unfamiliar. They are at the other end of the spectrum, used to letting go and following but not necessarily used to having the time and space to check in with their own bodies and feel how long they want to spend in a posture, how far they want to go, how, when and where the body wants to move next.

Of course, sometimes it is OK to be in a class and do something different. Sarah Powers explains that there are 3 main reasons why people may not be following the teachers’ instructions: (1) they did not hear them; (2) they are being deliberately defiant; and (3) they are doing what is right for them. Make sure not to injure yourself just to be doing the same thing as everyone else!



Lead class can provide us support, a sense of unity and community. Kino MacGregor leading a class at her workshop in Washington DC.

trouble practising alone. He gets up at 1am each morning to get on his mat and feels disappointed on the full and new moon days that he is not able to practise. Hamish advises people to try practising at home. It has many benefits, not least that there is not always a class to go to, so it is important to have that option available. He stresses that there are benefits to both. For Ashtanga Yoga, the benefits are that it is generally hotter, the community aspect, and the fact that “you might even learn something”.

The benefits of practising alone can include an increased ability to explore in silence. Without being disturbed and without interference from anyone else, we can reach new depths. That is not to say that this is not possible in a class setting but there is a different kind of space and freedom available - the freedom to experiment and the opportunity to explore a deeper kind of listening, to develop our own abilities to hold a quiet and safe space and to find peace alone within ourselves.

For some of us, that is not yet an option. Instead of suffering on our mats at home, it may be best to head off to class and save the private exploration for future days. For others, class can be as much of a challenge as self-practice. For years I had lived predominately in the middle-ground of Ashtanga Mysore-style classes, where a teacher is present in the room and assists but students do their

finding balance

There are different types of practising ‘alone’ and ‘together’. There is a difference between a Mysore style class where a teacher is in the room and there to help, and a self-practice with no one else in the room. Practising together can mean practising with just 1 other person and can be intimate. It can also mean practising in any size of group with or without a teacher.

There are benefits to all ways of practising both alone and together. Some of the teachers I interviewed had different views about the importance of both methods. Their views were not necessarily linked to any particular traditions.

All types of practice are valuable and bring us something. Like everything in Yoga and in life, the trick is finding the right balance. If you have never practised alone why not give it a go? Set an achievable goal. There are many days when I have been travelling when I have just done a few Sun Salutations alone in my hotel room – my day has invariably been much improved by that short and solitary practice. Richard Freeman suggests considering the act of standing on your mat to be a victory. After all, unrolling it can be the hard part. Everything else is a bonus.

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