



Allowing for differing body types in Yoga.

A Conversation - Knoff Yoga Student Margo Steiner and Master Teacher James Bryan

Morning James,

Can you please tell me how you feel about this article? A girlfriend of mine tagged me in this article as she is a yin trained yogie....

"Where is your appendix? Most who have studied anatomy will point to lower right abdominals. But that's only where it's located "on average." This is where an appendix is normally, but are you "normal"? Imagine you're suffering acute pain in your upper left abdomen. Your friends rush you to hospital, where a new intern's instincts are that you have appendicitis. Then he realizes that your pain is nowhere near your appendix, or at least where he thinks your appendix is supposed to be. He puts you on painkillers & sends you home instead of ordering the life-saving operation you need. Not good!

Now imagine attending a yoga class where the teacher believes everyone can, eventually, do Lotus Pose (Padmasana). Maybe not today, but with diligence, practice & a firm guiding hand, with the right Lululemon pants & the best Himalayan incense, the teacher can show you how to get into this challenging posture. He notes that every student who has stayed with him long enough has managed to do this. What if you have never been able to sit cross-legged comfortably? Your knees are always up by your ears, but you are game. You try—you ignore the little tweaky feelings in your knees until one day the pain escalates into a burning fire that won't stop even after the class. You've torn your medial meniscus & are no closer to doing Lotus Pose than when you started yoga. The teacher has ignored the reality of your uniqueness. Due to the shape of your pelvis/femurs, you'll never be able to do Lotus Pose & trying to get there is destroying your knees.

Yoga is a self-selecting practice. Those who have the correctly shaped bones to be able to do certain postures keep working & progressing. They stretch out all the tensile resistance preventing their maximum range of motion & get to their desired positions. However, those whose bones are not shaped so optimally, who are not stopped by tension but rather have reached compression, where the bones are hitting each other, will never be able to do the pose. They quit in frustration, convinced that some deep personality flaw is preventing their progress, a delusion secretly shared by some teachers."

 Your Body, Your Yoga, Bernie Clark

I guess I'm in the thinking of if you are doing it all correctly and being mindful of where pain is taking place and working with it to help ease the pain instead of pushing through it, won't you be able to finally get there? Look at BKS Iyengar didn't he change his chest through pranayama? Can bones move and adjust? I'm really keen to hear your feed back....

Love, smiles and hugs Margo.

Hi Margo,

We are in Bali at the retreat and wish you were here.

The article is correct. It is only in anatomical text books that you see the ideal or normalized shape. In real life, there is a lot of variation in structures and yoga teachers need to be aware and cautious. It is essential when teaching to focus on technique, and also when teaching to guide your students to pay attention to the sensations in the body and breath as a feedback mechanism.

In the Knoff Yoga Overview you will read 3 key points under Highlighting:

1. Step-by-step progression: where we focus on the process and not the pose.
2. Individuality of every student: where the teacher guides the student according to their capacity and not an idealized asana.
3. Adjusting for body proportions: externally (body size) and internally (body structures).

Knoff Yoga is designed to be a 'work-in' where we teach our students how to internalize their attention and listen to what their body is saying. When applying Bandhas, Breath and Drishti it is almost impossible to hurt yourself, because you are moving carefully and cautiously through the asanas, like a cat in the dark.

The ultimate goal of asana is to transform it into moving meditation, i.e. you can achieve the same depth of mindfulness in asana practice as sitting in meditation, but only when applying the 5 Principles of Practice. In Knoff Yoga we do not play music during class as this is a distraction and can lead to injuries. It is impossible to internalize the mind when it is being distracted by music, incense and even partner work.

Knoff Yoga is intelligent and safe and has built in systems, e.g. 11 Asana Groups and Right & Left Sides, to ensure the highest level of well-being for our ourselves and our students. For example, in dance there are lots of injuries as the emphasis is on public demonstration, with the tendency to show off the "good side" of the move or position. In Knoff Yoga we work both sides evenly at all times to avoid this imbalance.

The carefully designed Knoff Yoga system is like a treasured family recipe. If you alter the time-honoured order of ingredients or do not mix them correctly, or over/under cook, then you end up with something different - often inedible. This is why we encourage Knoff Yoga Teachers to follow the system and not change it.

On top of anatomical and structural differences there is the added complication of emotional and mental imbalances. Some students are fearful, while others are reckless. It is critical that the yoga teacher takes command of the class and does not let students go rushing off into the unknown. If a student is not following instructions, you need to bring them back into line. Some styles of yoga are more prone to injury than others, e.g. Vinyasa and Flow, where alignment takes second or third place. I trust the above is clear?

Namaste

James E. Bryan