

YOGA AND EDUCATION BY PETE YATES

There have recently been moves in the UK to regulate Yoga education, both as found in general Yoga classes and in the training of Yoga teachers, and to consider it in line with general educational principles which have some kind of governmental endorsement. At least three instances of this tendency spring to mind.

The one we are most familiar with is the collaboration of the BWY with the fitness industry bodies REPS and SkillsActive to produce the so-called National Occupational Standard (NOS) for a Yoga Teacher. This attempt to create a standard for the education of Yoga teachers takes the Yoga teacher to be a type of fitness instructor.

For some time, Yoga teachers working in Adult Education establishments have been urged to conform to yet another educational requirement. Pressure has been put on many of them to get the C&G Certificate in adult education (7307). Like the NOS, this is a cross-discipline qualification which receives some government support. In this instance, Yoga education finds itself in bed with flower-arranging, conversational French, life drawing and line dancing. (<http://www.cityandguilds.com>)

Yet another initiative is being pushed by the British Council for Yoga Therapy. Their big idea is that Yoga teaching and Yoga teacher training should come under the same regulation as that now being proposed for Yoga therapy. (This is another NOS and like the SkillsActive “standard” it conforms to NVQ level 3.) Like the attempt to bring Yoga education into the fold of fitness, this too would allow Yoga education to be influenced by a non-yogic body, in this case the quango Skills for Health. Again, the standards that would be applied to Yoga education are cross-disciplinary and Yoga teaching will be likened to aromatherapy and so on. (<http://www.Yogatherapyforum.org.uk/>)

For all their apparent rigor, all of these approaches to Yoga education are built upon the same unexamined presupposition. What those involved in these initiatives have taken for granted, as though it did not deserve a second thought, is that Yoga education is sufficiently similar to other very general categories of education to be coherently considered under their rubric. In what follows, I’d like to examine that presupposition to see if we can safely continue to presuppose it.

The first fundamental question is this: “Is Yoga training education at all?” Well, what is education? The term “educate” derives from the Latin “*educere*” which means “to lead forth”. Education, then, is a “leading forth”, and this gives us a workable picture of what, ideally, education should entail: there is the one who leads, the teacher, and the one led, the student, and the immaturity and ignorance from which the student is “led forth”. This is clearly applicable to the situation in which an experienced Yogi leads a student, through various means, towards the experiences, transformations, intuitions and states of being that Yoga promises. This process is one which is necessarily gone through by one who would himself lead others forth: it applies to teacher training as well as to general Yoga teaching.

So both Yoga training and Yoga teacher training are forms of education, at least in its original conception. So how does Yoga education compare with the education received in schools, colleges and universities and the vocational training received in practical disciplines?

The similarities first: Yoga like every other type of educational project has an informational content. It is generally thought that we need to learn what the techniques of Yoga are called, what they are for and to get acquainted with some model of how they work and so on. This is comparable to learning names of the various types of joints, pipes and valves needed by a central heating system, their functions, and the theory of hydraulics which enables us to mentally picture a whole system and so on. Knowledge of the history, textual basis, psychology and philosophy of Yoga is also thought useful in Yoga education, if only because it enables the student to place what he or she is practising into a meaningful context. Confining study to these matters, however, remains in the sphere of scholarship and doesn't move into the sphere of Yoga itself which values practice and experience above all other aspects of education.

Again like most other practical areas of education, Yoga education imparts certain techniques and skills. Just as we might show someone how to solder a joint in water pipes, we might show someone how to perform a *Yoga asana* or *pranayama*. We will then get our student to execute the technique for himself whilst we observe and we will then in all likelihood correct any mistakes. We will do this several or even many times if necessary. The inward aspects of Yoga discipline, however, are not quite so amenable to this method.

The third similarity is that both Yoga education and education in general transform the student. Someone who acquires literacy has the course of their life changed (hopefully for the better) with knock-on effects for the way that they are, and the same applies to someone who tastes the fruits of Yoga.

Like education in general, then, Yoga education contains informational, practical and transformational elements and on this basis we are surely justified in treating it like any other educational project.

But this conclusion, to my mind, is too hasty. It rests on an inadequate consideration of the transformational element in Yoga education. It underestimates just how radical the transformation of the human being that Yoga education promises is and how it is of a wholly different order from the undeniably beneficial transformations in an individual's confidence, social integration and so on that come from gaining a university degree or becoming literate or acquiring skills in plumbing.

There are many ways within the Yoga traditions of conceptualising and expressing Yoga's transformational promise and it would take us too far afield to try and survey even a few of them. But what is clear is that Patanjali's "*chitta vritti nirodha*" or the sublime vision of cosmic unity of the *Gita* are a far cry from the well-being that derives from the improved position in the market place we gain on qualifying as a maths teacher, reflexologist or plumber.

Yoga education, if successful, re-orientates one's whole being, not only at the surface but in the very depths. (And this paradoxically remains the case if the Yoga education ends up persuading the practitioner [as I am so persuaded] that there is nothing to do and nothing to undo!) Yoga education exists to effect this radical transformation. All else is a spin-off, including health, flexibility, confidence, social integration, nice teaching career and so on. Techniques too are secondary – they are there only to do a job and are not an end in themselves.

And here we meet the decisive difference between Yoga education and all other educational programmes. The education which produces a maths teacher, reflexologist or plumber exists primarily to produce people who have the information and practical skills to fulfil these roles in the economy. Any positive transformation of the individual is welcome, but secondary. By contrast, Yoga education is primarily aimed at profound transformation of the individual and all other results are secondary.

This concern with radical individual transformation, which defines Yoga, also places it apart from pretty well all other educational programmes. Does this leave the informational and practical aspects of Yoga education untouched so that they can be considered in the context of education in general and accordingly prescribed with the transformational aspects alone being left to Yoga itself?

This indeed is the view of the authors of the NOS (Yoga Teacher) and it is just plain wrong. If transformation is the *raison d'être* of Yoga education then everything else about Yoga education must be subservient to it and determined by it. In the NOS (Yoga Teacher) programme, the practical and informational elements of what purports to be a Yoga education are determined from outside of Yoga. Consequently, Yoga's transformational element is cut adrift which is why it goes unmentioned in the NOS documents. The NOS in fact fails completely to map out a Yoga education because it severs the determining link between Yoga's transformational essence and what that requires practically and informationally.

It is because of this kind of fracturing of Yoga's educational structure that we see some Yoga teacher training programmes emulating academic disciplines with essays, tests and all the rest of the rigmarole. But if we look carefully here we will see that this is a deformation of Yoga education. A little thought-experiment makes the point: it would be perfectly possible for a very accomplished and inspiring Yogi to fail miserably in the attempt to become, say, a BWY certified teacher. The reverse is also the case: it is perfectly possible for someone to succeed very well in the kind of training that makes information primary whilst having absolutely no experience whatsoever of Yogic transformation and consequently no ability to help students to encounter Yoga's transformative essence. There is such a thing as Yoga scholarship, (and fine it is too), but it is not Yoga.

Consider now the practical aspects of Yoga education. The practical aspects are the means by which transformation is approached. Obviously, without a clear view of the ends, the means cannot be prescribed. But as we have seen, treating Yoga education alongside other educational programmes obscures its unique end, the transformation of the individual. This must necessarily also obscure its means. (The practical result is the inevitable emptying out of techniques of their transformational charge at the same time as technique is fetishised.)

As far as I can see, only the IYN/Yoga Register initiative takes account of the unique structure proper to Yoga education and does not erroneously conflate Yoga with education in general. If we are to remain true to the insight which has guided us this far, we should reject attempts by non-Yogic bodies such as SkillsActive and Skills for Health to gain hegemony over Yoga training and Yoga teacher training and encourage others to do the same. That the SkillsActive and Skills for Health meddling is being done in the name of educational rigour when the most basic thinking about the nature of education and its relationship to Yoga has not been done is alarming to say the least. That some yogis are happy to go along with it is even more alarming and unless this tendency is successfully countered the Yoga of the future will have no spark within it and will be just a dry, dead shell.

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