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The Yoga of Romantic Relationships

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The Issue

It is no secret that long-lasting relationships are tough. We've all heard the statistics on divorce rates in this country—it's as though half of us are just waiting to become a number; we're labeled before we're even on the dating market; it's a scary feeling. It's also no surprise that many people become cynical about the idea of marriage and even monogamy by the time they're in their mid twenties, and some swear it off completely.

So several questions arise: Is it possible to maintain long-lasting, true bonding relationships in this day and age? Is it possible that monogamy, a tradition that has been around since the first tribal communities on Earth, has run its course after thousands of years?

Perhaps.

But I'd like to suggest an alternative view point.

Another non-surprising fact is the rising popularity of yoga. In New York City alone, there are well over a whopping 3,000 yoga studios, many of which have opened only within the last five years, and many still opening as we speak, not counting either the sports gyms that offer yoga classes or the multitudes of individual instructors that teach yoga on their own, in private lofts, client's homes, out of their own living rooms, etc.

But I think the interest in yoga runs a little deeper than the mere fascination with twisting our bodies into pretzels. Intuitively, through experience, or by word of mouth, most of us are becoming aware of the true power of a strong and devoted yoga practice. But what exactly does

this mean, and what does it have to do with the crisis within our romantic relationships?

The Yoga

In Sanskrit, the term *Yoga* is used to signify a sacred Union. The term yoga does not exclusively denote the physical postures we take in a class at a gym or studio, but rather, these *asanas*, or postures, are simply one way of creating the greater, deeper Union that the ancient Sanskrit texts are interested in exploring. There are a variety of different established yogas: Karma Yoga, for example, is the yoga of selfless action, doing a deed for the sake of the deed instead of for a particular purpose or ultimate gain. Volunteering time at a homeless shelter might be one example of Karma Yoga. Raja Yoga is another example, which constitutes the careful study of spiritual texts and the application of their messages and teachings to our daily lives; reading the Bible, the Koran, the Sutras, or even poetry— any study of text that lifts our spirits and challenges us to alter our behavior for the better is Raja Yoga.

So Union, as used by the sacred texts, is a Union of the self, a dynamic singularity beyond that of simply the mind, body and spirit complex. It is a movement towards a place where the three are transcended and are no longer three; where you are no longer divided but simply are. This Union, this Yoga, is dynamic because it, like reality itself, like our *Universe*, are always in flux, always in flow, like the way the ocean brings in tides, like day turns to night and back again. No beginning, no end; it simply is this movement. None of these universal flows have a set goal in mind, a particular destination; the movement itself is, as it's always balancing itself out, like a seamless dance or vinyasa flow, like our breath or our heartbeat, self-perpetuating. All the different types of yoga practices, Karma Yoga, Raja Yoga, and Asana Yoga, to name a few, are so amazing because they're not only yogas within themselves, in the scheme of this greater oneness, but also inform and compliment one another in the balancing act of the yoga of our being. They are each different types of movements, different tools that aid us in reaching and deepening our own Union.

My point here is simple: that just as our selfless acts, study of texts and coming into complicated poses that test our balance and strength are all yogas within the greater Yoga, so are our romantic relationships: Our romantic relationships *are a serious Yogic Practice*.

And that's the key.

For our committed, monogamous relationships to last and flourish we have to awaken to the realization that they are:

1. A practice that is ever deepening, and
2. That it is deepening toward a greater Union within the context of a flow of being.
3. Furthermore, the depth of that Union can be informed by our other, complimentary yoga practices.

The Pose

I'd like to give two examples of how this works. A shorter one, and a longer one.

First the short one: Take, for instance, the premise that one of our yoga practices, say our asanas, can inform the yoga of our romantic relationships. Each posture in any sequence or flow is a perfect combination of balance, strength and breath and when performed correctly, creates an optimal alignment such that the most amounts of benefits are released into the body, mind and spirit.

Take a pose such as Virabhadrasana I, or Warrior I. In this pose, the front leg is bent at a 90 degree angle, the back foot is firmly grounded, leg straight, hips square to the front of the room, tail bone tucked, both arms reaching up. The expression of the pose is "honor to the highest self" and when done with the right alignment, it not only lengthens and strengthens muscles in the legs, shoulders and arms, but it creates space in the organs, including the lungs and heart as well as stimulates vital glands that cleanse our blood and increase its circulation. If, for example, the back foot is not firmly grounded, then the practitioner may easily lose balance and the pose

becomes wobbly, unstable. If the front leg is stretched forward too much, then pressure can injure the knee, further affecting the overall practice.

To every action there is a reaction, the continual process of balance each organism is constantly in motion towards. If the alignment of some aspect of our relationships, say our behavior, is not firmly grounded (say, we have jealousy problems and feel scattered because of them), then our relationships can come off balance and unstable, increasing the risk of fall or failure. If too much pressure is placed on a central part of our partner's being, say, their character (i.e. we perceive them as too nitpicky and use nagging as a way to try to change that), then that unnecessary pressure can injure crucial joints of our relationship.

Every time you push your partner, he or she must pull back, and the pressure is now on them to not only react to your pushing, but to do so with accuracy, without overcompensating for the initial push, in order to come back into balance. The balance, strength, alignment, and breath, are all integral parts of our yoga relationship. Next time you're taking a yoga asana class, think to yourself about the ways in which you each push and pull on the relationship; what muscles you are lengthening, strengthening, which organs you are revitalizing. Each of our asana poses can speak to our relationships. Ask and I promise you they will make themselves heard.

I think you get where I'm going with this: For our romantic relationships to not only last, but deepen, we must take them as seriously as we take our other yoga practices, with as much care, effort and focus as our downward-facing-dogs. This is hard, but most definitely worthwhile endeavor.

The Practice

My second example comes from Raja Yoga, self-study through scriptural study. In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, one of the central texts of yoga philosophy, Patanjali elaborates on the concept of practice. For a practice to be truly a practice, it must have certain constituents:

1. It must be practiced a long time

2. It must be practiced without break

3. It must be practiced in all earnestness.

This is true of any practice, from meditation, to our yoga asanas, and it's especially true in our romantic relationships. In his commentary of the Yoga Sutras, Swami Satichananda (founder of Integral Yoga Institute) jokes about students approaching him with different problems they faced and him asking them:

“Well, have you meditated on it?”

Their response being something like “Yes! Every day for one week.”

One week is not enough, Satichananda reminds us.

Patience, patience.

Or, the student might answer, “Yes! For the past ten years, and I still see no change, what is wrong?”

Swami Satichananda might then ask a follow up question: “How often?”

To which the reply invariably was: “Here and there” or “Off and on.” This, he reminds us, is no practice at all.

The second condition calls us to practice without break. In the context of committed relationships this means a form of energy you carry with you at all times; the consistency of keeping your partner in heart and mind throughout your day, and most importantly throughout interactions with other people, opposite sex or not, that may carry attraction energy towards you or vice versa. This is not to say that you must eat, sleep and breathe your partner, keep at their side twenty-four hours a day, but rather, that their presence remains with you, like a hint of sweet cologne, as you go about your own business every day. The most practical way of achieving this is training your mind to think positive things about your partner every time they come into your consciousness, teach yourself to smile every time you think of them, for example.

To take this pose a bit deeper, the second step requires that at times of conflict, you learn to immediately assume the best of your partner in any given scenario. As attractive as the pull of negative thought patterns such as nagging, blaming, etc, may be, a strong Relationship Yoga practice requires training in the art of assuming the best. When you assume the best of your partner, you are naturally sending them the message that you believe in the core of who they are, in their ability to act from their heart with the best intentions in mind. This type of message cultivates positivity in both hearts and makes it easy for 1. your partner to behave with best possible intentions and 2. for you to continue to teach yourself to believe that your partner is always behaving with the best possible intentions.

The last of Patanjali's requirements for practice is that it is done in all earnestness, from the bottom of your heart. Anyone who practices posture yoga knows that there are some times when we're just not into it. Some nights your poses are just sloppy and you just don't feel like trying crow for the fifth time. It happens. There are slumps. But what Patanjali is talking about here is our overall attitude towards our practice. Even if no one could tell by looking at us, in our own hearts, we *know*, we simply do (even though a lot of the time we don't like to admit it) when we are being earnest in our efforts. If in your heart you know this relationship is not the one for you, then end it simply, quickly and honestly. Otherwise, it behooves us to seriously assume our romantic relationships as a committed yoga practice.

Romantic Relationships as Yoga Practice

Through this piece I've made an argument for how our romantic relationships can become a yoga and provided a snippet of the different ways our various other yoga practices can inform and compliment our romantic relationships. I believe the opposite is also true—the yoga of our romantic relationships can speak to our other forms of yoga, our asanas, our self-study, our worship, etc, in whatever shape these may take.

There is a lot more that can be said and elaborated on, but the truth is simple: We can shift our awareness of our romantic relationships from another painful battle with love to a recognition of their depth as an authentic *practice* worth devoting our energy to. Living accordingly can

awaken us to the myriad ways in which our romantic relationships can in fact become a flowing practice towards the sacred Union of our hearts, our lives and our loving and ever-deepening romantic partnerships.

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