

Profile

Mark Walsh on Embodied Yoga Principles

By Karin van Maanen
www.yogaandmindfulness.co.uk

Mark Walsh, creator and founder of Embodied Yoga Principles (EYP), was interviewed by Karin van Maanen who took part in the first EYP training for yoga teachers last year: www.embodiedyogaprinciples.com

KVM: What is EYP?

MW: It's a set of principles which can be applied to any style of yoga, to learn about yourself, maximise psychological insight from yoga, and bring the benefits of yoga into daily life. In some ways you could say it's quite traditional, in that we are learning to address our habitual patterns. In other ways it's completely new and original because we use quite unusual methodologies. It is quite different from a normal modern postural yoga class. It came from my perception that in modern postural yoga there are mainly classes that are very athletic, perhaps lacking depth, and classes that have depth but coming from an Eastern or esoteric point of view. Both I appreciate. I like to sweat and I'm a Buddhist so I have nothing against Eastern approaches. But I realised there was a whole group of people who wanted something more Western but with depth, to explore the psychological side of yoga without necessarily going towards transcendent Eastern spirituality or world view. So my aim was to create a postural practice with depth that is accessible to the Western world.

KVM: Where did the ideas come from?

MW: I've been teaching embodiment for years, in areas of conflict, with children, with corporates, humanitarian aid workers, all kinds of people. Embodiment means the subjective experience of the body. It's a mindfulness-based body practice in which we are looking to develop ourselves. Yoga is one kind of embodiment practice. I've been exploring embodiment in the context of Aikido, my main martial arts study, dance, body therapy and improv. I spent three years studying Aikido full-time, developing its psychological side, helping people get their Aikido off the mat. I wrote my dissertation on it. I've also practised yoga for twenty years. It was very natural to go through this process with yoga. Yoga is so popular, it's an access point to the body for so many people. Aikido is more of a minority pursuit. I thought, wouldn't it be great to get this embodied learning and wisdom to large numbers of people? The benefits are profound, both for the individual and society. It makes sense to work with yoga because that is what people know, it's accessible. It's a practical, portable vehicle for learning

about embodiment. Yoga practitioners would also turn up to embodiment trainings and say: "Wow, this is really enriching my yoga practice." Because I was bringing a perspective which is quite fresh. We work a lot more socially and relationally for example. For me, life is relational. I often start embodiment workshops by saying: "What matters to you? Let's do yoga about that." At the end of the day, most people don't really care about having long hamstrings. Some people do and that's fine. What matters most to people I work with is family, relationships, work, health. The health aspects of yoga are almost a given. But if I can pick something up from the floor, how long do my hamstrings need to be? I don't want to waste time and energy on that. Why would I learn to do a one-handed handstand? As long as I am fit for work and for my life... I became more interested in the psychological and relational aspects. How we are in relationships is key. That is something which I'd explored in tango and Aikido but not so much in modern postural yoga.

KVM: How do these aspects come into the practice?

MW: We slow things down. We work with known postures and some of our own unique postures. For example, we begin with a warrior posture, establishing mindfulness, as you would in any yoga class, and then we ask: "Where do I need this quality in my life?" We allow body wisdom to arise. This internal coaching process is quite different: "What kind of warrior am I? What kind of warrior do I want to be?" We develop awareness and choice. That's the first inquiry. The relational inquiry is that we pair up briefly after an exercise and speak and listen mindfully, naming any insights. That's really valuable because often people have insights in a standard postural yoga class but there is no space to name them and be heard. So they just move on to the next pose. Slowing it down and being socially witnessed is important. We also practise being in the body, speaking authentically and clearly, and listening empathically. This is yoga in an extended sense. During debriefs we are not talking about yoga, we are yoga. It's relational yoga, like karma or bhakti yoga. We also do some very simple partner practices. It might be as

simple as leaning back to back and asking: "How am I in relationships? What is my pattern? Is it to please my partner? What's happening around boundaries? How do I meet and leave that partner?" IF we're mindful, IF we slow it down to look for the patterns there is a whole world going on in every little interaction. Simple asanas help us to see patterns clearly. We also work with the group process. How much space do you take up in the group? What's your relationship to authority? In most yoga classes, you are told exactly what to do.

KVM: I found EYP very empowering. Rather than doing exactly what the teacher tells you, it encourages you to become your own teacher.

MW: That's nice to hear. EYP is all about choice. Consciously working with authority is fascinating. There is an Irish rebel in me. I go to an Iyengar class once a week, and in that class I work with my issues around authority. You know I've been quite critical of some yoga traditions because we've inherited this guru tradition which is wide open to abuse. This isn't an opinion. You can find pictures of the founders of the biggest schools of modern postural yoga physically abusing people on YouTube. Then there is the sexual abuse, financial abuse. How many scandals are there? I think this authority issue is being worked with very unconsciously and unskillfully.

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appropriate in a modern context. This is where we see yoga becomes political. For me, yoga isn't just an individual practice but we also work with what Michael Stone calls the political body, as well as the body individual. Are we just practising conformity? Or are we practising unconscious rebellion against conformity? There's another pattern you'll see in a class, right? You'll have a student who does her own thing? You see all these patterns come out? If you are paying attention.

You have seen the fabled yoga competitions, where we do a plank-off or tree-off. This is an anathema to many yoga people. They say: "Competition isn't spiritual!" But competition is natural and part of life. We do harmonious and cooperative practices too. But there are certain things that are in shadow. Saying no, or anger, power... We work with money sometimes. These things can be suppressed. It can trigger things and take us to new places. Some participants have profound life insights. Others just see it as a way to make asana practice more interesting.

I mean, what is it to you? You've done the training, what's your perspective?

KVM: It made asana practice much more valuable to me. It took mindfulness of the body to a deeper level which I explored in meditation, but not so much in asana. I was doing less asana because I wanted to work on my mind. I was doing asana to keep my body happy physically. Now I'm seeing it much more as an opportunity to work on mind habits too. It's made a big difference to my life quite quickly, particularly in relationship.

MW: That's really nice to hear that.

KVM: I am wondering how it would work with beginners? Some of my students have found it challenging.

MW: It's quite a mature practice and not for everyone. Having a mindfulness base really helps. The transfer to life is one of the main purposes. We work with that through the inquiry and the micro practice [a subtle version of a posture which could be applied in daily life



situations]. We also look at people's main practice. If you are a fiery person, do you need more ashtanga yoga or warrior pose? Or yin yoga and child pose? It helps people to develop a practice which enriches their lives. This deeper level you mentioned is a layer of extra reading. It doesn't take any more minutes a day, but if you are doing a forward bend anyway, you can do that for your hamstrings and back, and for what you want to let go of. What am I attached to that I want to let go of?

It can be scary because it exposes deep personal patterns quickly and directly. The biggest challenge is how to contain it safely. It's not therapy, we're not trained as therapists. In a specific embodiment yoga context it's not drop-in. It's usually a workshop or a series. There are warnings beforehand, and questions we ask about active mental health issues or recent bereavements. Real consent and choice is extremely important. That's often not done well in the yoga world. I was at a major studio in London recently and I had a teacher repeatedly adjust me after I had asked her more than once not to. So not even not ask, but to keep doing something... In any other context, where would that be OK? To do something to someone's body which is not allowed? In embodied yoga, respect for consent and confidentiality is massive. There are certain boundaries and teaching ethics that have to be firmer.

I find that people that get the most from it have been around a little bit and are fairly open-minded. They already know the basics of the shapes, they don't have to put a lot of attention on how to do a posture safely.

KVM: What's your vision for EYP's future?

MW: We're in year 2, disseminating it. I'd love it to be an option at every major yoga studio in the world within 10 years, so that everyone who wants to engage in yoga on a deep psychological level without going down the esoteric route, can. It's not for everyone, like acro yoga is not for everyone. It also brings in the social level in terms of politics and activism. So yoga isn't just a narcissistic, personal health practice which is in cahoots with consumerism and capitalism and body beautiful nonsense which I think is rightly becoming criticized. EYP goes well with challenging the wider relational issues we face in the world today. That's my vision, to have a positive impact on the world and that EYP is integrated into what people are doing. It isn't another style of yoga. That's the last thing the world needs. Our teachers are taking it out there in their own way. People with different ethnicities, ages, sexualities, nationalities, are all going to bring their flavour to it. Embodiment yoga will never be one thing. It's not standardised like an ashtanga series. Teachers use it creatively. The first public training for yoga teachers is this summer at Stretch Yoga in London. There's a rigorous application process. It's essential applicants have significant personal depth, growth and integrity. It's not just another technique to learn. If someone comes up to you in the class and tells you their issues are coming up, it is about knowing how to hold that.

KVM: What really inspires you now, personally?

MW: I took a sabbatical for seven weeks to immerse myself in yoga. I have three world class teachers here in Brighton: Pete Blackaby, Gary Carter and Jim Tarran. I've found that enriching. Teaching EYP is inspiring. It's innovative, playful and creative. On a personal level, I am getting married. That inspires and excites me. The trials of visa issues with my Ukrainian partner... That's the main backdrop. Yoga as union has a very special meaning right now.

KVM: Is there anything you would like to say that I haven't asked?

MW: It's how to get it across in words... People often think that they do this already, and they always realize they don't, once they've experienced it. It's a mistake to think you do this already. A good way to find out more is through our free videos on YouTube and our website:

www.embodiedyogaprinciples.com

The big four takeaways from EYP are that it's fun, it's deep, it's relational and it's practical. People tend to have a lot of fun, have deep insights, they make friends because it's relational. And it's very pragmatic. Otherwise, why are we doing yoga? Other than basic health and wellbeing. How does yoga affect our lives and what is going on in the world? That is what I am most interested in.

KVM: And a modern way of practising. The old texts often don't say how you are to achieve for example the yamas and niyamas.

MW: That is a good insight. It's all about the how - the practical nuts and bolts of how you are kind to yourself or other people, practising ahimsa. Looking at the ways in which we can be kind. In our classes we embody gratitude throughout. It's rich. I do lots of embodiment work but I am most excited about this. Who cares about hamstrings? How yoga can help me with what matters to me and what is real to me. That's what I'm interested in.

