



Author Interview
Yoga Beyond Fitness
Getting More than Exercise from an
Ancient Spiritual Practice

Tom Pilarzyk

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Author Interview

Quest: In this book, you address both the society's role in changing Yoga as well as your own personal, more spiritual experience with Yoga. What motivated you to write this book - as both a social observer and an actively-committed participant?

Tom Pilarzyk: As I practiced Yoga and slowly began to see the growing popularity of its more strenuous forms, I became fascinated and motivated to explore the new forms myself *and* more intellectually interested in understanding what was happening to the spiritual context for Yoga practice.

On the one hand, I could see and feel why so many more people were practicing and having fun with it. The positive benefits and after-effects are intrinsic to Yoga. On the other hand, something was amiss. The external window-dressing - the gentle and soothing words, the incense and altars - were still part of practice. What was increasingly missing for me was a depth of understanding tied to why we were doing what we were practicing - to the ancient philosophical and psychological teachings that provide Yoga with its underlying message and rationale: to know oneself more fully. Without these teachings and a qualified spiritual guide, we are left to do and believe what we want, uninformed by a deeper wisdom.

Q: You seem to suggest that Yoga's development over the past 30 years is to be expected, given the way American culture simplifies and sells. Yet many people feel yoga makes a difference in their lives. So what is the problem?

TP: There is no problem at all if what is being sold to us is the "real deal" and not some hollow or stereotyped shell of what Yoga is meant to offer. It is truly wonderful that more people are discovering the physical and psychological benefits of asana practice. But the real story of Yoga is even deeper and that is what cannot be sold in a business sense.

Yoga had to be dumbed-down to become a successful commercial product and service. What is at risk of being lost is its essence. That is the fundamental problem with the social development of Yoga in America.

Q: You pose this as a "bipolar condition" where both commercialism and spirituality co-exist, yet where one cheapens the other. Can this situation really be changed once Pandora's box has been opened?

TP: That is the million-dollar question. What can be done? There are many gifted and nationally-renowned teachers, writers and publishers, Yoga therapists, industry leaders of all kinds. In the book, I call them America's "Yogic Vanguard." They include those involved with major retreat centers, national magazines, teacher certification or program accreditation bodies, and research organizations. They are the ones who are in the best position to address "bipolarity" and in a way that enriches Yoga as a spiritual path while maintaining it for those who regard the physical or stress-reducing benefits as most important. I believe that they can best help us to find solutions and implement answers.

Q: Why should our listeners care about this development?

TP: We are living in more troubling times - from global climate change, increasing warfare and terror to worldwide hunger, poverty and water shortages. The Yogic teachings focus on the fundamental source of these problems as misguided and confused perceptions and interpretations, and the resulting actions based on them. They are part of large, complex, interrelated forces that are now institutionalized as a worldwide system based on self-interest. Yoga offers us one way to understand what creates this human misery, unless the practice is reduced to physical exercise and the narcissistic concern for looking and feeling better.

Q: You trace how both New Age culture as well as modern medicine have influenced the development of American Yoga, but in clearly different ways. How might members of both "communities" adjust their responses to Yoga to better nurture its spirituality?

TP: Medicine is such a powerful, influential and life-enhancing part of our society that what prominent members of that community think and say holds great weight for the overall populace. It has taken a long time for mainstream medicine to see the positive effects of adapting asana practice to physical illness and injury. That has been such a wonderful development as modern medicine followed the public's fascination with practice.

But the deeper message of Yoga demands an even more widened mind and heart, to explore the roots of our suffering- not seeing our true nature clearly, and how the

resulting aggression and attachment tied to our habitual patterns of thought and action lead to all kinds of mental, emotional, and physical problems that are eventually treated in clinics and hospitals. This means that more health professionals can find out for themselves what Yoga offers their patients as a form of medicine.

The New Age community has long understood Yoga's underlying message, while at the same time involving itself with some rather bizarre, half-baked, or unsubstantiated beliefs and practices. The New Age actually kept Yoga alive as a spiritual practice, as well as the Yogic lifestyle, by emphasizing what is natural, life-enhancing and curative for a world so out of balance. What I think is most important today is that New Age communities and those living lifestyles of health and sustainability stress the importance of serious, sustained practice without resorting to promoting "quick-fixes" or what I call "the workshop road to enlightenment."

Q: You evidently respect someone like the rock star Sting, given the book chapter that covers his life. Isn't this a bit odd, given the thrust of your book suggests that popular media culture has cheapened Yoga?

TP: I suggest in my book that a very important influence in the explosion of Yoga popularity by 2000 was its promotion by many popular media figures in the movie and music entertainment industries, in sports, politics and pop culture at large. While most probably practice Yoga for physical health benefits, including Sting, he is one international pop star whose practice definitely evolved in a more meditative direction while allowing Yoga to subtly affect his art and his life – musical instrumentation and lyrics as well as what he prioritizes as part of his lifestyle. The influence of those with star power, in such a superficial popular culture as ours, cannot be overstated. We are lucky to have thoughtful promoters of Yoga like Sting on the worldwide stage. That is why I included him in my book.

Q: It is also evident in the book that you really care about the spiritual side of Yoga and try to "live it." How did this happen?

TP: In the chapter "Elephant Headed," I tell my own story of Yoga - how it started as a form of health and healing for me, only to slowly morph into a lifestyle practice. I had long understood Yoga's spiritual side on an intellectual level and had practiced meditation for many years. I just had never connected asanas with mind-training through meditation. Breath work or pranayama was the key bridge for me. But it took some so-called luck, a chance meeting with a teacher that would open me to deeper experiences and understandings. As they say in the East, when the student is ready, the teacher appears. Then real practice begins.

Q: In laying out all the social influences affecting what you refer to as the "secularization of Yoga," and knowing your point of view, how do you stay optimistic about Yoga?

TP: Fundamentally, I love Yoga and what it has meant for me and my life. Nothing will change that, pending some unforeseen catastrophe. We can't easily control what happens on the societal level - why countries go to war or why Yoga becomes a fitness phenomena. But we can influence social developments through such things as writing. My writing is a way that I keep positive and hopeful about Yoga.

For example, recently, I was in Paris and wrote a magazine article about Yoga. But it was about "heart-stretching" and not "body-stretching." What better place to do so than in Paris? The article captures for me what is essential about practice - opening the mind and heart through wisdom and compassion that we all can access - and transcending superficial understandings of what Yoga is. That is what I attempt to do through my Yoga teaching as well.

Q: Since this book challenges the way Yoga has evolved in America, what can individuals and organizations do if they agree with your assessment?

TP: We can begin by "getting real", as they say. Talk and discuss ideas in this book. Challenge our complacency. Those who organize conferences, workshops and radio programs and who publish national magazines can begin a serious dialogue about the "social reality" of American Yoga rather than merely emphasizing the idealized version of what Yoga is all about. Only then, by juxtaposing what is real and what is ideal, can we begin to sow seeds for change in American Yoga.

Q: Where do you want to take your practice of Yoga? What is your next book project?

TP: The real challenge for me is to continue to remain aware of my mind and body and heart as I move throughout each day. My touchstone for personal sanity is maintaining a regular daily practice - asana, pranayama, chanting, meditation and visualization, and becoming more artful in putting aside seemingly endless reflection on my mindless distractions and neuroses. So the direction of my practice remains the same, although I certainly am intrigued by both ancient and more modern approaches to Yoga.

As for my writing, I was "driven" to write this book - by my love and desire to offer something meaningful, a basis for opening discussions about American Yoga. As for the future, I think one can be predisposed to fall in love but can never really plan to make it happen. You just have to wait for conditions to ripen and then you get hit across the side of the head. I will know what to write about if and when that happens to me again.