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Ask a Yoga Therapist

Choosing a Yoga DVD?



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Ask the Yoga Therapist

This column is part of a new, ongoing column where you can submit your or your students' questions about yoga challenges and related health and safety concerns. Submit your questions to askatherapist@yogatherapy.com

Q: There seem to be books and DVD's out on every illness and Yoga (ie, back pain, scoliosis, MS, depression, etc.). How do I know if they are right for me? It seems like yoga can cure everything!

A: This question is a mix of the most often asked questions I receive. The availability and ease of producing a media instructional tool presents some interesting challenges to both the producers and the consumers.

We certainly can't look back to the Yoga tradition to find an answer as it wasn't a possibility until the last decade. We also can't wish it would go away because that denies our culture and our place in history. So allow me to offer some considerations for us as teachers and as students as we literally or electronically browse the many offerings available for sale (and there are hundreds more in production today).

Your Shopping Tools are:

Expertise: The ease of production means anyone with enough cash can produce a book or DVD. So the burden is on the consumer to discern the qualifications. Some questions to ask of the product information are: What is their background and training? Are they affiliated with any reputable institutions that would have done a background check (major schools/hospitals, etc.)? Back cover endorsements help but are largely a measure of networking capability. Do a web search to see if there is any discussion about potential problems. A recent search on an Arizona produced Yoga DVD yielded a number of network affiliates across the country doing exposes on it being a form of yoga having cult-like characteristics. There is also a yoga anatomy text out by an author with no evidence of any anatomy training or mention of any academic background. While much of Yoga is of a subtle quality, anatomy is one of the few solid sciences. Again, good marketing budgets can cover soft background substance.

Safety: All products have medical disclaimers for good reason. Other safety factors to check for include: 1.) Are contraindications given for postures and pranayama? 2.) Are modifications suggested to include props and alternative adaptations? 3.) Do the students match the population....are they like unitard gymnasts performing the Yoga for Obesity postures? 4.) Do the authors begin and regularly encourage you to use this product in conjunction with feedback and support of your local teacher?

Format: Does the format allow for you do an entry level practice and then progress or is there only one level presented? Can you skip between practices to build a practice to match your abilities? Do they offer resources for additional learning or local support? Do they have a help line or email support service to answer your questions?

Claims/sensationalism: As always, if it sounds too good to be true, it almost certainly is! Claims of curing and reversing should be red flags to you. If it were so, it would all over the popular media. I have also seen where marketers have carefully toed the line of truthfulness with a recently released back care series. While the exercises provide were part of the study, the program the consumer participates in on the DVD is not what the participants in the study received. The research participants were first screened for appropriateness medically, then taught in a group setting with others which is known to ease back pain in itself, and most importantly were taught by a senior teacher allowed to make certain modifications for the individuals. The consumer gets none of this and therefore in essence just gets therapeutic exercises to do, which the literature shows alone has only marginal benefits for chronic back pain.

In summary I would suggest you categorize these products as resources to explore critically in collaboration with your local teacher. Yoga after all is about relationships not techniques. We as humans heal through our telling and listening to stories, human contact and heart-felt presencing...none of which are offered on a disc. Use these products to spark discussion in your local class. Consider inviting in a local expert to review the product for your class. Your students learn and it allows them to serve the public and network. You can also find quality product reviews in the publications of the International Association of Yoga Therapists (www.iayt.org) where experts are asked to review products. Finally, there is still plenty of snake oil being plied in the form of technological convenience....buyer beware. Ahimsa remains the first Yama.

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