

## HOW TO OBSERVE AN ASANA SESSION By Margaret Pierce (Atlanta, Georgia)

The dancer glides gracefully to her accustomed spot and sighs as she lies down. It is 5.50pm, ten minutes before class. One woman sits knitting intently. Another sits serenely in Ardha Padmasana. Another, face alit, places a rose on my table, while the tense weight-lifter eagerly describes his latest injury.

5.58pm A philosophy student asks urgently, "What is the meaning of Samadhi?" Brakes slam a car to a halt. The driver enters, stepping hastily over the students in Savasana. She can't get into the bathroom to change, the phlegm-spitter occupies it.

I am alert, interested, eyes missing nothing. I've studied yoga, experimented with my own body, and seen thousands of people practice. I didn't learn the art of observing asanas in the university, but I have learned something through experience. Tonight again, I will discover something – about myself as well as my students.

The body is a complicated machine. It is important to observe many postures, not just one, to avoid hasty conclusions, to explore my theories. I'll try to put aside my preconceptions, to avoid the easy game of teaching asanas that I like, projecting my problems and my teacher's prescriptions for them. Investigate. See the whole body and not just the parts. Observing is more than just watching technology in action.

I've set the course. Now I stand discreetly to the side watching the woman who brought the rose. Her face is serene, but her asana falls short of standard form. Her bent arms in Samasthiti reveal a neck and shoulder problem. Her flat lower back in Uttanasana reveals the tightness and tenseness there.

I check joint flexibility by watching fast movements. Then I observe the same movements done very slowly. Slow movements make problems more apparent. The muscles show their strength and weakness. Simple postures tell so much. Some faces are impassive, others confused, some twitching, scolding. Are they scolding themselves, the postures, or me? Is the twitching an expression of excessive muscle tension?

The man who sat so quietly at the beginning of class now does twelve breaths on each side in Mahamudra. His breath is smooth and even, with a pause at the end of inhalation and exhalation. His body, breath and mind unite in the asana. His eyes are fixed in a gaze behind his closed lids. Others perform mechanically, their minds somewhere else.

I am careful about watching the ex-dancer whose form is so beautiful. Her mobility and suppleness are deceptive. She has learned to display beautiful form and conceal her pain. Her Uttanasana is a delight to behold, but after staying just one breath in Ardha Uttanasana her breath becomes ragged, telling the true story about the tension and the weakness in her lower back. Her fourth Ardha Uttanasana tells me more than her first. Fatigue and weakness become even more apparent.

I cross-check my observations. It is easy for one part of the body to compensate for another. Do her loose hips mask a tight lower back?

My "he-man" weight-lifter has great strength but little endurance or flexibility. He recently boasted of performing one hundred pushups. However, he becomes breathless after two simple forward bends. His back rounds painfully as he insists on sitting cross-legged.

The fellow next to him would not win a weight-lifting contest, but he has real strength. He can stay in Salabhasana for many long, smooth breaths, arms forward. He has stamina – that is, the proper mixture of strength, suppleness, and endurance. He has great patience in his Mahamudra. He feels the breath and what is happening through his whole body. He has taken his yoga seriously. I've observed him regularly and taken the proper steps to lead him within his limits, into static postures. He is working independently, beyond the muscle level, observing himself. Yoga is more than mere physical movement. I continue to watch, keeping in mind that the breath is the real indicator of strength. It is the key to observation.

7.30 pm. I've tried to observe with all my senses, not just my eyes. I've observed my students at the physical level. I've seen what they can and can't do. I try to use my intuition, to feel from the inside, to go beyond physical observation in reaching my conclusions. I quietly pour tea and erase the blackboard. I continue to watch. Who will pop up quickly at the end of the session? Who will sit comfortably, reluctant to give up the quiet pleasure of the breathing?

Observation of a yoga session is an art. We must, of course, acquire knowledge. We should develop techniques for observation. Just as important, though, we must develop a relationship with each student. We must also develop ourselves. We must experience life, become confident (not arrogant), and sensitive to ourselves and others. We must live our yoga. Our own state of mind is important to our observation of, and our prescription for, others.