

Picking a yoga teacher needn't cause a strain

By KAREN FOSTER

Staff Writer

For anyone interested in yoga, the first step is finding the right teacher.

My quest began when my shiatsu therapist said I needed to strengthen the muscles in my bad back. After several bad experiences, which had pretty much convinced me to give up the idea of yoga altogether, I was introduced to my current teacher, Hikaru.



Beginners should listen to their bodies in order to get the most out of yoga. AP PHOTO

I was struck by how calm and poised she was, and after she told me the story of how yoga had changed her life, I knew she was the person to help me.

With so many different kinds of yoga available, and so many schools to choose from, it can be hard for a beginner to know just where to start.

"Yoga is a house with many doors," teacher Dominica Serigano says.

A good way to cut through the maze of options is to attend Yoga fest, which will be held Friday through Sunday at the Akasaka Prince Hotel in Tokyo.

There will be a lot of information on schools in the Tokyo area as

well as demonstration classes in which prospective students can try different teachers.

Some schools focus on the physical side of yoga, some nurture spiritual growth more, and others have a community-based focus, according to Leza Lowitz, founder of Sun and Moon Yoga in Meguro Ward, Tokyo. Good schools will have a statement explaining their philosophy and style of instruction.

Serigano, founder of Shizen Yoga Studio in Musashino City, Tokyo, says it's important to start the search for a teacher by considering what you want to get out of yoga. Is it because of the physical health benefits? Is it to get rid of stress? Or is it part of a broader spiritual search?

People who are goal-oriented will want classes that are active, with a lot of sweating -- such as *ashtanga* -- whereas people who want to improve their flexibility might find a style like *iyengar* is better suited to them.

"Attend a class . . . and if it doesn't click, keep trying," Shizen's Serigano says. "People are different. That's why there are so many types of yoga."

The recent yoga boom in Japan also means there are a lot of teachers -- some who might not have very much experience. Lowitz says it's important to find a class where "you feel challenged but not pushed." She also says it's a good idea to observe how the teacher acts "off the mat."

"I personally want to know how that person interacts with other people," Lowitz says. "If they don't treat their staff well, if they're not a nice person, then I have nothing to learn from them."

For the serious student, the general consensus is that it is best to find one or two teachers you are comfortable with and stick with them while you are learning the basics.

"If you have too many teachers at once you will be confused," says Ken Harakuma, founder of the International Yoga Center in Tokyo's Suginami Ward. "It takes time to digest what the teacher is teaching you."

Shizen's Serigano says people are drawn to the teacher that is right for them over time.

"As you are deepening your practice, you'll start to narrow down to one or two teachers naturally," she says.

Beginners are vulnerable to strains or more serious injuries because they often overestimate their body's limits. I got quite a serious strain shortly after I started yoga because I thought I could do more than I was able. Serigano says the attitude that led to my injury reflects our competitive society.

"The body is saying, 'No, I can't do that.' But the mind and the ego say, 'I can,' " she says.

Getting injured scared me, and I didn't return to yoga for nearly a year. But even after getting hurt, you can keep doing yoga -- you just have to work around the injury.

"Once you have an injury, you have to be patient. . . . You have to accept the situation," says Harakuma.

He says that once people start yoga, they quickly realize what state their body is in -- and it can be frustrating, but it delivers one of the first lessons.

"You have to be kind to yourself. That's the starting point," Harakuma says.

It takes time -- maybe more time than most of us are used to -- to gain flexibility and strength.

"Understand that it's a process," Sun and Moon's Lowitz says.

In the end, your body will tell you what's right for you.

Hikaru was the right teacher for me, and while I'm not a what Serenica calls "a yogahead," I can now do everything I used to do.

"If it feels good, you must be onto something good." Serenica says.

Yoga fest will be held at the Akasaka Prince Hotel Friday through Sunday. For more information, go to www.yogafesta.jp/2006/ (Japanese only) or call 03-5793-3477.

The Japan Times: Tuesday, Sept. 12, 2006
(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)