

Don't Be In Conflict With Yoga Society- An Interview With Mark Whitwell

Mark Whitwell is an author and international yoga teacher for many decades. He met his teachers Krishnamacharya (the grandfather of modern yoga) and his son Desikachar in 1973, and realized the gift of breath to all seekers everywhere.



New York City, Jan 2, 2021 ([Issuewire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - Don't Be In Conflict With Yoga Society: An Interview With [Mark Whitwell](#).

Wendy Wright

Wendy is a mother-of-two based in Toronto. After initially training in dance, she became a yoga teacher for children and elderly people. She is passionate about learning more about the wisdom of our bodies and baking.

Wendy: Hi Mark, thanks for coming on today.

[Mark Whitwell:](#) You're welcome. Good to see you.

Wendy: I'd like to talk about something I've been struggling with lately. Which is, a sense of conflict with what I see in the yoga world around me. I just see so much strange mash-up of dance and movement and feel good therapies and stretching and then it all gets called yoga, and I've been part of this myself and I don't feel good about it anymore. And more and more there seems to be a lot of stuff out there shaming people for appropriating yoga and such, but meanwhile, people are enjoying these hybrids and get quite defensive. What's your experience here.

[Mark Whitwell:](#) Yeah thanks Wendy, I hear you on that. None of its valid. Or at least, it's not yoga it's lots of other things being called yoga, and people are getting a little high off that and maybe feel a little bit better. It's the early days of yoga in the West and it's all a big experiment. The young students of Krishna macharia popularised these very physically harsh male gymnastic practices, and they spread all over the world. And then, on the other hand, you have the practice is spread by Hindu missionaries which demand celibacy and so on. And so either way people haven't really been given a practice that fulfills the promises of yoga. They sense there is something more there waiting for them. And so they start trying to add this and that.

But what is needed to be added is not somatic this and trance dance that, it is the actual principles that the guru of those young men (Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois) Actually taught. I have seen people with decades of experience in those systems add the breath principles that krishnamachari are taught, and they are away. They're playing with a full deck of cards.

Wendy: But people are very attached to doing what they're doing and calling it yoga they don't like to hear that maybe it's not.

[Mark Whitwell:](#) Yeah fair enough, and that's fine. It might have given them a little bit of relief, something positive in their life, some endorphins, like a glass of wine give relief. We can't begrudge anyone their sincere explorations. the problem is people start to identify with Wat ever has helped them, and that's when they get stuck because actually, Yoga is about dissolving those identifications so you can stand on your own ground as life itself not as any lesser conceptual categories. What we are talking about here is something more than feel-good gatherings.

Wendy: So what do you do when people righteously insist on their right to define yoga as whatever they feel like it is. For example, they feel good dancing around the room or walking their dog and so they say "that's my yoga."

[Mark Whitwell:](#) Well, what I would say to them is different from what I would say to you. You have to create a relationship with people where they are at and honor their sincere attempts to feel better. That is Life's intelligence happening. However silly. The goal is not to prove anyone wrong but to make some

space for them to actually try what will truly help them. And you can't teach anyone anything until you love them. So what you do is you do your own yoga, your own relationship with life, until you're able to relate with them sympathetically and not react or try to win the argument. Sometimes when people get a little bit of knowledge *about* Yoga, they can become awful to be around because they start trying to prove to everyone else that what they're doing is superior and it puts everyone else's back up. So there's no need for that. Everyone is the power of the cosmos and doesn't need to establish imaginary dominance over others in any way. So the main thing is to do your own Yoga. And if that's happening actually, naturally, and non-obsessively, people will notice. You'll find that some people have an organic curiosity about what you're up to. There's no need to get into arguments at dinner parties. I say, "when do you teach? When you are asked to teach." If someone is not asking you then there's no need to impose on them. There needs to be some receptivity there. But of course, that request might not be a request for yoga it might just be a request for help. And yoga is the help that you have to offer.

Wendy: Do you think that tendency to want to own and define yoga is a western thing?

[Mark Whitwell](#): Absolutely. The western mind wants to define everything, put it in the box, own it. My teacher Desikachar said that "In the West, whilst they don't accept authority, they would like to be the authority." So yes, we can say that there is a colonial impulse there that takes yoga, changes it out of all recognition, and then angrily fights for its right to do so. That is attracted towards very materialistic, aggressive physical practice, such as what Iyengar taught, and then gets injured, blames "the Indian tradition" rather than its own ambition and habit of struggle, and then says we need physios and anatomy to make it 'safe.' The Western savior complex that thinks it can come along and improve this poor inadequate indigenous thing called yoga, that can't be very good because brown people made it up. As if they were not thousands upon thousands of years of sublime history there. Think about the sages wandering that great land while Europe went through two world wars... Anandamayi Ma, Sri Aurobindo, the Mother, Ramakrishna, and Sarada Devi, Bhagavan Nityananda, Shirdi Sai Baba, Ramana Maharishi... completely extraordinary. But we won't gain anything from trying to point this out to anyone who is doing it. Because why are they doing that? They're just trying to feel better in the cultural patterned way they know-how, which is over-stimulation and entertainment, possession, and ownership. So what is the underlying need there? Intimacy. Feeling connected. Wanting to feel better. So what we can do is share the tools of the tradition that have been left behind that do actually make people feel better. The tendency to just get into fights about what yoga is, is part of the same cultural mess, the same illusion of separate mind vs separate mind. You are not a separate individual, you are Reality. And your Yoga is your daily participation in this fact. Whether they are informed about Yoga and yoga traditions, or uninformed, people are still troubled by the same thing which is our reaction to the experience. And so reacting to the reactions doesn't help. It just makes more of a mess. You have to step-free and live your life, share the actual tools, create something. Don't worry about whether you succeed or fail, just keep going. Don't worry if you're misunderstood.

Wendy: I feel so pained teaching yoga and being associated with it all, I have thought many times about quitting teaching because it's all become such a circus.

[Mark Whitwell](#): That's a beautiful honest confession. Thank you for your sincerity and vulnerability. Please don't stop teaching, because these qualities are needed in the world. We need people who aren't just selling shoddy goods to the public, selling patterns to people who genuinely need help, and are coming to you for help. We need people who are willing to share their knowledge of the precise

technology of Yoga that Krishnamacharya brought through from the ancient traditions. There are only three qualifications to teach: that you have a good teacher, you practice yourself, and you care about others. And you, Wendy, have all those three. And so you must teach. You know it. You have a treasure and I guarantee that you can't help yourself but share it. It's like having some food and there are hungry people around you, you want to share it. And when you see the circus going on, don't be in reaction to it. It doesn't define you. What you are doing has nothing to do with all that. Don't waste your energy on it. Let it motivate you to be even more determined to share things that actually help at a deeper level, not just make people feel good for five minutes and then grind along as usual. Everyone has a heart. At some deep level, everyone wants to step out of the cycles of numbness and stimulation, distraction and repression, excitement and despair. Even if it seems to you like everyone just wants gymnastics and a talking circle, don't despair. Share what you know to be true and a few good souls will find you. Do not worry about who comes and goes and whatever their karmas are. Don't take it personally.

Wendy: It seems to me that part of the problem is that people don't admit just how much they are really suffering. It's like it's shameful or something, and there's just this surface level of smiles and laughter, with all this anger and pain underneath.

[Mark Whitwell:](#) Absolutely. That's part of the teachers' role in the traditions, to see that people think they're at a feast, and really there is a kind of desperate hell realm. The glamour has to wear off the illusions. As people relax and start feeling into the real state of the body, as they start regaining their natural sensitivity, they become sober and realize that what looks like an exciting party from the outside is actually a desperate scene of suffering and seeking. No one has to take my word for it, they notice it for themselves. They stop being enamored of the drunken party. A person starts a yoga practice and starts to feel for themselves how they have been imposed upon by culture. It's a shock. But it becomes the further motivation for their practice. To participate in something different than the identity of the limited individual that they have been sold.

So as a teacher you absolutely don't have to try and convince anybody that they are suffering. First of all, you just acknowledge your own suffering. You really honor everything you have been through and every persona that you have been that got you to where you are today, the modern survivor. You thank them all. And you forgive them all for whatever they had to do to survive. And then you just share the breath with people and you share your recognition of them as a valid person, as life, as something that isn't the limited identity they might have bought into of winner or loser or whatever. You make it clear that you are interested in them as a person no matter what they are feeling. Your own practice gives you a capacity of feeling, that you can receive them, no matter what their feeling. You can only receive anyone as deeply as you receive yourself. If they're down you don't try and cheer them up just because you can't handle it. You help them make space for reality. And that helps them make space for Reality capital R, the fact that we are always looked after, nurtured, and supported in this life. That life is nurturing. You can tell people this, sure, but the most important thing instead you feel the truth of it and you share the practical means for them to feel the truth of it.

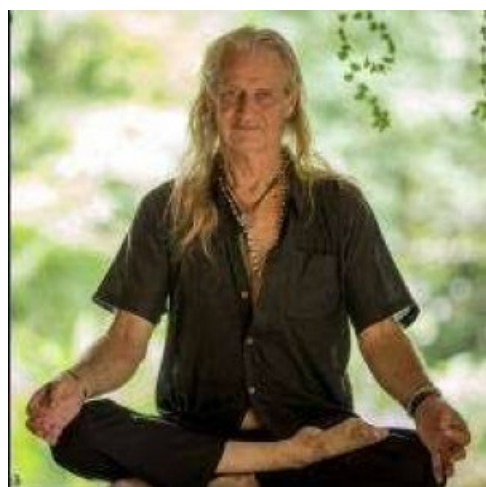
Wendy: Thank you, Mark. I feel like there is potential here to step out of a kind of purity spiral, where I never feel like I'm good enough as a Yoga teacher, never feel like I know enough like I should have more qualifications, read more ancient texts.

[Mark Whitwell:](#) Again, thank you for this beautiful vulnerability. There are so many feeling the same thing

whom you speak for. It's just our old patterning from school and culture of not good enough, the old identity of being lacking, just a hangover of these old patterns. Some of them might hang around for a while, but you know that you ARE in fact the power of the cosmos, you acknowledge this daily. You make some new grooves in your mind. You don't get stuck in reaction even to your own patterning. You have those three qualifications that I spoke about earlier and look, I can tell that you really do care about people. You have all kinds of people coming to you, and you really do care about each one. Thank you so much for caring about each person. I know you do. Don't let these old hangovers hold you back from doing what you can do. Don't let yourself be intimidated by all those climbing up imaginary ladders in imaginary power structures. They get to the top, apparently, and they still feel bad about themselves, they still find themselves looking for power over others. It's all made up. The teacher is no more than a friend, no less than a friend. Not an authority. Not a knower. Not someone hoarding information and doling it out with the stink of enlightenment, the promise of future realization. There is no such thing as future realization.

Wendy: Thank you so much, Mark. I hope other teachers reading this or listening in will feel some relief and inspiration.

Mark Whitwell: Thank you, Wendy. I appreciate your love of the people and desire to get it right for them so much. Thank you.



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