Guiding Question: Can you define yoga for yourself?

Reading from, Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism, by Chögyam Trungpa (1973)

Q: Having stumbled around various spiritual centers, I feel that a personality like Marpa must be a very troublesome phenomenon...for here is a man who seems not to be doing any of the things that everybody says will get you there. He’s not ascetic, he doesn’t abnegate. He looks after his everyday affairs. He is a normal human being and yet, apparently, he is a teacher of enormous capability. Is Marpa the only one who has made the most of the possibilities for a normal man without going through all the tremendous pain of asceticism and the discipline of purification?

A: Of course Marpa is an example of the possibilities open to us. However, he did experience tremendous discipline and training while he was in India. By studying strenuously under Indian teachers he prepared his path. But I think we must understand the true meaning of the words “discipline” and “asceticism.” The basic idea of asceticism, leading a life according to the dharma, is to be fundamentally sane.

If you find that leading an ordinary life is a sane thing to do, that is dharma. At the same time you could find that leading the life of an ascetic yogi, as described in the texts, could become an expression of insanity. It depends upon the individual. It is a question of what is sane for you, the really solid, sound, stable approach to life.

The Buddha, for example, was not a religious fanatic, attempting to act in accordance with some high ideal. He just dealt with people simply, openly and very wisely. His wisdom came from transcendental common sense. His teaching was sound and open. The problem seems to be that people worry about a conflict between the religious and the profane. They find it very difficult to reconcile so called “higher consciousness” with practical affairs. But the categories of higher and lower, religious and profane, do not really seem relevant to a basically sane approach to life.

Marpa was just an ordinary person, involved in living every detail of his life. He never tried to be someone special. When he lost his temper, he just lost it and beat people. He just did it. He never acted or pretended.

Religious fanatics, on the other hand, are always trying to live up to some model of how it all is supposed to be. They try to win people over by coming on very strong and frantic, as though they were completely pure and good. But I think that attempting to prove that you are good indicates fear of some kind.

Marpa, however, had nothing to prove. He was just a very sane and ordinary solid citizen, and a very enlightened person at the same time. In fact, he is the father of the whole Kagyii lineage. All the teachings we are studying and practicing spring from him.