

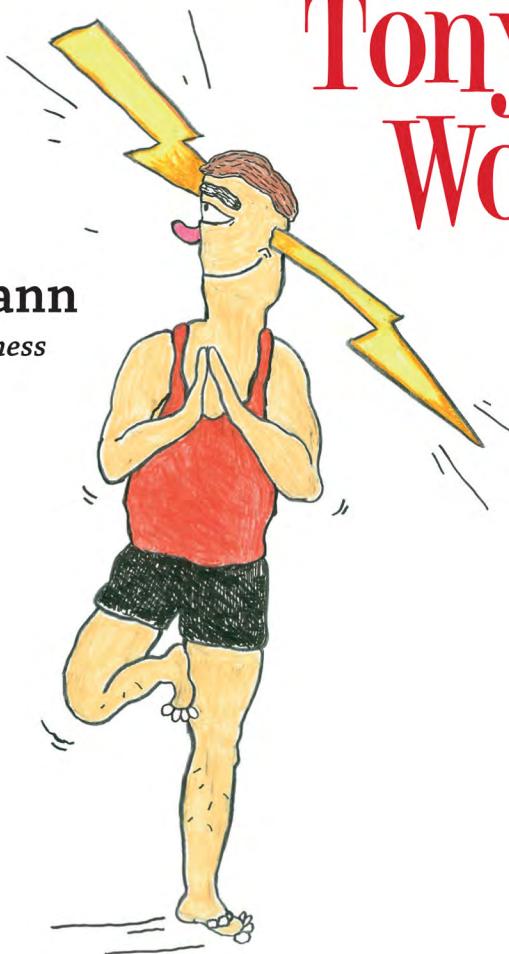
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Lightening Up: THE YOGA OF SELF-ACCEPTANCE

Tony
Wolff

with a Foreword by
Erich Schiffmann
author: *Moving into Stillness*

Illustrations by
Sacha Eckes



“Wolff’s inquiry into the state of contemporary yoga practice is remarkably refreshing. This book encourages us to look with greater sensitivity at the expectations we bring to the mat, and will leave all who traverse the paths of yoga feeling less driven and more at ease.”

—Tias Little, Director, Prajna Yoga, and author: *The Thread of Breath*

“Many of us are driven in our yoga, employing the competitive striving, over-efforting and self-flagellation that work so brilliantly in other areas of our lives. This engaging and useful book shows us less can be more, and a whole lot more fun!”

— Timothy McCall, M.D., Medical Editor of *Yoga Journal* and author: *Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing*

“This is a wonderful work. Deeply spiritually wise, fun and funny. A very useful and insightful view of the meeting of the ancient tradition of yoga with fast-paced modern America.

— Kevin Barrows, MD, Medical Director Osher Center for Integrative Medicine, University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine

“This book has great advice for those walking the spiritual path, and better yet, it is filled with the humor and playfulness that are essential for the journey. Western yogis need this book. Enlighten up!”

— Wes “Scoop” Nisker, Humorist, Dharma Teacher and author: *Crazy Wisdom*

Lightening Up: The Yoga of Self-Acceptance combines findings from neuroscience, physiology and scientific studies of mindfulness with traditional teachings of yoga to remind us that the body doesn’t lie. This book is a must for any yoga practitioner, beginner or expert alike.”

— Sandra Blakeslee, NY Times Science Writer & author: *The Body has a Mind of its Own*

“Tony Wolff has made superb use of his knowledge of philosophy, psychology, and spirituality to create a very accessible book on yoga as a medium for transformation. This is a truly useful handbook for yoga practitioners, teachers, and all those seeking to increase their bodymind consciousness.”

— David Richo, author: *Wisdom’s Way*

“In this book, Tony Wolff offers an approach to yoga that allows us to receive its sacred gifts. We are reminded that all healing and freedom becomes possible when we approach asanas (and life!) with sincerity, non-striving and a deep acceptance towards what arises.”

— Tara Brach, Director, Insight Meditation Society of Washington, D.C & author: *Radical Acceptance*.

Lightening Up: THE YOGA OF SELF-ACCEPTANCE

with a Foreword by Erich Schiffmann

Illustrations by Sacha Eckes

Tony Wolff

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Warning:

Buy this book at your own risk. It will fill your head with many thoughts, some you'll recognize, and maybe some that are new. But, remember: the only good thought is the one that reminds you to stop thinking.

“Abandon all thoughts, then
don’t think of anything.”

—Svatmarama, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*
(4.57), 14th century CE

“There is nothing either good or bad,
but thinking makes it so.”

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

“I try to stop thinking
but nothing happens.”

—Curly Howard* *The Three Stooges*

“You think too much, that is your trouble.

Clever people and grocers,
they weigh everything.”

—Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*

STAN: Well, I know if it was me, I'd sit down and relax, I'd close my eyes, and I'd concentrate and I'd think of nothing. Wouldn't be long then, that's what I'd do.

OLLIE: Say, I think you've got something there.

STAN: I know I've got something. Why don't you take a whirl at it?

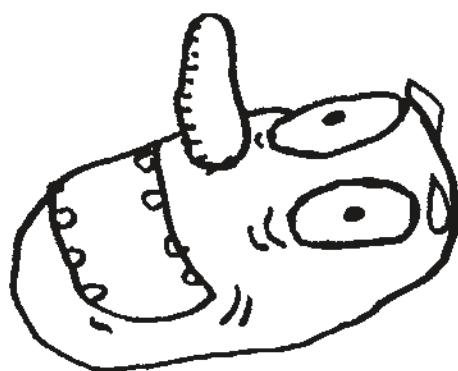
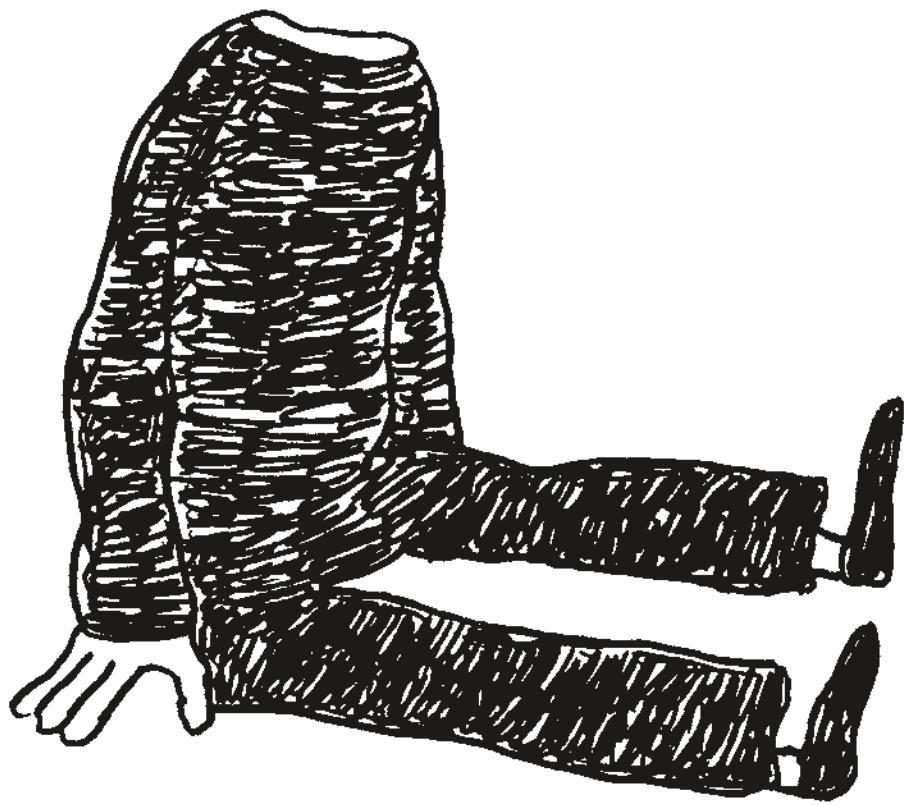
OLLIE [sits down, supports his chin in his hands, and closes his eyes]

STAN: Now don't think of anything.

OLLIE: I won't.

—From Laurel and Hardy, *The Flying Deuces**

*Courtesy of Richard Rosen, thinking not-thinker.



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First and foremost to Jack Kornfield, who came into my life many years ago, and whose teaching deeply influenced this writing. When this book was little more than a few chapters, Jack read them and encouraged me to continue. Normally, he said, he doesn’t read yoga books since he isn’t a practitioner. But when I worried that the Five Not-So-Noble-Truths might seem too flippant to a dedicated Buddhist, Jack laughed and assured me I was on to something.

I am deeply indebted to the teachings of T.K.V. Desikachar. His perspective and guidance have helped this often cranky body and stubborn mind find great joy in yoga.

This adventure began with a phone call to Wes Nisker, dharma teacher, humorist, author, and exponent of crazy wisdom. I knew that the ability not to take myself so seriously is sometimes the only grace available. He reminded me to smile.

To Robert Hall, dharma teacher, poet, and therapist who encouraged me to write what I know.

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To Saul David Raye, who reminded me that the essence of enlightenment is to lighten up.

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To my friend Clyde Freedman who always holds a mirror up to me when I get a little too full of myself. Then all I can see is my own reflection.

But mostly to my son Ian, I acknowledge and dedicate this book. His own perseverance and fortitude to follow his muse has been truly inspirational.

Foreword

!

Self-acceptance is the healing balm or potion
that, because it makes you feel radiant,
shines outward from your body
and makes you look radiant, too.

And why does this seem so hard or so far-fetched?

Self-acceptance is not settling for second place.
Accepting yourself as you are
is not a substitution
for what you can never be.

Self-acceptance is the glad and gracious recognition
of what you have always wanted
and never been without.

—*Erich Schiffmann*

Preface

The first chapter of this book languished on my desktop for three years. When I showed it to my teacher as an idea for an article, she asked why I wanted to write it. I couldn't give her a clear answer. I mentioned the struggle that had been a part of my own practice for so long. I pointed to the quest for improvement in our particularly American style of yoga classes. I told her of the countless folks I've met who quit their practice after painful physical experiences, of the experienced practitioners who diligently aspire to the perfect splits (*hanumanasana*), their faces contorted as they push through the pain, believing at some level that the gates of Yoga Heaven are guarded by angels who've mastered the pose.

But it wasn't until last year when my life was turned upside down by an unforeseeable event that I finally realized the reason for this book: as traumatic as the experience was, it reminded me that I can control nothing except my attitude. An attitude of self-acceptance is the only way to find harmony in a world that cannot otherwise be controlled. And a yoga practice infused with self-acceptance is a great way to cultivate that attitude.

As I write, fog blankets the Big Sur Coast at the mouth of Rocky Creek. It seems impenetrable as it slides south. Yet at the crests of its wisps, it disappears into a rich blue, endless sky.

To the east where Long Ridge climbs from the sea, tanbarks are brown in the July sun, victims of Sudden Oak Death. Through my binoculars, I can see the wilted, dry leaves—fuel for the fire that some day will again consume the canyon in nature's endless cycle. Chaparral blankets the hillside. Not unlike the fog to the west, it gives way to the verdant greens of Monterey pine, Douglas fir, and California redwood. These are survivors of countless generations of man-made and natural attacks. As I focus on each tanbark, it looks so forlorn, so used up and forgotten. Yet as I draw my eye away from the binoculars, I see these once mighty oaks within the patchwork of the living mountain. Their part in the dance is so obvious, natural, and necessary.

It's just a question of where to put my attention, and what "magnification" I trust to help me see.

Many mornings when I practice, I see quail skittering out of the bushes, bustling through their morning meal. One morning, a young rabbit joined one of the quail. The bunny would jump up, then the quail would jump higher. The quail would return to tease the rabbit as it jumped again. It was a dance. They were playing. Several weeks ago a doe and her fawn came right to the window and glanced in, their curiosity seemingly aroused by the sight of me on my mat. They welcomed me with their presence and lack of fear. Yesterday they returned, the fawn's walk more surefooted, its spots fading.

Before sitting to write this afternoon, I took a nap. I dreamed of a doe in the living room, her head caught between the stiles of the spiral staircase. I came up to her and freed her head. She licked my hand, her black nose shiny. I woke.

The dead tanbarks still stand across the canyon. A dog barks, yellow jackets buzz, a spider web glistens before me. The sun, well past its zenith, arcs to the sea.

There is so much here, right now.

It's not rocket science. It doesn't require donning white robes, chanting into the night. There is no need to perform 108 sun salutations. It's simple but it ain't easy. Just remember the Five Not-So-Noble-Truths: Slow Down, Breathe, Pay Attention, Relax, and Lighten Up.

Actually there are six, since Lighten Up should be in there twice!

“I, not events, have the power to make me happy or unhappy today.
I can choose which it shall be. Yesterday is dead, tomorrow hasn’t arrived yet.
I have just one day, today, and I’m going to be happy in it.”
—Groucho Marx

Introduction

Has yoga lost its mind?

—*Jill Satterfield*

The world doesn't need another book on how to do yoga postures. Instead, this book provides a new way to approach the *asanas* in whatever style of yoga you enjoy. It is intended as a counterpoint to the performance and achievement orientation of so many uniquely American variations of yoga that often fail to realize yoga's promise of increased peace of mind. That orientation reflects a cultural belief that you can achieve anything if you just try hard enough. This book is, quite simply, a training manual for finding and trusting the wisdom of intuition to chart your own course towards well-being. Your body knows your truth. And since you're spending all this time putting it through this rigorous work, why not listen to what it's saying?

For an understanding of asana within the context of a complete yoga practice, I am particularly indebted to, and highly recommend, the writings of T.K.V. Desikachar. His lucid reviews of the life and teachings of his father, Tirulamai Krishnamacharya, are inspired. While many sages and teachers through the millennia have influenced the yogic tradition, Krishnamacharya's efforts are in large part responsible for much of yoga as we know it in the West.

I was raised somewhere between the meticulous golf courses of Pebble Beach and the natural madness of Big Sur. I was drawn to the wild coast but never stayed; could never find solace in the uncertainty. A force deep inside always drew me to that creative energy where I'd stand with charred redwoods at my back, salt spray pouring through the summer fog against my face, yet I'd always return to the predictability of fairways, to where I knew that the second followed the first as surely as the eighteenth finished the day. In more ways than one, I gravitated to the manicured consistency of green.

At age 10, I received a fellowship to an acting academy, my teachers seeing a useful outlet for the class clown. Yet during the performances, I'd feel the same churning in my belly that I would later feel standing at the mouth of the Big Sur River,

watching cliffs crumble into the sea, massive breakers filling my head with the surf's howl. The energy was too disquieting; I quit the acting company.

This allowed me to get to my newspaper route early enough to beat the other kids to the streets. I knew the rules here, where value was measured by the weight of the coins in my jeans. I remember the smell of oiled oak at the bank teller's window and the ink-stamped dates of my deposits. The blue-hairs would cluck in appreciation, wagging their chins, complimenting me as concretely as the dimes I dumped before them. I'll never forget the first green bills I unwrinkled from the pocket of my jeans, smoothing them out on the marble counter as the teller's penciled eyebrows arched in appreciation. For much of my life, the only balance I knew was in my bankbook. I loved to see the interest grow. I was well primed for performance, achievement, and pursuit of the American Dream.

Many years later, after much material success that nevertheless failed to obscure the ineffable longing still calling me somewhere I couldn't define, I was introduced to *vipassana* meditation and its emphasis on returning my attention so that I could observe the breath, the sensations of the body, and my mind's activity. With nothing to do but sit, breathe, and watch the turnings of my mind, I became a diligent practitioner. Then I discovered yoga and a way to use the messages of my body as mindfulness reminders. I embraced it with the same sense of purpose I'd used throughout my life: if this was good, more must be better.

But a funny thing happened on the way to perfection: I kept hurting myself, and my body just wouldn't bend the way those yoga calendars showed. I became increasingly dissatisfied. So I became a teacher. If I just studied and practiced a little harder, my body would surely behave. One day, on my way to class, I stepped off the curb and felt a sudden twinge, like an electric shock, run from my sacrum through my left buttock down my leg. I froze, more in fear than pain. I remember thinking, "What would I do if I couldn't be a yoga teacher?" My self-image trembled as panic set in. Over the next couple of days, tension gripped my body, just as doubt gripped my mind. Then one morning, as if I was outside myself looking down at my mental gyrations, I watched the conclusions I had reached about what this pain meant. In that moment, I was somehow granted the grace to see the folly of my mind's dance, and from somewhere in the midst of the pain, I started to laugh.

In that instant I learned the power of self-acceptance. The pain didn't disappear, but the tension did. My mind, this set of thoughts that had trapped me in despair, was equally adept at deciding to lighten up and look at the whole situation differently. A course of action for dealing with my physical discomfort seemed completely obvious. Such insights and attitude shifts are totally accessible before the

physical or mental pain occurs. The mind has the power to change itself through the Five Not-So-Noble-Truths: if you are able to slow down so you can pay attention to what is actually happening in the mind, breathe deeply to keep focused on how the thoughts change from moment to moment, relax enough to be willing to see the mental and physical patterns that keep you trapped in reactive behavior, and most of all to lighten up so you can see your mental dance without fear, judgment, or justification.

Derived as a playful nod to the path out of suffering described in much greater detail by Buddhist teachers, there is nothing particularly unique about these Five Not-So-Noble-Truths. They are tools for you to achieve the benefits of what Krishnamacharya described as a “science of the mind.”

“Ask yourself: why are you doing yoga?
Is it so that you can show others that you can get your head
closer to your knee? Or is it to find peacefulness inside?”
—Nischala Devi

A yoga of self-acceptance allowed me to finally find balance between the clarity and precision of external direction, and the creative and inner truth I’d failed to honor. I hope that *Lightening Up: The Yoga of Self-Acceptance* does the same for you. All it takes is patience, faith, and a sense of humor.

To help you with this attitude adjustment, you’ll find quotes from a number of well-known yoga teachers, plus thoughts from scientists, writers, yogis, Buddhists, philosophers, and comedians. All are intended to remind you of the real message of this book: if we didn’t take ourselves so seriously, we might just enjoy our brief moment on this mortal coil.

“You grow up the day you have your first real laugh at yourself.”
—Ethel Barrymore

A Note On The Practices

Throughout the book you will come upon practices to engage you. If you are reading in an ebook format, you will be able to access the audio or video directly. If you are reading an actual book, you can access the media through the URL's accompanying each practice. They begin with **yosa.co/**. Key in the shortened URL and you'll connect to the audio or video for that practice. If you would prefer to read the text, it is included. But since many of the practices are internal, doing them with your eyes closed, even the videos, may be beneficial. The audio tracks may be helpful as you go inside.

After completing many of the practices, there will be a place for you to answer questions and take notes. I recommend that you take whatever time necessary to reflect on each practice. Then the teachings become about your experience, not my ideas, which is after all, the goal of a Yoga of Self-Acceptance.

CHAPTER I:

The Contradiction of Progress

In your life, please emphasize the means, not the goal

—T.K.V. Desikachar

We are beginners for 25 years if we do asana practice every day. I'm not quite sure from whom I heard this originally, but it's offered me more freedom and peace of mind than all the alignment instruction of my own 25 years of practice. Since I haven't practiced every day, I assume I can call myself a beginner for a while longer.

Certainly, most teachers worth their sticky mats have the standard schpiel on the importance of "beginner's mind." But there is always an implicit pressure to progress. The concept of "progress" has struck a wonderful chord among goal-oriented Americans. For many, asana practice has become a substitute for the boredom of aerobics or running. It's a calmer way to get the endorphins flowing.

"The running craze melded into the yoga craze; a lot of runners were destroying their bodies so they switched to yoga, but they wanted to get the same high from yoga. The problem is yoga is only slightly less destructive if you approach it with the same attitude of trying to get that high."

—Leslie Kaminoff

The beauty and tyranny of many American approaches to asana practice is that there's always somewhere "better" to get to. Perhaps you're only in level one or two classes (though you do sneak in to the more challenging classes once in a while and regret it in the morning). Or perhaps you've progressed to "advanced classes" or second or third "series," continually challenging yourself to move beyond the restrictions in your body that keep you from perfecting the asanas. It's no wonder that the National Association of Chiropractic Physicians may be planning to sponsor next

year's *Yoga Journal* conference, out of gratitude for sending so many pulled sacroiliacs, strained knees, and hamstring insertion injuries to its members.

It is easy to forget that asana is only one of the Eight Limbs of Astanga as defined by Patanjali (and differentiated from the astanga style popularized by Pattabhi Jois). The goal of Astanga is to reduce suffering through increased self-awareness of the connection between the individual self with the greater whole. The first step to realizing that connection has always existed is to reconnect the mind and body. They've been artificially separated by our cultural emphasis and mental dominance. If asana practice were about putting your body in certain positions, then any contortionist could start an ashram.



“Yoga is not (attained) through the lotus posture and not by gazing at the tip of your nose. Yoga, say the experts of yoga, is the identity of the psyche (jiva) with the (transcendental) Self.” —*Kula-Arnava-Tantra*,
Translated by Georg Feuerstein in *The Yoga Tradition*

This quote is not from some glossy new-age journal. It is from an ancient text that predates much of the *hatha* yoga literature. Asana has a set of mechanical rules that are intended to help the practitioner become comfortable enough to leave them in the background.

Asana is about effort. It is the effort first of waking up to present experience: noticing if you are struggling, and training yourself, moment by moment, to be present. In that respect the physical postures are simply a tool of meditation. The messages of the body are mindfulness bells. They provide an anchor to bring the attention back to the breath and to the part of the body that is “speaking.” Thich Nhat Hanh, with only a little irony, suggests that as you drive around with the mind spinning recklessly, there is a wonderful opportunity to pay attention. Each time you come to a stop sign, use the “sign” to truly “stop” and bring yourself back to the “right now.” So, too, you can use the messages of the body—especially those we might describe as uncomfortable—as reminders to come back to the present.

“Slowing down allowed me to notice all these fascinating feelings and sensations happening inside my body—pleasant and unpleasant. As I stayed present with my physical body and all of its sensations, it became a training ground for me to stay and be present with emotional issues as well.”

—Jill Satterfield



At a stop sign along the Via del Corso in Florence, Italy, someone was channeling Thich Nhat Hanh: Stop and Breathe.

Spiritual seekers often strive for a non-wandering mind. Yet Jack Kornfield points out that meditation is not about how long you can sit without extraneous thoughts jumping in. Rather it is the repetitive realization that the mind has wandered. Each time the realization occurs, the work is simply to come back to the body and to focus on what's going on at that moment. More than doing anything to or with the mind, the goal is simply to notice what "is."

"All men's miseries derive from being unable to sit in a quiet room alone."

—Blaise Pascal

Often in practice there is a psychological reaction, a mental tension that accompanies the physical sensations. But because of the pervasive bias towards progress, and because of the belief fostered by many teachers that you are simply in fear that must be overcome, the emotional and psychological discomfort seldom becomes a subject for attention or investigation. With a teacher's encouragement, your face may soften, your breath may deepen, and you may become aware of the specific muscles being engaged. But seldom is the mental tightness that accompanies your practice brought into conscious awareness. If the yoking doesn't occur—if the connection isn't made between

what your body is doing and what your mental chatter is saying—then the body learns over and over again that stretching is accompanied by stress, not release. While there might be exhilaration or calm at the end of a session, these benefits are often achieved through a lot of disconnection between mind and body—and they are fleeting.

“You have to slow down to really experience yourself deeply [so you can] penetrate into the habitual gripping in the body. The ego is a grip on the body.”

—Richard Rosen

There is a world of difference between the spaciousness to which the liberation of yoga can lead, and the tightness and constriction of the *dukha* (suffering) that accompanies most of our waking lives. Zen teacher Joko Beck writes that the response to fear accompanying our earliest post-natal experiences manifests as physical pressure or tightness. Each person has a pattern for responding to the normal and extreme stresses of life. Beck recalls that Gurdjieff called the strategy each person develops his or her “chief feature.” It is the style developed at a very early age for handling pressure.

“Some respond to pressure by working harder, others by working less. Some evade, others try to dominate. Some get busy and talk a lot, others become quieter than usual.”

—Joko Beck

Poet, psychiatrist, and meditation teacher Robert Hall works with this internal pressure. In his bodywork therapy, and in his poetry, he emphasizes that the energy spawned by feelings of fear and anger becomes locked in your body and manifests as physical and mental tightness. By first becoming aware of the places in your body where these repressed energies are locked, it is then possible to free it of the muscular restrictions. But, without first acknowledging the connection between fear or anxiety, and physical tightness, release is impossible. Asana practice is often directed towards overcoming fear rather than first acknowledging

fear's very role in the tightness. This creates a continuous feedback loop of physical discomfort and self-doubt.

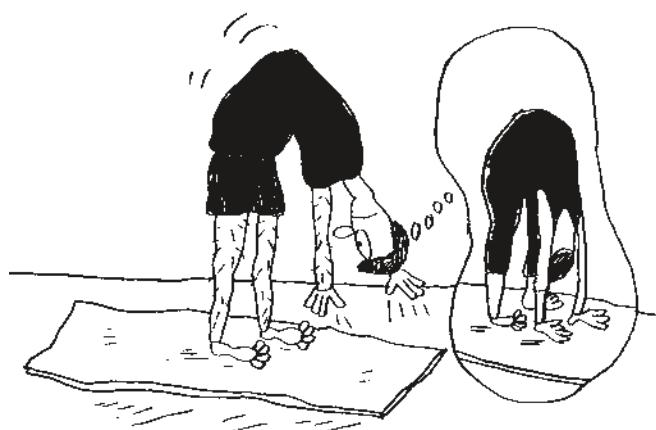
“The very act of ‘seriousness’ tightens the mind,
instead of allowing a sincere openness to all possibilities.”

—Saul David Raye

Certainly there is much to be said for “no pain, no gain” at the level of physical and mental discipline. We each have personal stories of the exhilaration that follows overcoming some obstacle. Those who practice the more active forms of asana, such as the followers of Pattabhi Jois or Bikram, know that physical exertion can overcome mental chatter. But if this result is accomplished through patterns that have led to emotional and physical suffering in the first place, then one cause of suffering is simply being substituted for another.

“Trying to force yourself into a ‘mold,’ into your idea of how a posture
is supposed to look, is doing violence to your body. What you’re
thinking is part of the posture. When I teach, I do it slowly, from the
inside out rather than the outside in. It frustrates a lot of people.”

—Richard Freeman



In *The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice*, Desikachar points out that unless the body is in a state of *sukha*, *sthira* alone cannot bring the mind/body into the state for true advancement. *Sthira* is the steadiness and firmness that accompanies effort and concentration. *Sukha* is comfort, ease, and expansiveness (the opposite of *dukha*). It is impossible to prepare for the deeper states of astanga without it. In these deeper states, you truly come to know yourself from the perspective of the equanimous observer, accepting both strengths and weaknesses as equal measures of who you are.

“It is only possible to find the qualities that are essential to asana if we recognize our own starting point and learn to accept it.”

—T.K.V. Desikachar

Edward Espe Brown, former abbot of the San Francisco Zen center and chef par excellence, describes his style of cooking as “what’s in the fridge.” The analogy to the *sukha* that could free one’s life from struggle is obvious as he describes how cooking should be about what is available. Certainly it is necessary to stock up on ingredients. But at the time of pulling a meal together, you always have the choice of paying attention to what you failed to get, to run around trying to find the missing ingredients, or even to go to a cookbook and read someone else’s idea of what a great meal would be. Or you can open the refrigerator door, take a deep breath, look inside and let your eyes scan what’s there. Then you can prepare your meal with what’s available.

Asana practice can be similar. Training, practice, and discipline are valuable. They stock the shelves. But coming to practice each day, seeing and knowing exactly what the package is with which you have been blessed, can be a truly liberating experience.

“People think asanas are to be mastered and perfected according to some external form that has some esoteric value in and of itself. They are, among other things, mirrors that help us see and understand ourselves.

—Gary Kraftsow

Mark Perlman is a fabulous painter and professor of art at Sonoma State University. He tries to get his students to see *what is*. He suggests, “Squint your eyes, look beyond what you think you see and look for the forms, lines and planes inside all your conclusions about what is. Don’t get hung up in the details.” Seeing *what is* sounds so simple. But there is a learned tendency to bring the filters of assumptions, ideas, and thoughts about that thing called a “chair.” It’s got four legs, a back, and you remember how it feels to sit in it. But what is really occupying that space? These same filters can keep your yoga practice separated from the essence of the postures you are trying so hard to perfect. If you’re human, you probably hold an idea of what a really cool person looks like in each asana you practice. But as long as you focus on that image, it is impossible to “see” or “draw” its essence. There is always a reality beyond the filter of expectations through which a posture is viewed. It’s such a relief to remove that filter, to let go of perspective, and just to be aware of what is.

Accepting *what is* requires a deep awareness of how your internal critic—those mental voices of advice, admonition, and correction—guides your viewpoints, perceptions, and behavior. Those internal directions are often so pervasive as to be downright daunting. It’s all well and good to talk about being present, but if there’s something else pulling the strings, you’re not present at all. I believe one key to seeing, accepting, and working with the internal critic is humor. There’s a certain freedom in the willingness to lighten up a bit and not take this all so seriously. This does not mean falling into the sluggishness that Buddhists call “sloth and torpor” or worshipping at the altar of the couch potato. Notice the expression of anyone who has that air of acceptance about them. Then compare that to a class full of diligent students, and you judge. It just takes a little practice. Later chapters will offer very specific ways to help you learn to lighten up.

“This goal oriented ‘we’re going to do it at all costs,’ attitude is the world’s greatest killjoy. There’s no sense of appreciation because we’re so solemn about everything. The best gift you can give yourself is to lighten up and be curious.”

—Pema Chodron

Now over 25 years in print, *Jitterbug Perfume* is one of Tom Robbins’s more insightful spins on the ironies of being human. The protagonists achieve immortality through two secrets of everlasting life. One is the miraculous power of beets (leave

it to Robbins to make fun of his own brush with philosophizing); the second is an awareness of “erleichda,” which roughly translated means to “lighten up.” Yoga is serious business. Asana practice requires a diligence and determination to stay present. But that doesn’t mean you need to beat yourself up.

Try giving yourself 10 seconds, 20 minutes, or an hour and a half to be just where you are. The irony is that the critic’s power can be suspended simply by noticing its presence. Then the body will begin to open in ways it never has before. As Dorothy discovered in *The Wizard of Oz*, the critic would love us to “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.” But just noticing the critic’s presence will diminish the pressure it exerts.

The key to letting go is noticing your unwillingness to do so. You can’t stretch a knot. It is first necessary to untie the mind before the body will follow. But because of unconscious patterns, it is often the body that reminds you how locked up the mind truly is. Pay attention to your body, and it will set you free.

“Children are born connected to their inner truth. But at a very young age they are taught not to trust that sense. While we are all connected to each other, at our center each of us is a unique individual. Unless a person can feel connected to one’s own energy, as opposed to an outer ideal, it’s the wrong path.”

—Saul David Raye

Coleman Bark’s translation of Rumi’s “Love for Certain Work” really got it right:

Traveling is as refreshing for some as staying at home
is for others. Solitude

in a mountain place fills with companionship for this
one, dead-weariness

for that one. This person loves being in charge of the
working of a community. This

one loves the ways that heated iron can be shaped with
a hammer. Each has been

given a strong desire for certain work, love for those motions, and all motion

is love. The way sticks and pieces of dead grass and leaves shift about in

the wind and with the directions of rain and puddle water on the ground, those

motions are following the love they've been given.

Erleichda, and make your motion your own. That is true progress.

CHAPTER 2:

What's It All About, Yogi?

It is not only a question of seeing things as they are, but of seeing yourself at the same time, and the reactions that take place within you.

—*Swami Prajnanpad*

I became a diligent yogi in my third grade classroom. Before you get too impressed, I wasn't in the third grade. As an adult, I'd returned to the town where I grew up, and found the local yoga studio housed in what had been my grammar school. I walked through the front door that first day, remembering and wondering.

Remembering all the past moments: staring up at the wall clock, watching the second hand click through interminable minutes, waiting for the final tick before the bell rang; the coats hanging on the tarnished brass hooks, dripping from fog that blew wraith-like though the pines on my walk to school; the pocked oak desks where pencil points ground into the hard wood; the mullioned windows negotiated by drunken flies, wandering up and down, trying to escape.

Wondering about all the future moments: worrying about my skill compared to the teacher's, assessing fantasies of the other students' lives, considering the class level I'd chosen, hoping it was not too hard nor too easy, busying myself with what might happen.

Then I rolled out my mat, sat with eyes closed, felt my breath and a subtle calm cutting through the clutter of past and future. For the first time since coming back to this town, I was home.

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself why you do yoga? I'm sure the answers seem obvious: to build strength and flexibility, to become more calm and centered, to deal with stress, to make a spiritual connection, to transform. But why do you want those things? The answer generally gets down to some variation of wanting to feel better than you felt before yoga.

“Yoga done over time will lead to different results than you expected.”

—Timothy McCall, M.D.

Within the answer to the “why” of doing yoga lies the essence of humanity itself. From a cellular level up through complex bodily systems and on to the entire organism itself, humans are genetically predisposed towards well-being. While that fact may run counter to everything your mind says, you are put on this earth with a natural inclination to be well. And well-being is enhanced when there is *balance* in your component parts, right up to the whole YOU. Regardless of how macro- or microscopically you look, balance implies that the elements comprising a cell or system function in a maximally efficient manner. That efficiency is characterized by the ease with which the components interact. When balance is absent, when health and well-being flag, that state is often known as *dis-ease*.

Think about the times (hopefully not too infrequent) when your life is going well. Nothing needs to change, things are working smoothly, your mood is one of calm awareness and an overall sense of harmony. While there may be rough edges, there’s no compulsion to fix things or to strive for any “if only” or worry about “what if.” You are physically and mentally in balance.

“You have to be serious, but not too serious.”

—Richard Rosen

While it may seem obvious, the best way to support your body’s inherent tendency toward balance is to choose balanced actions in your life. But seeking that sweet spot between effort and ease is not automatic. Quite to the contrary, our culture teaches that effort is the path to happiness.

At the beginning of my vipassana training I went on a 10-day silent retreat. Prior to that experience, I was about as good at keeping quiet as a blue jay. I was the kid in class who couldn’t be bothered to wait to be called on. Raising my hand to speak seemed like a waste of time. And my running commentary on the teachers’ lessons often landed me in the principal’s office. By the time I was an adult, being quiet for 10 days, let alone sitting still while doing it, was inconceivable.

Coming into the meditation room on that retreat, I saw a couple hundred other souls, all of whom, I was sure, knew exactly what to do. After a few hours on the first day, in spite of my diligent efforts to bring attention to my breath, my mind was like a caged animal. And the cage seemed to get smaller and smaller while the animal kept growing. After a couple of days, every muscle in my body screamed. The opera going on inside my body and mind was a tour de force and I didn't want to wait for the fat lady to sing.

Since I'd decided not to cut and run, there wasn't much to do besides sit and watch and kvetch. You can imagine all the internal voices: "You dummy, what are you doing here? You think you're going to find something? You know you never should have done this. You're such a fraud, sitting here in pain while all these other people are meditating." It continued, ad nauseam. Then I began to notice that all the things I was afraid of didn't come true. I didn't die. Blood was not running down my leg when I sneaked a peek at what I was sure were gaping wounds where my knee cap had exploded through the flesh. The pain I thought excruciating turned into vibrations of hot intensity and then changed to softer frequencies. My desire to bolt never went away; it just receded behind the attention I paid to my breathing and sensations. All the thoughts that were so incredibly frightening at first began to make me laugh out loud. Everything was constantly changing and nothing was solid.

One evening during seated meditation I became acutely aware of crickets chirping outside in the warm summer air. The sound increased as if the volume had been turned up. I began feeling the sound changing to vibration in my body. I was pulsing; suddenly, there was no difference between the sounds of my body, the other sounds in the room, and the sounds from outside. It was all vibration. I was filled with a complete sense of peace and connectedness. Most profoundly, I felt absolutely no need to do anything different.

Needless to say, this, too, was a fleeting experience. But it was as if a curtain had been pulled open. I had only been paying attention to a very small part of *what is*. That awareness let me know all the stuff I worry about was just *stuff*. It wasn't some underlying Truth. Instead, the Truth lay in the very sense of ease and connectedness I'd felt when I stopped trying so hard. Accessing it just required getting out of my own way and unlearning everything that had taught me otherwise.

"We can rely on the breath. It's what we can eventually surrender to because it will do its job if we simply let it, if we just get out of the way."

—Leslie Kaminoff

Yoga has the power to slide back the same curtain. It is a way to break old habits that keep in place the false separation between all your parts. The rules of physical alignment can help this process, but to attend to the physical without incorporating mental or emotional reactions is like buying a car with no tires on the wheels: you get the general idea, but it doesn't work very well.

"Throughout the spiritual literature, earnest well-meaning disciples have been chastised by their masters for being too strict with the rules. There is an emotional hunger and longing that cannot be transcribed into a box of rules. Sometimes humor is the only way to get people to realize that."

—Paul Grilley

Part of learning any art is the acquisition of the skill that makes it possible. But skill is not the same thing as art: it's part of it, but not equivalent. The rules of alignment are one small part of the art of yoga. If they are used to bring the body's natural drive for homeostatic balance into consciousness, then they have served their purpose. However, if physical prowess is achieved without an integration of mental energy, then the longing for balance that leads one to yoga in the first place will continue to grow.

"Look carefully! It is just as important. You must see what is not there, what has never been done before."

—Pablo Picasso

It has only been several generations since the practice of hatha yoga was limited to twice-born male Brahmins. Today, according to *Yoga Journal*, 72 percent of practitioners are female. In large part through the efforts of Krishnamacharya, the glass ceiling was forever broken on the sticky mat, if you will forgive the garbled metaphor. But why have women driven the growth of yoga in the West? I am certainly not qualified to answer this question. I can pose it, and in reviewing the comments of the female teachers with whom I spoke, offer a conjecture. I raise it at this point since it seems to tie directly into what I see as yoga's real value: a set of tools that allows you to recapture a path to your inner truth.

Many boys and men live in a world that idolizes physical achievement, often in a highly competitive milieu. When men begin hatha yoga, they tend to make it one more competitive vehicle measured against the same criteria as other physical activities. Because competence in yoga is often measured by flexibility, men often find themselves lacking. The pace of the physical changes accompanying a yoga practice, occurring as they do over time, is diametrically opposed to men's desire for rapid progress.

Our culture teaches girls and women to value others often to the exclusion of themselves. At its best, this belief system (which builds on the survival mechanisms of nurturing and caring for the young) honors service, consideration for others, and selfless action. But in its extreme, women lose themselves in their efforts to please others.

Yet women seem better able to appreciate the pace of the physical achievements of yoga. This may be due to gender differences in innate flexibility, but I doubt it. Here at the level of external physical achievement, women seem much more able to appreciate and not get lost in the small steps their physical bodies go through. In so doing they feel better about themselves. Men often end up feeling worse.

So here again we come back to the question of "Why do yoga?"

Kim Wolff teaches the critical role of the heart in yoga practice. She came to yoga from a career in the helping professions. She realized after the first day on her yoga mat that after a lifetime of putting others first, these moments were just for her.

When I put this question to Kim, here's how she responded:

Why do I do yoga? When I consider why I began practicing many years ago and why I practice now, I see so many differences...and so many more reasons to practice. Some days it's because my low back is killing me and I know yoga will help ease the pain. Some days it's because I feel anxious and I know that I will always, always feel a greater sense of calm after my practice. Some days it's because I know my biceps and triceps will "look better" if I throw in those *chaturangas*...that my waistline will be slimmer...my tummy tighter. Some days it's because I feel blocked and I truly believe in the increased flow of energy or *chi* that comes from yoga. Some days it's because I think my internal organs will enjoy being massaged by the asana, enjoy the attention, and therefore work better.

I was always taking care of others, and now I'm finally taking care of myself and it feels really good. That also allows me to give even more to others but in a way that comes from a deeper place in my heart.

It's all about balance. A balance that may call for increased physical competence or a willingness to let a softer presence emerge. The work is not only physical. In fact, the most difficult work may be slowing down enough to see your ingrained patterns. Then the appropriate physical steps you need to take in order to counter those patterns will be obvious. Once that clarity emerges, you may find you're able to hear the small voice of your intuition that has been with you all along.

“Self-acceptance is fundamental. Change can only happen by knowing where you are starting. And you start by embracing where you are.”

—Gary Kraftsow

CHAPTER 3:

R&R Redefined

There is no rule to follow about rest: if we need a rest we take one.

—T.K.V. Desikachar

It's old news that Americans are addicted to work. From the Puritan ethic to the painting *American Gothic*, from the angst of *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* to all those tycoons whose Ferraris sit idle in Silicon Valley because their owners don't have time to play with their toys, striving for something *more*, even when there's no assurance that more is better, is a uniquely American characteristic.

“There is an explicit message that it is possible to do all these postures, no matter what your beginning limitations; the implicit message is progress, progress, progress. It doesn’t lead to freedom, it leads to myopic uptightness.”

—Paul Grilley

America has the second lowest rate of vacation time of all industrialized countries (saved from the bottom rung by Mexico). Twenty percent of all workers fail to take the vacation time they've been allotted. When they do, vacations tend to follow much of the same frenzied pace as normal workdays.

While the rest of the world watches in bemused reflection, there is nonetheless an admiration for the American belief that anything is possible, if one just tries hard enough. From my earliest days, I remember *The Little Engine that Could*. Over 100 years old and still in print, its celebration of perseverance influences kids to this very day. The book is alternatively described as an ode to optimism or a screed on the emptiness of the American Dream. At its best, the American Dream honors optimism. At its worst, it cultivates self-doubt and feeds the comparing mind.

How can we maintain our optimism—the belief in our inherent ability—without succumbing to self-criticism?

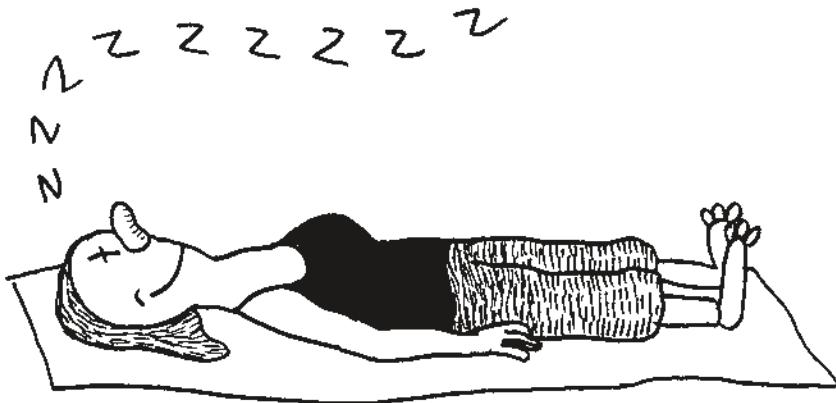
Once again, attitude is everything.

Over the last decade there has been a burgeoning of sleep research centers, together with tools and techniques to help a culture of insomniacs. A few years ago, I went to one of these sleep centers, since I was concerned I was sleeping too much. I learned that most people visit for the opposite reason: theirs is an inability to sleep through the night.

I was asked a series of questions, including whether or not I ever felt like nodding off during a conversation, if I got sleepy when I drove, or if I felt like sleeping during the day. My answers to these and other questions convinced the doctor I was a prime candidate to spend a night in a cold room, hooked up to 25 electrodes attached with an ice-cold bonding cream to various parts of my body and skull. I was placed in a hospital bed, green and red LED lights blinking everywhere, and told to get a good night's sleep while they monitored me. Not surprisingly, I didn't sleep much and when the results were read, I was told I had a sleep problem.

But the best part of this story was the second opinion I got. Let's just say I felt the results were skewed a bit in the direction of recommending I buy a very expensive "sleep enhancement" device. So I went to an eminent researcher in the field. He didn't think I had a problem; in fact, he was jealous. He admired the fact that my lifestyle allowed me to sleep as much as I do (and even to take naps when I want). "We are a sleep deprived culture," he said, "trying to move faster and faster to keep up with the demands of our days and expecting our nights to somehow be different." How is it that rest and recuperation have been relegated to the junk heap of "as available," always last on our to-do list?

One of the reasons yoga has enjoyed such a boom in the West is the respite it can provide from our work-oriented culture. How many classes have you attended where you were racing to fit yoga in either before or after work? How many times have you heard (or felt your own) snoring during *savasana*? The very act of relaxing leads many people to fall asleep, simply because they are finally able to let go of the stress that occupies their daily lives. I wonder how many people have gotten speeding tickets trying to get to or from yoga class.



Finally plopping down on the mat and hearing the music, or just the silence, is often such a wondrous relief. In simply providing a space to let go, yoga classes provide a clear benefit. Yoga has morphed from its roots as a completely spiritual practice into a wonderfully secular form that doesn't require or demand a spiritual component. It satisfies many practitioners with its assistance in building strength and flexibility in a fashion that can also have a remarkably calming effect.

I was speaking with an ex-football player who was introduced to asana practice in his health club. It was an extremely challenging form of Power Yoga, one that taxed his physical abilities. But the main benefit he derived from it was the teacher's constant focus on the breath. He found it a remarkable tool simply for learning to be less distracted. He had gone to yoga class to increase his flexibility; he discovered an entirely different benefit.

“People come to these very strong asana-based practices because it’s giving them a sense of vibrancy and aliveness. All that energy is great, and particularly appropriate when you’re young and strong and flexible and restless and need all of that.”

—Anne Cushman

I'm not suggesting we give up on the strong effort (*sthira*) that characterizes half of Patanjali's definition of how to be balanced in asana: *sthira sukham asanam*. But too often Americans seem to have adopted *sthira* on steroids. Balance can only be balance if it balances opposites. And the balance that is a centered, grounded asana can only come with equal parts of effort (*sthira*) and alert relaxation (*sukha*).

“It’s like extreme sports have come to yoga. There are tremendous physical benefits that come from *hatha* yoga. But when that takes precedence over the union of mind and body, then it’s not yoga anymore.”

—Jill Satterfield

Since the strong practices can have so many benefits, I am often asked whether taking the lightening-up approach might not mean that we’d all end up as a bunch of couch potatoes. Asana is hard work. Hard work is hard, and it is work. If it’s too easy, we might not be willing to challenge ourselves to move past our resistances. The state I’m pointing to is full of effort, but it is effort without *striving*. It is effort borne of an awareness of the constantly changing nature of the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual bodies. It’s hard work to pay attention.

Since our culture so admires the act of striving, it’s easy to lose sight of the balance yoga is about. The precision of alignment, the step-by-step progress as your body opens, the pictures on the front of *Yoga Journal*—each of these things can easily fall into sync with the rest of our harried and goal-obsessed lives.

“When I first studied with Iyengar, it really fit in with my mindset. It was like math, and I love math. I loved having it mapped out and verbalized. It began to bring my mind into my own experience in my body. I did what I was told. But over time, something just got dammed up, something wasn’t right. I stopped going to class, holed up and let the energy teach me. I trusted that. It was slow and confusing. Trust built, but it was not quick.”

—Erich Schiffmann

I was once leading a class on a beautiful Mexican beach. We were doing a long hold in Warrior Two, and I was also in the posture. We closed our eyes. I became aware of the sound of the breeze through the palms and against my skin. I heard the waves continually lapping on the shore, each one with a sound of a slightly different frequency. Just as the vibrations I felt in that first vipassana retreat melded with my body, I was aware that all these sensations in my ears and against my skin were the same as what was happening inside. Except now my body was also working. I asked the students to feel the sounds in the muscles of their legs and hips. Here

was a seemingly static posture, one where great effort was being expended. Yet by feeling the work as a continuous wave of changing sensations, effort changed to ease. The work could continue with a much different attitude towards it.

The state of well-being generated by endorphins is legendary among runners. After all, they are the body's natural morphine. But the only way to stimulate endorphins is through the stress of intense physical exercise and the pain accompanying it. I imagine Patanjali might question this process. By adopting a more balanced approach, "gain" truly is possible without pain.

“Endorphins are like any other drug. You might get high from it but in the long run it's still a drug.”

—Richard Freeman

I am certainly no student of Sanskrit, let alone a scholar. But perhaps because of my simplistic reading of translations, a certain clarity comes through the teachings that may offer a way out of the self-defeating game you may experience in yoga practice. And it might blend into the rest of your life as well. Patanjali warned of the allure of *avesha*, that rush of blood that so often motivates us to pursue pleasant experiences that lead to enticing but temporary relief from suffering. Whether from endorphins, or the short-term rush that accompanies the latest diet fad, exercise routine, or Pilates video, how many times have you discovered the “perfect” process?

Patanjali might argue that each of these vehicles could be considered yoga if they lead to “a calm, clear awareness.” If, as is more often the case, they lead to what he termed *avidya* or misperception, they cannot be yoga. Each becomes one more false god, one more temporary respite from personal suffering.

When Patanjali codified the oral traditions that have come to be known as yoga, he wasn't interested in whether or not you could put your big toe in your ear. Nor did he feel that various bodily manipulations somehow presented a new stairway to heaven. He was building on a tradition that simply recognized how much people suffer regardless of their physical prowess. Material or physical gifts, or religious training, made no difference.

Once again, as I'm introducing the concepts of rest and recuperation, it is critical that you not view this as an ode to laziness. To the contrary: the beauty of asana practice is in the dance *between* effort and relaxation. Both are critical.

“R&R” in military parlance refers to rest and recuperation. It is something granted after the demands of wartime. You have the luxury of realizing you are not at war. Your life, and especially your yoga, are not battles to be won. You don’t need to recuperate from anything. Resting and relaxing during moments of effort will not make you lazy. Both are imperative to build real strength, the kind of strength that makes it possible to trust that you’ll be able to hear your own music. Then the effort can be enjoyed.

“KEEPING QUIET”

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still

For once on the face of the earth
let’s not speak in any language,
let’s stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines,
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would not look at his hurt hands.
Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victory with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity
life is what it is about,
I want no truck with death.

If we were not so single minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.

Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve,
and you keep quiet and I will go.

—Pablo Neruda
(translated by Alastair Reid)

CHAPTER 4:

The Mind And Its Shenanigans

Life is what happens when you're busy making plans

—John Lennon

When Thomas Jefferson first penned the Declaration of Independence he immortalized what has become an American obsession: the *pursuit* of happiness. Jefferson did not say that happiness was our inalienable right, only the *quest* for its achievement. In so doing he helped crystallize the root of much of the dread that befalls modern culture. We are constantly in a process of seeking something beyond what we have.

Do you remember the Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote? If you're younger than 30, search them at youtube.com. Wile E. spied on the Road Runner, planned and schemed to catch him, but somehow the speedster would remain tantalizingly out of reach. Then Wile E., with his eyes on the goal, would be crushed, folded, spindled, or mutilated by some unseen force that always interceded as the Road Runner sped away.



Image courtesy of Chuck Jones Center for Creativity Looney Tunes characters © & TM Warner Bros.

Wile E. never learned. While a more Zen approach might have limited the sequels possible for this long running cartoon series, it would also have broken the

ineluctable link between these two characters. If Wile E. had just sat down, been still, and happy with what he had, it might not have bothered him a bit to watch the Road Runner race off into the distance. I wonder if the Road Runner might not have seemed to run quite so fast had Wile E. not been in hot pursuit. But that too is a horse (or a Road Runner) of a different color.

“Find a way to slow down, find a way to relax, find a way to relax your mind and do it often, very, very often.”

—Pema Chodron

For thousands of years, the mystical traditions of the East have taught that freedom from the vagaries of human emotions lies in the simple (but again, not easy) process of waking up to the moment-to-moment experience of being alive. The goal of those tools, separated from their ritualistic trappings, is exactly the same as that explored by mystics in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

They each point to a state not unlike that reported by athletes whose peak performance seems to put them in a zone: their experience of the outside world diminishes, and they are completely present and focused on the task at hand. Many regular folks report similar experiences when engrossed in a favorite activity, be it gardening, listening to music, drawing, or walking in the forest.

“It will always be the ball and me.”

—Tiger Woods

What exactly is this experience? It certainly isn’t limited to meditators, spiritual pilgrims, or new-age pabulum. Many athletes describe it as intense attention with complete relaxation and a trust of the body to do what it has been trained for. Focus is direct. Past and future drift away. There is nothing but the present. This is not a moment of emptiness. It is, as Erich Schiffmann describes it, like the stillness created by a spinning top. When the top’s centrifugal and centripetal forces are in balance, all that energy is concentrated in stillness. Anything unrelated to the subject of concentration fades from awareness.

“It’s a relaxed but accelerated feeling. You lighten up by slowing down but you’re not ‘slower’. Your energy actually accelerates.”

—Erich Schiffmann

Jill Bolte Taylor is a brain researcher at Harvard University. She experienced a stroke several years ago. She was able to remain aware of much of her experience even though the left hemisphere of her brain, with its invaluable planning and comparing skills, ceased to function. The left brain is where planning turns into achievement. When functioning well, it is the left brain that makes sure our ducks are in order. Taylor’s right brain remained completely functional so that when the left brain checked out, she found herself in a wondrous state of calmness brought on by being conscious only of an ongoing series of present moments with no concern for past or future. As a completely westernized researcher, she found this state something she described as *nirvana*. She used that term because of the peace, sense of connectedness, and lack of worry it evoked. Her experience is described in a video available at www.ted.com.

“It’s not ‘paying’ attention: it doesn’t cost anything.
Relaxed attention, relaxed attention.”

—Rodney Yee

Taylor’s experience reminds me of what Jack Kornfield describes as the “lens of awareness.” Being totally present can be experienced either as deep immersion in the moment, becoming one with the object of attention, or it can widen out to an awareness of what the attention is doing. It is this latter ability that combines awareness with intention to form the essence of what many call mindfulness. This term, translated from both Sanskrit and Pali, takes a concept from Eastern traditions where there was no separation between mind and body. The seat of mindfulness is known to reside in the heart/mind. But because of the Western tradition of rational dominance, the term leaves the impression that mindfulness resides somewhere between our ears. I prefer to characterize this state as “Intentional Awareness,” where you consciously direct your attention to what you are experiencing at each moment.

Prior to my first introduction to meditation, I thought spirituality and religion were the same thing, and the connection wasn't particularly positive. My religious experience was limited to listening to prayers I couldn't understand and to incredibly boring men droning on in self-important tones. There was a temporary uplift one summer when I was invited to religious services by an incredibly attractive girl. I suddenly got religion. Only problem was, upon entering the sanctuary, I was overcome by a huge wave of nausea. Suffice it to say, it was all down hill from there.

So when I walked into the auditorium years later and saw the white robed mystic sitting on a bed of chrysanthemums, surrounded by hundreds of roses, the fragrance of the flowers mixing with incense and the sounds of Sanskrit chanting, I wasn't too enthusiastic. But something about the energy the master projected, much more than his words, led me to take the next step and actually be introduced to what he called the "practice" of meditation. It was presented in a particularly American way, 20 minutes twice a day... I could swallow that.

And so I showed up for my "initiation," was given a *mantra*, a two syllable Sanskrit phrase to repeat, over and over again; that was it. Say the phrase; repeat until I heard the bell. When I became aware that my mind had wandered, the instruction was just to return to the mantra. And so I sat, and repeated it with as close to an open mind as I could muster. I have no idea how much time actually passed when I had the sensation of hovering over my body, looking down at it. The mantra was there, somewhere, the sounds of the street were there, somewhere, but most of all there was just this huge feeling of observation, of neutrality, of peace and calm as I looked down on myself. Time no longer existed until some other thoughts became aware that "I" was looking down on myself. I panicked, though at what I don't know. As if I was being sucked down a funnel, I was suddenly back in my body, aware that my heart was beating as the bell rang.

I wanted that experience back. I didn't understand it but it was the most peaceful I had ever felt. And though I had no label for it, this felt like the spirituality all the books seemed to be talking about. Just a simple heartfelt sense of connectedness. All of the mental chatter, the desire to improve, to fix the loneliness and all the problems in my life just went away. I was simply there. And I wanted to be there again.

So I became a diligent practitioner. But after a few weeks, I seemed unable to focus on the mantra. Instead I was only able to see, hear, and feel my breath. It was like waves at the ocean. And this was a problem. It was a distraction because I wanted my mantra. I was sure it held the key. I went to my teacher and explained my dilemma. He just smiled and said to keep coming back to the mantra. It was so annoying... I quit meditating.

Fifteen years later, in another auditorium, with more roses, chystanthemums, incense and chanting, the teacher said there is nothing to do but pay attention to your breath. Let it fill your being like a wave in the ocean, rising and falling. I didn't have the good sense to laugh at the dance my mind had put me through so many years before. But I kept meditating and every once in a while, a smile crosses my face as I sit. Mantra or breath; golf ball or flower bed—it's all right there. You just have to pay attention.

Intentional Awareness is not unlike Desikachar's description of the yogic journey. He sees the reintegration of mind and body to be a function first of the *intention to be aware* of everything that is going on in the present moment without the clutter of conditioning. It requires great effort to see that conditioning from a neutral place. So *awareness* is critical. It is enhanced and enlivened by linking *attention* to the breath with the movement of the spine and limbs. And so *Intentional Awareness* is one integrated whole, including everything that is occurring in the mind and body.

Hatha yoga provides a way to notice what is actually happening. But exactly because so much is going on, it is necessary to slow down so that both sensations and reactions can be experienced. This allows you to also observe the mental jabber that is often a reaction to the sensations. You are using Intentional Awareness when you decide to come back, over and over, to an integration of the physical and mental. They are both part of a whole, not separate entities.

“I was never given the luxury (in a yoga class) to stay in the pose long enough to notice what was actually going on in my body. So I started holding the poses longer. It allowed me to see the subtleties of my body and allow my mind a chance to investigate the form my body was in. Then I could see the relationship between my mind and body. That’s one of the most important benefits of yoga.”

—Jill Satterfield

The ability to place your attention in an observational, non-judgmental way on the breath, on physical sensations, and on mental reactions gives you freedom from the belief that all that mental chatter is the truth. To simply notice you are thinking paradoxically gives you some distance from the thinking process itself.

“Yoga is fundamentally about the nature of mind. The bottom line is simply to be present. Asana can be a platform for clearing away the conditioning that keeps us from being present.”

—Gary Kraftsow

The quest for perfection, advancement, and self-improvement often cloud the ability to stay present. How many times has yoga class been a place of comparison? Paul Grilley, who teaches Yin Yoga, has a tremendous grasp of human anatomy and its implications for hatha yoga. He presents a compelling case for self-acceptance: at a skeletal level we are constructed completely differently from one another. He provides a wonderful release from comparative self-criticism: “It’s my bones’ fault!” Paul and his wife Suzee have studied the physical characteristics of skeletons and have found remarkable variations from one to another. They show how the shape of one’s bones can actually prevent full articulation of some of the more traditional yoga postures. Armed with this knowledge, you can learn whether limitations might yield or dissolve after more time and attention, or whether such range of motion is simply not possible for your body.

In these reprints from Paul’s website, he shows two femur bones whose angle of insertion into the hip socket varies by 40 degrees! The implication: each of the splits or wide angle forward bend of these two individuals could also vary tremendously—and the person in possession of the more restricted femur would not be able to overcome that 40 degrees by chanting *Om*, eating organic food, or memorizing Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* in Sanskrit.



Paul also shows a front view of two pelvises. In one, the openings for the femur are visibly pointing forward. In the other they are rotated so far to the rear as to be invisible. While there are clear differences between the male and female pelvis, such variations are also evident within each gender. Imagine the impact of that variation on those bodies' asanas! And yet it's so easy to fall victim to the feeling that if only you had tried a little harder, you could have done it.



“A lot of yoga practice is to just expose the mind for the silly thing it is.”

—Richard Freeman

CHAPTER 5:

Remembering to Remember

The more we notice our emotional chain reactions and understand how they work, the easier it is to refrain. It becomes a way of life to stay awake, slow down, and notice.

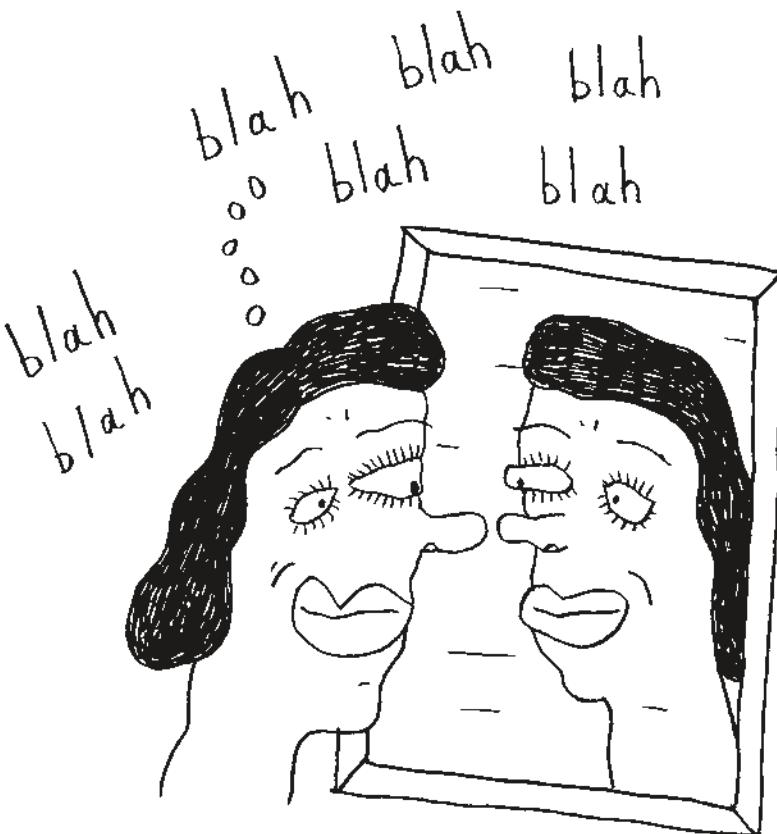
—Pema Chodron

By applying Intentional Awareness prior to unrolling your sticky mat, you can enhance the tranquility of your practice. Paying attention to what's going on in the mind is a wonderful preparation for practice. Noticing the resistance, fear, or hope that is present as you go to yoga class will paradoxically release you from these expectations. You will be in a position to simply experience *what is*.

It is a simple but challenging task to pay attention, to be mindful of each present moment. For those times (quite frequent, I expect) when diligence fails, I'll offer a few parlor tricks intended to "fake" you into the present moment. Let's look first at mindfulness as it applies to thinking—those seemingly endless conversations and arguments that seem to take place somewhere behind your eyes, apparently disconnected from the rest of your corporeal being. Freedom can be found simply by paying attention to this activity, noticing that you are thinking, and labeling or naming what the mind is doing as "planning," "remembering," "criticizing," "judging"—ad infinitum. The mind takes you on such wondrous voyages. It's easy to lose sight of the trip you're on.

"To be aware of the constant dialogue that goes on for all of us is maybe the practice of yoga."

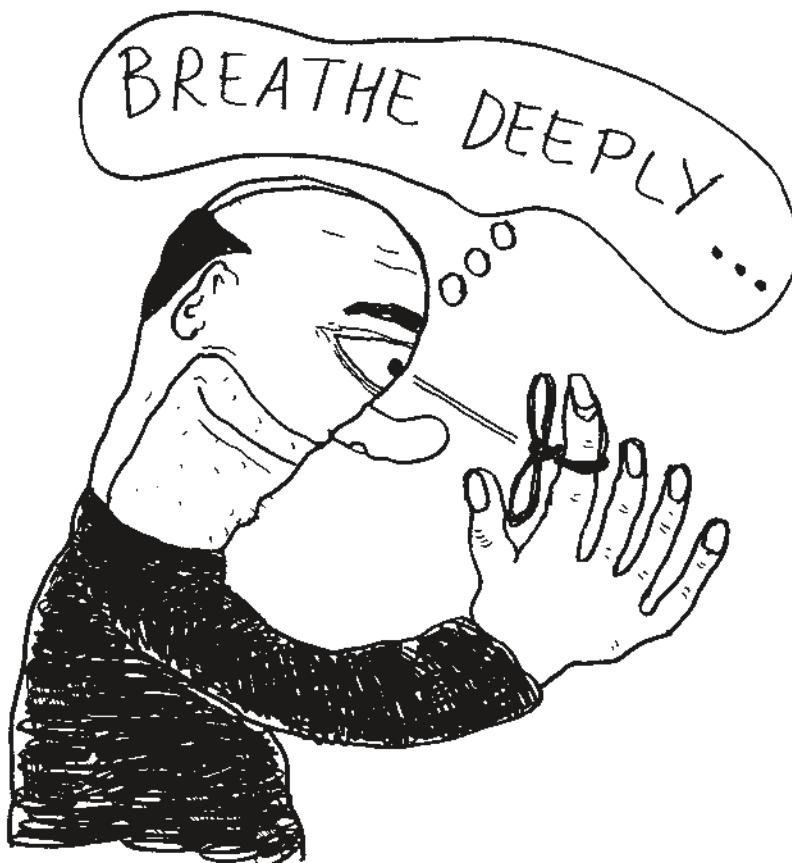
—Rodney Yee



How do you begin to notice, and remember to pay attention? It's tough; I forget most of the time, and I'm the teacher! You can purchase a *zafu* (meditation cushion), a statue of the Buddha, a meditation tape, or attend classes. But let's take a lesson from grandma: the first way to wake up to the present moment is to tie a string around your finger.

Originally intended to get kids to remember something important, you can also use it as a reminder you're thinking, and to come back to the present. Then it's possible to bring your attention to an object of your choice. The simplest and most direct object is the breath. It happens all the time, all by itself. While its fluctuations are somewhat within conscious control, the act of breathing is not. It is accompanied by clear and distinct physical sensations that are repetitive and constant.

Realizing that you can direct your attention virtually anywhere is one of the first steps in preparing your new approach to yoga. It is one of the best applications of



Intentional Awareness. Here's the secret (it's a tongue twister): be aware of where your attention is. *Aware of Where*. Then, once you notice *where* it is, use your mind's eye to reel your attention in to where you *want* it to be. This becomes a conscious, intentional choice that brings you closer to awareness of the totality of what is actually going on.

The string-around-the-finger and other examples I'll present throughout this chapter are variations on a parlor trick memory experts use all the time. They rely on *mnemonics*, something that's easy to remember, to help recall something harder to remember. The string reminds you to pay attention to your breath.

When your mind is spinning about some future or past event, if the string comes into awareness (don't fret about all the hours you'll wear it and never notice) just take a moment and notice that you're thinking. Then bring your attention to a point just below your nostrils and breathe deeply, using your visual imagination to "watch" closely as you say "inhale" and "exhale" to yourself.

“One’s destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things.”

—Henry Miller

This is the highest use of the mind: deciding what to focus on. You are deciding all the time. Unfortunately, since so many thought patterns are habitual, you forget that you can choose what to think about instead of letting repetitive mental patterns do the choosing for you.

“It’s not what you’re doing, it’s how you’re doing it. Reframe.

Next time the phone rings stop and take a breath before automatically responding. The phone is a breathing alarm.”

—Leslie Kaminoff

Just as the string can help you remember your breath, your breath is a great mnemonic to remind you to return your attention to the present. It is always present without conscious awareness. But you can choose at any moment to become aware of it. That decision immediately brings you back from wherever your mind has been. Once you experience the familiar, comforting assistance that awareness of the breath can offer in your quest to pay attention, it becomes a constant friend. It is a monitor of mood and a balm for mental afflictions. Find yourself in a difficult mental state and you will, in all likelihood, find yourself with short and shallow breathing. Consciously altering those short breaths into deep, full exhales and inhales can have a profound effect on your mood. Moods suddenly stop being these things that happen to you. On the darkest days everything seems insurmountable; shift to a good mood and those same obstacles become minor bumps.

“Let us not look back in anger, nor forward in fear, but around in awareness.”

—James Thurber

PRACTICE: BREATH VISUALIZATION

 <http://www.yosa.co/a1>

- Bring yourself to a comfortable seated posture and close your eyes.
- Bring your attention to your nostrils and “watch” with your mind’s eye as the breath passes in and out. Get curious.
- When (not if) your mind wanders, and you become aware you are not paying attention to your breath, just say “thinking” to yourself. Don’t get caught up in what you are thinking, but use your Intentional Awareness to drag your attention back to your nostrils. This may happen many times. See if you get annoyed or anxious. Can you just gently reel your attention back to your nostrils without judging how well you’re doing? Probably not, if you’re human, so just “look” at your self-criticism.
- Now get curious about the nature of the inhale and exhale. Watch and feel as the breath passes in and out. Describe the sensations inside your nostrils. Listen for the sound of the breath. It is perhaps cool on inhale, with a bit of a tickle, warmer on exhale. See if there is any pressure in your nostrils or if one side is more open than the other.
- After several breath cycles, try to find where the breath goes after it comes in. Visualize it passing into your lungs. This is all imagination but can add the physical feeling of the pressure building in your chest on the inhale and release on the exhale.
- Soften your belly as you inhale the next time, then actively draw the belly in as you exhale.
- Use all of your senses to examine your breath.
- Take notes on your experience.

—Were you able to see your breath?

—Did it feel or sound different on inhale and exhale?

—Where did it go after your nostrils?

—When you added awareness of pressure in your chest and belly, what happened?

—Did your mind wander less or more as you got curious?

—What happened when you realized your mind had wandered?

—Did you react or were you able to just come back to the breath? Be honest with yourself. Try to recall what went through your mind.

What could be easier than paying attention to the breath? No big deal, right? But were you able to actually observe the breath for more than one inhale and exhale without the mind wandering elsewhere? Not too likely. Once the mind has become separated from the body, its job seems to be to get you to do whatever it can to keep you disconnected. It fights and resists when you try to slow down and pay attention to something as simple, direct, and constant as the breath. This is particularly strange since all the mind's advice would have you believe it alone knows the path to happiness. It is so easy to get trapped in the loops of mental gyrations, believing that if you just figure out which internal voice to listen to, everything will be wonderful.

The secret isn't how many breaths you can count. It's just seeing that the mind, like a curious kid, has wandered off again. Don't get caught up in or bummed out by its wanderings. It's possible to take advantage of the mind's curiosity by directing it. First, notice how the mind has wandered off. Then gently and without judgment draw it back to the breath. The mind may seem like a house of mirrors. But it holds within it the power to control itself. Curiosity about what is happening in the present moment is the key.

“Curiosity has its own reason for existing. It’s a miracle
that curiosity survives formal education.”

—Albert Einstein

Curiosity about the physical sensations that are actually happening can free the mind from wondering about how the practice is going. Curiosity takes you away from comparing and into experiencing. It draws attention away from the external and redirects it towards internal reality, as if changing your perspective from looking through a telescope to viewing parts of yourself through a microscope.

This is not unlike the advice of Thich Nhat Hanh relayed in Chapter One to actually stop, and breathe when coming to a stop sign. The mnemonic is a reminder to come back to the present.

“Yoga is really mind training and that’s what’s
lacking in much of the yoga culture.”

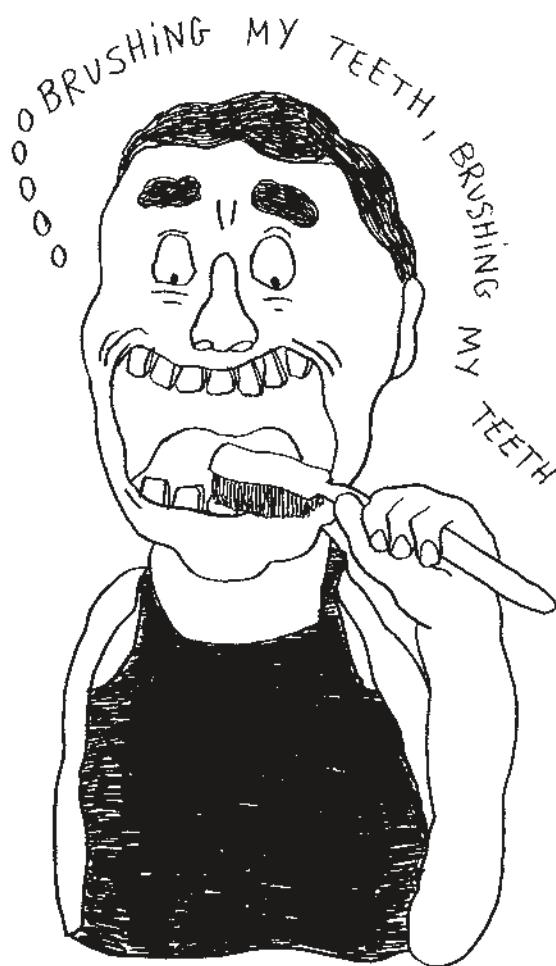
—Tias Little

The next time you are in your car at a stop sign, remember Thich Nhat Hanh's simple suggestion to stop and breathe. Then go immediately to an office supply store and buy a packet of red dots. They are the kind you can stick on things but that come off when necessary. Please don't do this if you're racing to some critical event. But if you can steal a few minutes for yourself, go to the store and watch all the mental steps you go through to buy the package.

Then, when you're back in the car, place one in the middle of your steering wheel. Each time you race to your car preparing to head off to who knows where, your mind will be spinning with all you have to get done. At such frazzled moments, the little dot is intended to remind you to stop and notice that you are thinking, to bring your attention to your nostrils, and to breathe. It will bring you back to *now*.

Just prior to the fall of the Soviet Union I decided to go to Russia. The language seemed totally overwhelming, if only because the Cyrillic alphabet didn't look anything like English. I found a wonderful language series that included the title *Russian in 10 Minutes a Day*. It seemed like my cup of tea since it had no intensive study program. I found the adhesive-backed flash cards particularly useful. They had Russian names for many common objects around the house. It drove my wife crazy to see these two-by-three cards stuck in the strangest places. Yet for me, they not only taught the specific words, they also reminded me to pay attention to thinking in Russian. These cards were mnemonics. They were mindfulness bells.

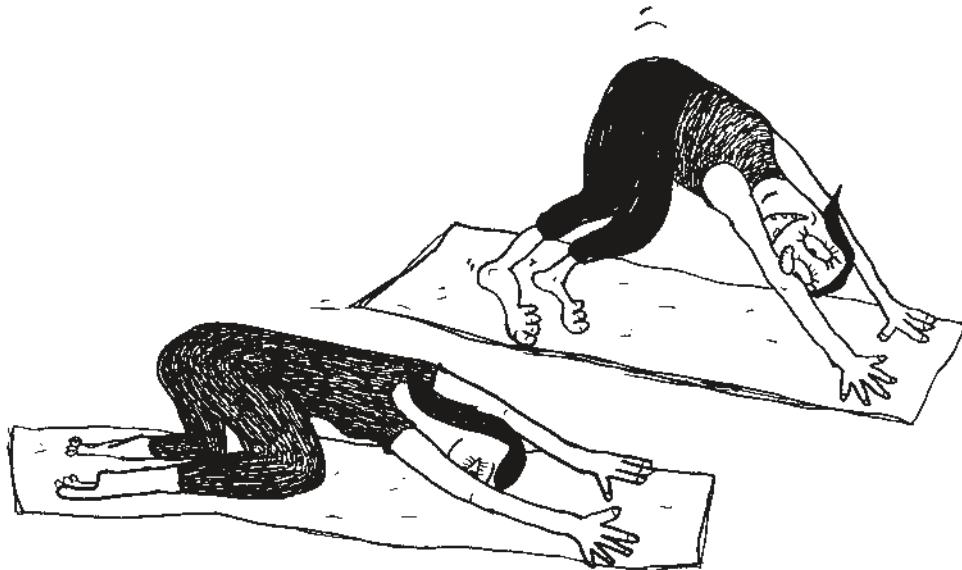
At the risk of annoying your significant (or not-so-significant) other, take some of the red dots left over from your steering wheel exercise and place them on objects you come in contact with as part of your daily routine. Don't pick so many that you'll become inured to their presence. Perhaps you can place them on your toothpaste tube, inside of your shoe, on your cereal box or milk carton. Then each time you notice a red dot, remember to become aware that you were thinking at that very moment. Don't get caught up in the content. Just notice you are thinking, what's going on in your body, and breathe consciously and deeply. Next, describe to yourself what you are doing, e.g., "unscrewing the toothpaste tube," "squeezing it on the brush," "putting it in my mouth," "brushing up, down, left, right." Know and name what you are experiencing, as mundane as it seems. Be curious about all the steps that go into what is usually a rote process. Notice how your curiosity keeps you in the moment and in the experience of what you are doing. Curiosity about the present keeps you from worrying about the past or future.



Remember the countless Downward-Facing Dogs and Sun Salutations you've completed in yoga class? Think about all the individual micro-experiences you've missed while you went through the motions. Imagine in your mind's eye each of the muscular feelings, and mental resistance or joy that might have accompanied the postures.

In the following practice, I will be asking you to do a Down Dog very slowly and to use your curiosity to take a voyage through your body. Be aware of the mind's tendency to wander away and your ability to bring your attention back to your body. Feel the assistance that physical sensations offer to help this returning. Remember, Intentional Awareness is a constant and repetitive coming home. It is bringing your mind back into the present, reconnecting it where you want it to be—in your body.

Be aware when and where parts of your body feel open or closed, and when your attitude is receptive or restricted. There's nothing more frustrating than a teacher calling Downward-Facing Dog a "resting" posture when you are straining against the resistance of tight shoulders, weak muscles, a strained back or contracted hamstrings. See what you would have to do to make it possible for you to feel comfort and ease while under the physical demands of the posture. Instead of thinking about the perfect Downward-Facing Dog, try to find your place of ease within the effort. It just might be dropping into Extended Child!



"It's alertness without tension and relaxation without dullness."

—Leslie Kaminoff

PRACTICE: DOWNWARD-FACING DOG

 <http://www.yosa.co/a2>

- Bring yourself to your mat on your hands and knees, one hand below each shoulder, one knee below each hip.
- Tuck your toes and come into Downward-Facing Dog. I won't give you any instructions for the posture at first. Just let your body come into the posture as you normally would.
- Use your Intentional Awareness to scan through your body. Begin at your hands, feeling them on the floor, now your arms, elbows, your neck, and shoulders.
- Feel your shoulder blades. Does this paying attention bring any new awareness? What's happening in your mind? Is tension starting to build up? What is your reaction when tension builds?
- Feel your hips, your hamstrings. Notice your knees, ankles, Achilles tendons.
- Where are your heels? Do you have an idea of where they should be?
- Now come down into Child's Pose.
- Did anything happen in your mind when I said to come down?
- Rest for three deep breaths.

You'll be doing the posture again, so remember there is no right or wrong way to do this practice. There are alignment suggestions that can help you articulate the posture, but only if you achieve them with ease and comfort as well as effort. Whenever you feel tension build, drop down into Extended Child. We are looking for that sweet spot of right effort, not strain. The best way to know if there is tension is to scan your face, your jaw, your neck, and to know if you are breathing or holding your breath.

- Now come back up into Downward Dog, but bend your knees deeply, letting your neck soften, looking at your knees. Pay particular attention this time to any ideas you have of how the pose should be done according to your expectations. How do you feel when I say "bend your knees?" Deepen your breath.
- Feel your hands on the floor. Press the thumb and index finger inward. Roll your shoulders outward, bringing the soft part of your elbows in and up. You are creating

a dynamic pressure between the inward rotation of your lower arms and the outer rotation of your upper arms. Breathe with deep inhales and exhales.

- Let your shoulder blades slide down your spine. Soften your neck and smile.
- The back will want to rise up. Try to lower your heart center toward your knees. Lift your hips. Don't worry about your hamstrings for now. Concentrate on your heart, lowering your chest, softening and lengthening your shoulders. Breathe deeply.
- Straighten your legs but leave your heels high off the floor. See what happens in your shoulders. Can you find a balance between shoulders and hips, making sure there is no tension? Breathe deeply.
- Drop your heels toward the floor but don't worry about getting them all the way down, unless they do so without compromising the arms and shoulders. Lift your hips. Breathe deeply.
- Feel the lengthening from the crown of your head, down through your shoulders and back, into your hips and hamstrings, on down to your heels.
- Scan your attitude. Are you happy to be here? Are you working just hard enough to be able to continue, or are you praying for this to end? Are you breathing?
- Drop down to Extended Child and then Child's Pose. Deepen your breath. Feel the thighs constricting your breathing and let the inhales move into the back of your body, widening the ribcage.
- Take three deep breaths
- Take notes on your experience.

—Was there any difference in your attitude toward Downward Dog between the first and second times you did the asana?

—How did your “idea” of the posture affect your mood when you actually did the posture each time?

—What was the first thing you thought of when you initially came into the posture?

—Was it placement of some part of your body? Or on your breath? Or something else?

—Were you aware of any mental or physical tension as you first did the posture?

—Were you able to be curious about what was happening the first time?

“What’s spiritual about touching your toes? Nothing. But when you watch your mind you can set up a game for your practice.”

—Richard Freeman

Imagine preparing for your next yoga class. Visualize the sequence of events you go through. And think about where a mnemonic device might come in handy. Choose several that work for you as little reminders that can be put in places you’ll notice as you go through your preparation routine. For example, let’s use the string-around-the-finger and red-dot-on-the-steering-wheel to take you to class. But let’s throw in a bit more distraction. Perhaps you’re a new mother needing to drop the kid off at day care or you’re fitting class in before work. So you arrive and unfurl your mat. You sit in an easy seated pose, legs crossed in front of you, and start to breathe. Sitting here is a mnemonic. No matter that you raced to get here. You’re here now. Maybe you’re a little frazzled, but the mat feels good. The music is soothing. You can close your eyes and sit. And breathe.

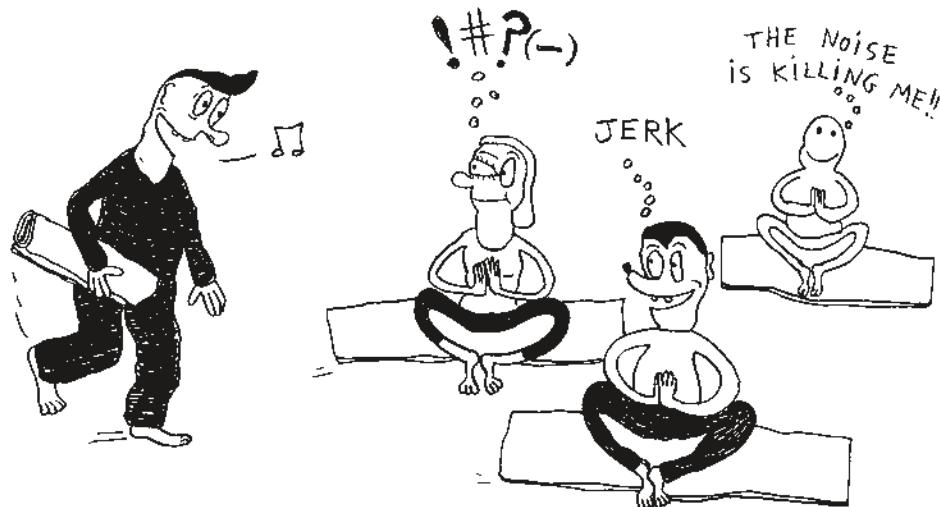
Suddenly, your concentration and attention are disturbed by someone coming into the room late. He’s frazzled like you were 10 minutes ago. But now you’ve calmed down. He makes a lot of noise as he flops his mat down. He ruins your calm. You’re really annoyed. You’re sitting there on your mat, and to an outside observer you’re totally tranquil. But in your head is turmoil. One of the most prevalent distractions your tricky little mind has at its disposal is judgment. Usually judgment rears its head in reference to something you don’t like about someone else. It can take you away in an instant.

“We’ll love you just the way you are, if you’re perfect.”

—Alanis Morissette

But you can use judgment as another mnemonic device. Don’t try to not be judgmental. Instead work at noticing when you are. Once you’ve noticed, bring your attention back. This is a wonderful device for freeing you from your judgments. The insensitive behavior doesn’t change. Even your judgment doesn’t change, only the *attachment* to that judgment. You have a choice about where you put your attention. Your mood can change from tightness, disappointment,

or even anger to appreciation or thankfulness for the reminder—perhaps even compassion for your frazzled friend. The choice is yours, and your attitude influences everything.



“It is only possible to find the qualities essential to asana if we recognize our starting place and learn to accept it.”

—T.K.V. Desikachar

Now imagine that you’re sitting there in yoga class again. See if you can recall your judgments about yourself. It’s so easy to be distracted by others’ quirks, and in so doing to lose sight of all the self-criticism that is present. In the guise of self-improvement, we constantly compare ourselves to others or to some external criterion. In yoga class, that usually has to do with someone else’s body or facility with the asanas. We’re seldom aware of the voice that’s doing the comparing. So once again, without trying to change anything, just notice how the mind busies itself with your latest faults.

If you’re really brave, jot down some of the things your own voices of self-criticism are saying. Actually write them down.

—Describe your Internal Critic(s)

—Do you have a visual image?

—What kind of a face? Body? Clothes?

—Where is it? Can you locate it in space?

—Can you draw how it looks?

—What colors would you use to describe it?

—Does it/do they remind you of anyone else?

One needn't be a therapy junky to be familiar with those internal voices of contempt. There are countless ways to judge yourself when you don't satisfy your own expectations. Since this isn't a treatise on therapy there's no need to rehash the source of these voices in the subtle or not-so-subtle criticism you've received at the hands of parents, elders, or experts. Suffice it to say that most people share this series of inner voices filled with a laundry list of shortcomings.

"I can't get no respect."

—Rodney Dangerfield



I CAN'T DO THIS

CHAPTER 6:

Seeing Is Believing

Cultivating moment-to-moment curiosity, we just might find that one day this kind of peace dawns on us and we begin to understand what all the books have been talking about.

—Pema Chodron

Although Alice found Wonderland “curiouser and curiouser,” your own curiosity can support your Intentional Awareness’s ability to help you stay in the present moment. By approaching an asana by first slowing down, then breathing comfortably and deeply, it becomes possible to actually see what is going on in your body and mind. You’ll discover that what is going on is constantly changing. Boredom comes from a lack of attention. Once curiosity is engaged, your body presents myriad opportunities to dive into the *now* and explore. Your breath is a precursor to present-moment seeing. It is a vehicle for curiosity and awareness. By engaging your mind’s eye, you can visually travel down the path of the breath from the nostrils into various parts of the body. Once you are able to do this, you begin to see what lies beyond the scope of your physical eyes.

“Directing attention means directing your awareness through your intention.”

—Gary Kraftsow

To become fluent in the language of the visual imagination, you must become comfortable with a new way of seeing. Visualization is a skill that can be developed like any other: through practice and repetition. Ultimately it becomes possible to use your visual imagination to descend into the musculature and circulatory system. It is possible to observe the energy there as tightening or loosening, as pulse, as color.

“You can observe by just watching.”

—Yogi Berra

Hatha yoga is about using the physical body to reach deeper levels of awareness. It diverged from a tradition in which the body was viewed as a detriment to spiritual growth. While this book questions Western culture’s overemphasis on the physical, the paradox is that the physical body provides a perfect mechanism, especially for goal-oriented Americans, to notice, accept and alter the habitual patterns that lead to suffering. Active visualization of what’s going on in the body can enhance physical and emotional balance.

To show you how powerful visualization can be, I’m going to take you on a voyage of your imagination. One of the imagination’s greatest gifts is the ability to drill down to deeper and deeper levels with nothing more than a gentle suggestion.

PRACTICE: GUIDED VISUALIZATION

 <http://www.yosa.co/a3>

- Find a seated posture where you can be comfortable for a while. Close your eyes. Take three deep, slow breaths, feeling your chest and belly rise and fall.
- Imagine you are sitting in a boat on a large lake where the shore is visible but quite distant. Take note of the image that comes to mind. How big is the boat? What color is it? Describe it to yourself, looking more and more closely for details of the entire scene as your gaze scans the boat, the lake, and the shoreline. Look at what you are sitting on in the boat. Is it a bench, a chair, or something else? Shift your focus between the shore and the boat and notice what you see.
- Don’t worry if you don’t see anything from this instruction. Has your internal critic mouthed off? Are you nervous trying to get it right? There is no right or wrong way to do this.

This is more than anything, a practice designed to show you that you can create anything in your imagination, including your own internal critic. You’ve just been listening to its criticisms for so long, you think the critic is real! If you can imagine

all that nonsense is real, surely you can imagine anything. It's all an invention of the mind, sometimes pleasant, sometimes not, but invention nonetheless.

If you had a clear mental image from the last suggestion, see how the next direction changes the pictures in your mind. If you didn't, you may just need some more concrete images.

- Imagine you are sitting on a white chair in a boat of about 30 feet in length, with lots of fishing poles resting against the rusted metal railing. Look around you. What else is there? If you see things, take note of what they are. If not, it doesn't matter.
- Directly in front of you is an older gentleman about 65 years old and a young boy, perhaps his grandson. The man is helping the boy with something. Can you see what it is? The boy is somewhat frustrated. Perhaps you can see his and his grandpa's facial expressions. If you see something, take note. If not, again—don't worry about it.
- The boy is wearing a green flannel shirt and old, faded blue jeans. The man wears a brown sweater under a parka that seems out of place for the warm day. What color is the parka? Do you see this? If not, no worries.
- Look up. The sky is quite blue and the sun is shining down. You're starting to perspire a bit. The underarms of your shirt are damp. Your back is sticking to the white chair. Look over the railing towards the shore. There are buildings and a dock but they're hard to make out. What do you see? Make a list in your memory of what is there. The boy hands you a pair of binoculars so that now you can see the dock clearly. There are three people waving to you. One is an older woman, perhaps 90. She is pushing a stroller with a toddler in it who waves also. You can't quite make out the third person. Keep your attention there for a bit longer and see if the third person comes into focus.
- See what other details you can create as you look more closely at each thing mentioned: the boat, the fishing poles, the white chair, the rusted railing, the grandfather and grandson, their clothes, the hot sun, your shirt, the binoculars, the dock, the old woman and other people on the dock. It doesn't matter if you can't remember it all. Actually look around and see what you see. As the image grows, pick some part of the scene and look more and more closely. It's as if you are looking through a telescope of increasingly higher magnification.
- Take a minute to see what else comes into your field of view. After a minute or so, open your eyes and take notes.

—As the instructions began, did you visualize a scene without the directions?

—If not, how did that make you feel?

—Did you experience any discomfort during the instructions?

—Was your internal critic involved?

—Was it fun, or a chore, or something else?

—When the specific instructions were added, what happened?

—Did your awareness become more complex with the instructions?

—As you focused your attention, did the details increase?

—Recall what you saw and go back through the text of the exercise and compare what you imagined with the instructions.

“You are what you pretend to be.”

—Kurt Vonnegut

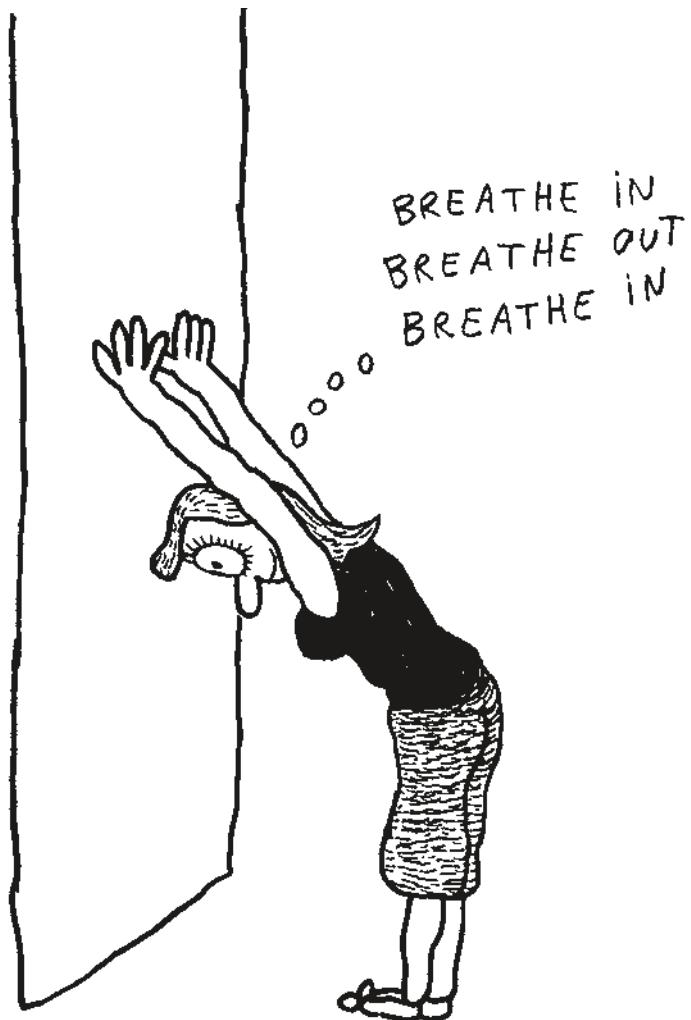
By directing the attention, it is possible to actually *see* with the imagination. Since there are internal physical structures involved during asana, it is useful to know how things actually look. I recommend going to the library or purchasing a book on human anatomy. Look specifically for those visual aids that give you a sense of the attachments of muscles, tendons, and ligaments, and how the circulatory system courses through the body.

But even if you don't have objective knowledge of internal bodily structures, the next practice will show how your visual imagination can reveal them.

PRACTICE: WALL HANG MUSCLE VISUALIZATION

☞ <http://www.yosa.co/a4>

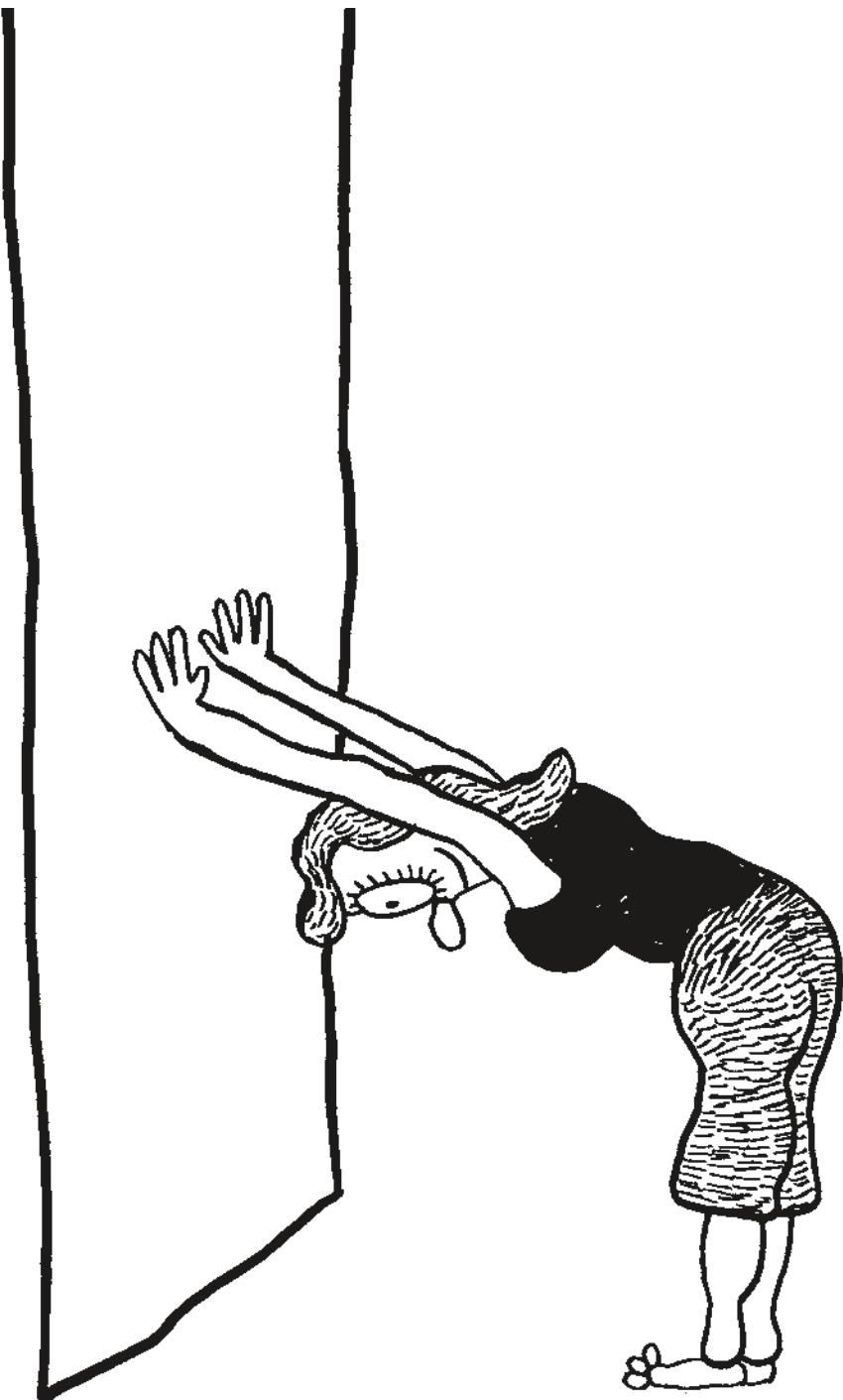
- Find a wall that has enough blank space for you to bring your hands shoulder-width apart at about a 45-degree angle above your head resting against the wall. Have your feet far enough out so the legs can be parallel with the wall. Lean into your hands as they reach the wall, but don't put too much pressure on them. Take three deep breaths noting the inhale, the exhale, and the pauses in between.



- With eyes closed and almost no pressure against the wall, feel the sensations in your shoulders. Begin to breathe more deeply, and imagine that the breath is actually traveling from your nostrils into your lungs and out into your shoulders where you are feeling the sensation. Imagine the breath is a lubricant and is finding its way into the muscle fibers allowing them to relax and let go. See if you can sense the bright red color of the tissue as the oxygen-rich blood flows within the muscles. If you are beginning to notice strain, pay attention to it; what is the actual sensation? Can you describe the sensation as opposed to your thoughts or fears about it?
- Muscles soften under the lubricating gentleness of deep breathing. Feel the blood pulsing through the muscles. Don't increase your effort, but imagine the muscle fibers getting longer and more supple. What would have to happen for the strain to release or soften? Try backing off just a bit and notice what happens.
- Look inside your right shoulder to where the muscles of your arm join the tendons. Move your awareness to the same place in your left shoulder. Any difference? Imagine that the color changes from deep red to pink to whitish. There is less blood flow here. Can you bring breath to those connections? See where the tendon attaches to the bone. Not much movement there. Don't force it. Keep your attention in the muscle fibers. Notice their color, and how much potential there is for the breath to bring lubrication to the area.
- Next, gently drop your chest towards the wall so a slight, increasing pressure begins to build. Each body is different, so notice where the pressure begins for you. Climb down into that physical feeling and see if you can actually describe the sensation to yourself. Be curious about the changes that are occurring. Back off slightly, and see what the sensations are like now.

“When you do movement without paying attention, you may repeat patterns that lead to injury. Becoming aware of how those patterns occur in the body reduces the chance of stress to the system.”

—Gary Kraftsow



- Practice this for a few moments on your own without coming back to the book. See how engaged your visual awareness can become in the actual physical sensations; they are not static. Be mindful of how and when pressure starts to build: breath shortens, and you may begin to tighten as tension creeps in. This only exacerbates the muscular tightening in an ongoing feedback loop. When this happens, back off and instead relax. Imagine your extra deep breath expanding your blood vessels, while lowering your heart rate and blood pressure.
- For the last few breaths, move your awareness from the nostrils into the lungs and then into the places where you feel strong sensations. On each exhale, without trying to change the sensation, just **let go** a little—whatever that means to you. This is the beginning of trusting yourself and the messages of your body: knowing that when tension is present, it is completely within your conscious control to soften it.
- Get curious. That's what this practice is all about. Explore the dance between effort and relaxation. Come to know when you can be excited about what is going on and when you can't wait for it to stop. You can choose which place to be. Come out of the pose gently, return to the book, and reflect on your experience.

“Curiosity has its own reason for existing.”

—Albert Einstein

—At the outset, were you able to isolate the sensations in your shoulders?

—Where else did you feel the pressure?

—Were you able to visualize the breath traveling down and lubricating the muscles that were working?

—Did the instruction to breathe and relax change the experience?

—As strain started to build up, what happened in your mind?

—Were you able to see the blood flowing, the muscles lengthening, the strain releasing?

—Did backing off change anything in the physical, mental, or visual experience?

—Could you see the color change in the tendons?

—What happened when you increased the pressure by hanging more deeply?

—Were you able to be curious about what was happening?

—If so, how did your curiosity affect your attention?

—Did using your visual awareness help?

—How did watching the breath moving from nostrils and lungs into the working muscles affect you?

CHAPTER 7:

Moving Forward By Staying Still

The spiritual journey is not about getting to a place that's finally swell."

—Pema Chodron

In *Light on Yoga*, Sri Iyengar states that Corpse Pose (*Savasana*) is one of the most difficult postures of all. It may not be too difficult to quiet the body in this posture, he says, but to do so with the mind fully present is truly challenging. With the taxing physicality of the active asanas, it's also easy to lose sight of the mind's lack of involvement. This can be especially true for more experienced practitioners. Once the physical requirements of the asanas are achieved, the mind has a tendency to check out. From your mind's point of view, it's quite possible to be on a beach in Hawaii, picking up the kids at day care, or finishing an argument that began days ago.

When Sri Krishnamacharya developed the *vinyasa* style of flowing movement, his intention was to engage the extremely active minds and physical energy of his young students. Even for adults, fully engaging the technical aspects of the postures can be a great tool for concentration, but it risks leaving mental activity unnoticed.

“In the beginning, gross form is very important.
It’s just that we can’t get stuck there.”

—Rodney Yee

To notice all that is going on while still letting go of effort is the paradox of *Savasana*, and is a microcosm of asana practice itself. Yoga is a paradox, not a contradiction. You can only move forward by not trying to.

“The essence of yoga is intention; it’s more important than anything, especially how a posture is done. *Technique is simply a tool for channeling awareness.*” (emphasis added)

—Saul David Raye

This suggests an entirely new concept of progress and with it another paradox on the path to self-acceptance. By embracing each moment of mental and physical resistance and softening into it, it is possible to move toward a non-resistant presence. It is impossible to *force* an acceptance of your uniqueness as a practitioner. You can only hope to become aware of your own lack of self-acceptance, and to know and embrace the resistance it creates. Then, ever so slowly you will notice that the tension of self-criticism dissipates. Look at how flowing water handles obstacles: when it encounters a boulder, it doesn’t stop short, become rigid, and resist. It molds itself to the shape of the boulder; this allows it to flow over and around the rock. With time the boulder dissolves. A solid, seemingly immutable substance gives way to the patient flow.

“The hardest person for us to accept and love is ourselves.”

—Jill Satterfield

As a young boy I was truly inspired by Popeye the Sailor Man. While I didn’t see his Buddhist-inspired roots, “I yam what I yam and that’s all what I yam,” always captivated me. It was only years later that I realized how spiritually advanced this spinach-munching guy was.

For Popeye Roshi:

“FLOAT SOME, JET SOME”

I sing my scales on borrowed horns and flutes:
On treadless tires worn smooth from stolen drives down lovers’ lane
On plastic jugs of laughter, exhumed from picnics on the shore
On tennis shoes, still tied with double knot, vacuumed from the past

Born of obstacles, bred of snags
Should I lose you, who then would I be?
A lazy old fart, rolling along
Wandering down to the sea.

Your acceptance of the resistance in your muscles (and in your mind) is the beginning of your journey toward positive change and transformation in yoga (and in life). If a stiff body is the hand you've been dealt, it helps to know what your cards are. Pretending, hoping, or thinking they're something else will tap you out. And like a table stakes poker game, you can only play as long as you've got cash in the game. Embracing without judgment, and observing with a dispassionate curiosity, your places of hardness begin the path to opening. A non-judgmental knowledge of this hardness is the hidden pathway to progress.

“Seriousness tightens us. It is the opposite of joy.
A sincere openness to all possibilities is not serious.”

—Saul David Raye

If only the criteria for graduating beyond the beginners' class were a 100 percent full-on, no-nonsense, dyed-in-the-wool, true-blue, absolute familiarity with and acceptance of your self-doubts and limitations. That's the moment it becomes possible to move forward. Eliminating the perceived duality between mind and body will only come with an acceptance of the mental and physical turbulence that is simply a part of being human.

“Self-acceptance leads to self responsibility, self-confidence and personal empowerment. It's very active. It's recognizing I have the power to see myself and effect change in my life.”

—Gary Kraftsow

Fred Jealous, who has helped hundreds of men and women come to understand the cultural training that leads people away from a belief in their essential goodness, put it this way in one of our conversations: “Self-acceptance can only come

with an awareness that we are *perfect* in our *imperfection.*" You are perfect, just the way you are, with all of your warts, bruises and complexes. Your behavioral aberrations are nothing more than that—aberrations. But they must be seen for what they are before the essence of who you are—so apparent in the smile and openness of an infant—can re-emerge. Focusing on self-acceptance does not mean eliminating change as a positive force. In fact, it makes change to enhance well-being inevitable since a clear understanding of your self-destructive tendencies leads to the inclination to become healthier.

“There’s lots of talk about ‘self-transformation’ in yoga. But actually it’s only an intermediate step before self-acceptance: it’s a healthy impulse if you’re entrenched in unhealthy behavior. But the secret is to just become aware of what you’re up to.”

—Erich Schiffmann

Change is only possible with your acceptance of not changing. How might you acknowledge this paradox of self-acceptance, if you have a strong desire for progress? Remember how, after a few weeks of diligent practice and looking longingly at the class schedule, you got up the nerve to ask whether you were ready for the next level? Your teacher probably advised you that if you made sure you paid attention and didn’t push too hard, you were ready for more advanced classes. You no longer needed to fear Down Dog, even though the notion of it ever becoming a resting pose still seemed like a cruel joke. But you were able to flow through the vinyassas, no longer panicked when some strange sounding Sanskrit asana was called, and were actually quite proud of the fact that you could almost touch your toes.

And so your first intermediate-level class approached. You looked back at the new beginners, subtly patting yourself on the back for your diligence and perseverance. It had paid off. You might have noticed a firming in your buttocks, a new lilt in your walk, and the way other people noticed you on the street with your new yoga mat slung over your shoulder in its color-coordinated carrying case.

But what if progress were measured not by your ability to achieve certain physical contortions, but rather by your ability to be *present* more consistently? What might that mean, and how would it manifest? Imagine a yoga program that measures achievement differently. The decision to move to the next level would be based

on your ability to find the correct manifestation of each posture for the physical/emotional needs of your body at each moment.

Imagine a test that asks you to sit in an easy cross-legged posture (*Sukhasana*), and requires you to scan your body with the mind's eye. You'd be asked to bring attention and breath to the parts of your body that are "speaking," and to listen to their messages.

"Pay attention to signs of discomfort. It might be a twinge in your back, a resentment running through your mind. It is your whole body communicating with you. It's a signal to pay attention."

—Gary Kraftsow

PRACTICE: BREATH, BODY, AND ATTENTION LETTING GO

 <http://www.yosa.co/a5>

- Sit in a comfortable cross-legged position, supporting yourself on pillows or blankets if necessary so the natural curve of your back is relaxed and your knees drop to the sides.
- If you are reading these instructions, leave your eyes open so you can read each part before moving on. If you are listening to these instructions on the audio, close your eyes.
- Take five deep breaths, paying careful attention to the ending of each inhale, the pause that occurs, and the exhale that follows. As the breath passes out, don't force it. Where do you feel it in your body?
- As you inhale your sixth breath, bring your attention to your eyes and notice the skin around them. Without changing anything, exhale. On your next inhale, again focus on the eyes. As you exhale, imagine the skin around your eyes dropping towards the floor. Repeat two more breath cycles.
- On your next inhale, gently part your lips just a quarter inch. Exhale, feeling the space between your lips. On your next breath, split your focus to either side of your face where your jaw joins your skull. Take another deep breath in, and, while not letting your lips open more, let the lower jaw drop away from your skull as you exhale. Repeat two breath cycles with your intention to let go of the musculature at the joint on each exhale.
- Move your focus to your ears and taking a deep breath in, pause, then on the exhale, let your ears drop toward your shoulders. Repeat two breath cycles.
- Notice what happens in your neck and shoulders. Feel the softening, then return your attention to your face.
- Now at your own pace, scan down through your body, moving your attention to a new place on the inhale, releasing the underlying musculature on the exhale.
- If you become aware that your mind has wandered (and it probably will), come back to the place where you lost your concentration, and continue.
- When you reach your feet, take three deep breaths and return to the text.

Asana practice is as much about letting go as it is about effort. This is extremely difficult when mind and body are straining. As Sri Iyengar's opinion of Savasana indicates, progress might best be measured by your ability to achieve awareness regardless of the physical nature of the posture you are executing.

“There is still an unspoken impulse to be different, to change: it elicits an aggressive non-sensitive practice. Teachers' communication is conflicted. Students try to be mindful, but they also want to 'go for it.' The old stuff is still permeating the teaching. The right stuff is being said, but there is still the exhortation to push harder. It's a conflicted teaching even if the words are getting better.”

—Erich Schiffmann

It would be hard enough to integrate the body's messages with the mind's ideas even if you didn't have all your own internal mental troops shouting conflicting commands inside your head. Now the teacher, or at least the teaching, seems to point in different directions at the same time, telling you to honor your body, but to do the posture properly. And the teacher's supposed to be the expert! How are you to chart your way, listening to the teacher's instruction, and monitoring your own needs?

The key is once again simple but not easy: notice what's going on in your own body. If you are experiencing something you are either hoping to endure or overcome, odds are tension is present. Tension, above all else, is the wake-up call. It's easy to distinguish it from the physical effort of muscles working and stretching. Tension is always accompanied by feelings of *restriction*. Krishnamacharya summarized dukha as “a claustrophobic closing in that keeps you from finding happiness and freedom of action.” You are probably familiar with the tightness in your chest or throat during an experience described as “anxious.” This is the same as dukha. It will happen all the time in asana practice if you're not careful to differentiate effort from tension. Few students (or teachers) look at tension honestly. Everyone generally places so much emphasis on progressing past the current physical state. In this progress oriented way, tension is seen as a natural consequence of effort or as something to be overcome with more effort.

“We need to take the tension out of attention.”

—Timothy McCall, M.D. (quoting his teachers)

It is remarkable how this description of dukha maps directly to the tightness Joko Beck described in Chapter One. And this definition relates directly to new findings in neurophysiology regarding panic attacks and other emotional blockages, which I’ll describe in the two chapters on recent scientific findings later in the text. Whether in teachings of Eastern philosophy or Western neuroscience, it is clear that the breath can modulate and release this blockage. But to find the freedom of the breath one must first be willing to notice and accept what is.

The practice of asana has the potential to either magnify tension or to offer a glimpse of an alternative. This is neither rocket science nor some wondrous discovery available only to diligent spiritual seekers. Rather, once again it’s straightforward but not easy. Above all, it’s necessary to slow down, pay attention to what is, breathe, relax, and lighten up. These Five Not-So-Noble-Truths require nothing more than a faith that by practicing them, avenues are opened that are not available to the planning mind. But it takes the mind to decide to practice them, and then to get out of the way.

Ellen Langer is one of the pioneers of mindfulness research. She and her colleague Shelley Carson have examined the critical role of self-acceptance in mindfulness. In addition, many writers, including Jack Kornfield and Dan Siegel, lead readers to the inexorable conclusion that complete awareness of what is becomes impossible without complete *acceptance* of what is.

“Self-acceptance is only possible when we accept all that arises.”

—Tias Little

I have combined several of Langer and Carson’s suggestions as well as those of Kornfield and Siegel, with my own ideas for adapting mindful self-acceptance (distinguished from mindless acceptance, which manifests often as denial) to yoga

practice. The instructions below can be explored in any posture. I encourage you to pick one without thinking too hard and to come out of it if you find yourself straining. Then re enter it as you're ready. Select one that doesn't require too much effort. Ease is especially important here because you will be staying in the posture for some time, and using the mind to pay attention to several aspects of the experience. If you are struggling physically, the other elements will get drowned out. Take it easy. I believe you will move forward by staying still.

PRACTICE: ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING POSTURE OF YOUR CHOICE

 <http://www.yosa.co/a6>

- First come to the top of your mat, stand in Mountain Pose and bring your attention to your nostrils. Take five long, deep breaths, paying careful attention to the physical sensations that occur during inhale and exhale.
- Give yourself a moment to let the posture of your choice (either standing or seated) come into your awareness. If possible, keep your eyes closed. Come into the posture and extend into it with a bit less effort than you normally would.
- Bringing the focus of your attention to the muscles that are working, just observe what is happening. See if anything changes as you stay right here. Remember, you're not trying to go any further. Your body is stationary, but watch to see if it says anything to you that's different than normal. Also, by paying attention to your mental activity, notice what is happening in the mind as you try to keep your focus on the body.
- Imagine that no matter how long you've been practicing, you are a *work in progress*. Put aside the idea that there's a better place to get to. Your posture is exactly right for where you are today. Consider that your progress will be measured by your willingness not to change. I know it's hard to believe, but entertain the possibility that it's perfectly OK if you will never be more flexible than you are today.
- See if you can find anything *puzzling or paradoxical* about what's going on in the posture. It may be entirely physical. Why is your body responding the way it is when you're doing everything you were taught? See if there is any contradiction between the amount of effort you are expending and the amount of openness you achieve. Think about the word "openness." What paradox lies at the heart of your feelings about that word? How open are you feeling right now? What would you have to change to become more open? Imagine there is a different way of defining openness. How would your boss define it? How about your mother, your father, your spouse or child? Now, think of how the Dalai Lama would approach the same question. How about Gandhi, Mohammed, Jesus, or Martin Luther King? Now try on each of those perspectives and decide which one makes you feel better.
- Smile. Notice what happens when you do nothing other than that. Imagine how hysterical it would be if someone from outer space came down to earth and saw you right now. See if you can find some small thing to laugh at about what's going on. This

is not the laughter of self-criticism. It's the joy and sorrow of the human condition all wrapped up in one.

- After you've been in the posture for a while, look for elements of *self-criticism or judgment*. You may be dying to come out of the posture, but something other than my words may be telling you to keep at it. Maybe your muscles are starting to react, but you're hoping to stay just long enough to finish the practice. Maybe you have a thought that you should be able to do more. Who is speaking? Be really clear now, and look at the negative messages. If you hear them, think about what you are being judged for and imagine that characteristic is actually a part of your wisdom. How and where would that aspect of you be seen as a valuable commodity? Imagine yourself on the workshop circuit, extolling the virtues of that trait.
- Now come out of the posture.
- Take notes on your experience.

—Were you able to notice novel distinctions, different ways than normal of experiencing the posture either at a physical or mental level?

—When you considered that you might never be more flexible, that you are simply a work in progress, what was your experience?

—Were you able to see any puzzles or paradoxes? (For example, apparent “opposites” where both sides were true?)

—What happened when you smiled? Were you able to laugh in a non-critical way? -Did the inclusion of humor change anything?

—How did all the voices talk about openness? You? Your boss? Gandhi, Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama?

—When you thought of yourself on the workshop circuit, extolling the virtues of your negative traits, what happened?

This practice was intended to help reframe how you view your practice, separate from externally imposed ideas of how you should define it. I know it's hard to believe, but imagine you are OK just the way you are. Back off of your judgments, back off in your body, and you'll be amazed at how your body will open.

CHAPTER 8:

Shine a Little Light-Ness

Lightening up is the essence of enlightenment

—Saul David Raye

I was asked to substitute for a very popular teacher early in my teaching career. I had attended her class many times, was comforted by the familiar faces, the greetings, and by the implicit support of my style that helped me feel at home, connected, and welcome.

As I was getting ready to start, a young couple walked into the room, he with sculpted muscles, and wavy, deep brown hair, trimmed just above his shoulders; she with an aquiline nose, ivory skin, high cheekbones, in general a gorgeous face and body, made-up subtly but definitely, the two of them in elegant designer yoga togs, hers a burgundy top with coco-brown tights, his a form-fitting black t-shirt, with black spandex shorts. They placed their mats respectfully, covering each with a towel. At this point, I knew I had a couple of experienced Bikram students, waiting for the burn. And while I have great respect for the students who practice that style, suffice it to say I worried that a Yoga of Self-Acceptance might not be right up their alley.

While I may appear to be writing this with a good deal of attention to detail, at the time I was totally unaware of the fear behind my thoughts. My only limited recognition was a tense knot in the pit of my stomach, and a constant inner monologue about how I was sure they (and everyone else) were hating the slow, deep movement and inner reflection typical of my teaching.

After class ended, I could hardly look their way, convinced that they couldn't wait to get out of what had obviously been an unfortunate choice, at best a practice not for them. Instead, I busied myself rolling up my mat, but was interrupted by a "Thank you." I looked up to see them both before me, two people who looked as if they had just come off the front page of *People* magazine. I smiled and the man said, "That was the greatest class. I can't tell you how wonderful it made both of us feel." She added, "I wish you taught in Los Angeles." (I'd been right about the L.A. part, but little else.)

I thanked them for their support, and as they and the remaining students left, I just sat and chuckled to myself as all the thoughts I'd had during class came rushing back. I'd invented a fantasy, which I was sure was reality. Not only was it false, I didn't even know that my fears were running the show.

The message I'd failed to remember is how important it is for *awareness* to be *intentional*. You can decide to observe the mind's dance; that grants you the mental distance necessary to let go of the mind's control over emotions and actions. By deciding to watch what the mind is doing, you'll discover its activities can become remarkably entertaining rather than debilitating.

One of the most infuriating (in its simplicity and difficulty) paradoxes of the spiritual path is that a shift of attitude towards your idiosyncrasies can only come with complete acceptance of them. Trying to force a muscle in spasm to relax always fails. You also can't force yourself into believing in your goodness. But in both situations, once you stop *trying* to, then a shift is possible.

Humor seems to stop the internal critic in its tracks, deflating its windbag nature. No need to analyze or suffer. Just turn it into another mnemonic. When self-criticism rears its head, a subtle smile, a quiet laugh, or a gentle shrug of the shoulders, as if to say "Oh, there you are again," can be a reminder to come back to the present experience of the breath. It can free you from the endless loops of mental banter. While there is often something bizarrely appealing about being miserable, to know that it is always a choice opens the door to freedom.

Wes Nisker is a humorist, dharma teacher, and all-around jester. He finds that a bemused smile is a great source of self-acceptance. Wes often metaphorically throws up his hands and simply blames his DNA. He doesn't work through a series of affirmations. He doesn't argue with his internal critic. He knows it's a losing battle to try to convince himself that he's OK. But he also knows there is wonderful humor and humanity in his quirks and frailties. You can choose to beat yourself up—or you can shrug your shoulders and smile, notice your mental dance, and count on the grace of the universe to give you a break.

If you need a bit of help getting to this point, reflect for a moment on the fact that your mind has created all of your internal dramas, this *mishigas* (in the Yiddish my mother so often invoked to encapsulate a complex idea in a single word). We make ourselves crazy because of where we choose to put our attention, most often occupying ourselves with self-destructive internal monologues.

This is not a prescription for some '60s style do-your-own-thing. There is much self-destructive behavior that healthier impulses seek to overcome. Honest self-acceptance can only come with a clear awareness of what your behavior *is*, without the added layers of judgment. Awareness always must precede acceptance, since only then is it possible to truly see what is, and to make decisions about the appropriate courses of action. And lightening up toward yourself is one of the best pathways to awareness.

“Even though [a strong physical practice] made me feel more ‘competent,’ I learned that competence is not dependent on functionality at a physical level; it’s being able to be sensitive to my organism and respond to inner cues in a kind way.”

—Sarah Powers

I have found a wonderful description of the power of the critic, and of humor’s role in dealing with that power in a profound book by Rick Carson. For *Taming Your Gremelin*, Carson had an artist listen to people’s descriptions of the constant nagging and criticism they foist upon themselves, then illustrated what was said. The artwork that emerged reflects the most bizarre and frightening images: a creature in military garb with a pig-snouted, cigar-smoking visage or a golem-like slimy creature just waiting to catch you in the weaknesses she’s so good at noticing and pointing out.

Go back to the descriptions that you wrote to describe your own internal critic. With the knowledge that many others have described their demons in a most graphic fashion, try to see yours with a little more visceral depth. Play with this by remembering your critic is only as real as you make it. This practice can build the visual awareness so important to asana practice. So here’s the drill. I’ll try to keep it simple so you can remember each step. The key is to give yourself a break. Don’t start criticizing yourself if you’re not able to find your critic. Better yet, notice how you criticize yourself when you can’t find it!

“Self-acceptance comes with looking at our own stuff and watching our own thought patterns. Then we gain more insight and lucidity into what drives us.”

—Tias Little

PRACTICE: INTERNAL CRITIC

 <http://www.yosa.co/a7>

- Close your eyes. Let the breath come into your awareness. As your mind begins to wander, notice where it's going. Be aware of the first sign of some internal discomfort. Is a voice questioning the value of this practice? It will come in various guises. The common theme is that you're not doing it right or someone else is screwing things up. You should be doing it differently; you should be doing something totally different, or conversely, the writer is full of baloney and the exercise is a waste of time.
- Once you start hearing these voices, see if you can imagine to whom they belong. A real person may come into your mind. Perhaps it's a parent, a teacher, or a priest. Exaggerate what it's saying. Really have fun with this: what kind of a preposterous, scary, ridiculously arrogant and critical meany would say these things?
- Take notes on your experience.

—Describe your “demon” or critic in sentences or whatever medium comes naturally to you.

—If you can draw, do so. If you have a friend who can draw, ask for help.

—If you’re blessed with musical inclinations, let the sound of your voice or instrument evoke this entity.

—However it works for you, try to pull it from the depths of your psyche and bring it into the light.

“If you name the voices and give them physical features you start to be able to work with them. You start to see they have your best interests at heart, but in a distorted way. They were forged in childhood and have about a 5 year old’s perspective. It helps you to not take it all so seriously.”

—Sarah Powers

Nowhere does this internal critic rear its head more than in a yoga class. If you’ve never gone to a class, think about all the reasons you’ve had that have kept you from going. If you are practicing, remember your first class where you felt like your two left feet were obvious to everyone and the beginning instruction somehow eluded your definition of beginner. Maybe it took you a month to go out and buy one of those cute yoga outfits. You were sure your stomach was sticking out much further than anyone else’s and all those damn mellow people could probably hear your heart beating. And then the teacher started talking about breathing, when it

took all your self-control to hold your breath as long as possible, lest someone know you'd hyperventilate otherwise. As if that weren't enough, the teacher started intoning about quieting the mind. Maybe she threw in a few Sanskrit chants, as if everyone could chill out except you.

Paul Grilley addresses his version of the internal critic with his "Contra Mantras," those internal monologues that may ring a bell. Among my favorites are:

"Why me Lord, haven't I suffered enough? I'm not like
these other people. Oh sure, it's easy for them!"

Or for a bit more of a spiritual perspective:

"I'm the only one, there is something wrong with me,
I am inadequate in some way. Shanti Om."

Of course, a little self-deception goes a long way:

"I'm in top shape, top shape.....but I think I'll just lie here a while."

And if that's not enough to make you laugh out loud, consider Michael Singer's suggestion to get some distance from the thinking mind. In his book, *The Untethered Soul*, he suggests imagining all the advice your mind gives you is coming from someone who's sitting next to you in a car as you're driving down the road. What would it be like to have someone like that in your life (other than your mother-in-law)? Would it be a friend, advisor, or confidant? Or would you avoid their advice like the plague? Ah, the voices. If they weren't so debilitating they'd be downright hilarious.

Perhaps you've gotten an inkling that humor, combined with simply noticing the voices' presence, diminishes their power immensely. The fearful states created

by your internal critic can give way to a bemused acceptance—“Who is that jerk who’s saying all those things, anyway? And look at all the power I give it.” It’s the same demon but it’s so easy to expose it. Attitude is everything.

Have you ever been to a yoga class where you didn’t compare yourself to someone? Most teachers and yogic texts intone about the importance of staying in your own practice. But take a moment and recall how often you’ve actually been able to do that. Comparison seems so natural. Don’t worry, because all members of the human race suffer at the hands of this all-too-human tendency. Comparison is not inherently bad. In fact, the brain develops by social interaction, by comparison to others. It has mirror neurons whose sole purpose is to identify and mimic behavior in others. The brain has neuronal maps of your body and your body’s relationship with other bodies. Think about that for a moment. You are inextricably connected to others. We’re all in this boat together. But instead of allowing ourselves to feel this connection, more often we are contrasting ourselves to others in some form of judgment or criticism.

The Buddha talked to his disciples about the nature of this comparing mind, growing as it does out of a misperception that at some basic level you are separate from everything around you. He saw the mind as having two “jobs:” to constantly scan the horizon looking for danger from some “other,” and to reinforce your belief in how separate you are. The mind convinces you that this scanning keeps you safe.

One of the beauties of Patanjali’s perspective was his view that yoga did not require any specific religious belief. He did however feel you need to believe in a power greater than yourself to be guided along the path. It can be a religious idea, a belief in the power of the universe to guide right action, a simple faith in a better outcome, or a throwing up of your hands and giving up to some higher power.

Erich Schiffmann speaks of this higher power as “Big Mind” and contrasts it with “Small Mind,” which is the limited perspective of an individual’s mental gyrations. While we sporadically gain access to Big Mind through flashes of insight and intuition, Erich argues it is possible to find ways to connect more directly and purposefully. He came to yoga down a rather circuitous path, which included years spent as math whiz and artist. He’s developed a wonderful image from the world of technology to communicate the connection between Small Mind and Big Mind. It’s as if our Small Mind is housed on our personal hard-drive while Big Mind is like the Internet. It’s out there in cyberspace, inaccessible until we figure out how to go on-line. Just as it is possible to gain access to a much greater store of information by connecting to the Internet, so too it is possible to access the greater wisdom of Big Mind.

The knowledge of Big Mind has always been with you, but you haven't known how to access it. To connect with Big Mind the secret is simply to know the limitations of Small Mind, and to trust that there is much greater knowledge available to you beyond your personal conceptions. Small Mind can direct your attention to the vast wealth of insight that is beyond its capabilities. That's the beauty and paradox of mental capability. A few experiments in trusting your intuition can show you that the answers gained are so much more beneficial. Small Mind is wonderful for waking up to the fact that it's necessary to go "on-line" to access Big Mind.

"There's some kind of inner wisdom that you get in touch with through the practices, and if you're paying attention to your practice and your life, after a certain number of years, it starts to become obvious whether what you are doing is addressing your suffering or not, and is it really making you more joyful and happy and at ease."

—Anne Cushman

CHAPTER 9:

If It's So Simple, Why Ain't It Easy?

If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.

—Mexican Proverb

What keeps you from trusting your inner voice, from clearly seeing how things are and having faith that everything is basically OK? What keeps you locked on the path that the comparing mind charts? Dr. Robert Hall, of whom I spoke in Chapter One, leads vipassana retreats and gives dharma talks in Todos Santos. Elena, his translator, does a marvelous job of communicating to the Mexican residents concepts that are hard enough to understand in English.

In trying to describe the fallacious viewpoint of the comparing mind, Robert often speaks of the “me,” that sense of an entity we believe speaks our truth. It seems to rise up to protect us from harm. It must know what’s best for us, we think. Elena translates this concept as *El Yo*, “the I.”

During one of his retreats, I sat listening to Robert with the added lilt of a warm Mexican evening, hibiscus tea, and the sounds of palms swaying in the late winter breeze. I was struck by how *El Yo* captivates us with its dance. And I remembered as a kid the wonderful tricks I performed with my professional-quality Duncan Yo-Yo. This one small device—two round pieces of wood joined by a small spindle in the very center—could be led through marvelous gyrations, always tethered at the end of a loosely wound double string. The secret to these moves was to untwist the string just enough, so upon thrusting the yo-yo towards the floor, it would stop at its full extension and “sleep” (a technical yo-yo geek term meaning simply to stay spinning without climbing back up the string). I could execute wonderful feats for the several seconds it remained extended. But the true test of a master was the ability to bring the yo-yo back up the string at the end of the trick.

Our minds have a tremendous capacity to entertain us with tricks. We’re so captivated and involved that we’re unable (or unwilling) to realize it’s all just a trick,

until we are yanked back. El Yo isn't a thing. It has no reality. It's a process and, as Robert says, a verb, not a noun. It is this yo-yo we're on that is so fascinating yet so limited in its repertoire. It is forever convincing us that we're not OK the way we are. It convinces us the key to becoming OK is to change something.

"If you accept yourself, you can connect the inner and outer. If you don't accept yourself, you will always be in dis-ease. Self-acceptance is the key"

—Saul David Raye

Slowing down calms and quiets El Yo so that it loses some of its hypnotic power. You can then feel and see what is, as opposed to what El Yo tells you. Yoga can help you see and accept where you really are at each and every moment. The learning happens when you stop focusing on where you'd *like* to be. But to keep from making this simple task either a platitude or another goal you can't achieve, it's first necessary to truly see what keeps you from doing what seems so obvious. The task seems natural, but it is difficult nonetheless.

It's challenging to see the nature of fear and anxiety clearly. You don't know them for what they are, so it is hard to let them go. Pema Chodron recounts the tale of the monk Milarepa, who entered the darkness of a cave where he grappled with the most horrible monsters, only to find in the light of day that the monsters were no longer present. They had flown away on the wings of the light and his imagination.

Fear can grasp attention and magnify the perception of threat, even when that threat is unreal. Unless there is a clear awareness of the fear, false perceptions will seem like reality (as I discovered in the teaching episode I recounted earlier). It may be impossible to eliminate fear, but it is quite possible to be aware when it is operating. Robert Hall's poem poignantly captures the power of fear. It was so necessary during the vulnerability of childhood. But it stays long past its usefulness, convincing you that it is your protector, well into adulthood.

“THE SOLDIER”

He stands inside my chest and throat,
a soldier at attention.
Holding the line, guarding the storehouse from looters.

They came once and stole everything, every bit of trust,
every reassuring touch and all the spontaneity.

Those days were long ago, when intruders came
and left their bloody footprints on my skin.
Still that soldier stands, holding a musket,
a feather in his hat.
I try to steal a smile from him everyday,
but he knows his duty.

I say, “At ease soldier! As you were,
before strangers occupied the land,
as you were before my innocent heart
was cut open like a ripe melon!”

He guards the scars
and every day I visit with my bouquet
of tender attention, basket of appreciation.

We touch each other with understanding,
but he does not relax his stand for security.
He has his duties. I have mine.

Against the force and power of the internal soldier, there is only the skill of Intentional Awareness to remind you of its presence. Once acknowledged and even befriended, once you realize it's just trying to protect you, its power evaporates like the monsters in the cave.

I have always been, in the politically correct parlance, musically challenged. My singing voice sounds not unlike a rough piece of metal being scratched across a blackboard. What's worse (or better) is that I love to sing. The problem is, when I start listening to myself, I don't like what I hear. It wasn't always like that. In seventh grade everyone went to music class. (I'm from a time when they actually

had music class in public school.) My recollection (questionable at best) is that all students tried out for glee club. Then the day arrived when those selected were to go to the auditorium to sing. Each one of the other kids' names was called and they marched out. When the teacher got to the end of the list without calling my name, I don't know if she or I was more uncomfortable. There were just the two of us all alone in the classroom. So she did what any reasonable person would have done: she punted, telling me to go anyway as there must have been a mistake. So I, too, marched off, a little late but excited. I joined my classmates in the auditorium and we began singing a tune I knew from a musical my parents had taken me to. I was singing with abandon, totally unaware of anything around me, having a great time and feeling thrilled. At the end of the song I looked around and noticed my neighbor had moved away. He said my voice made it hard for him to sing.

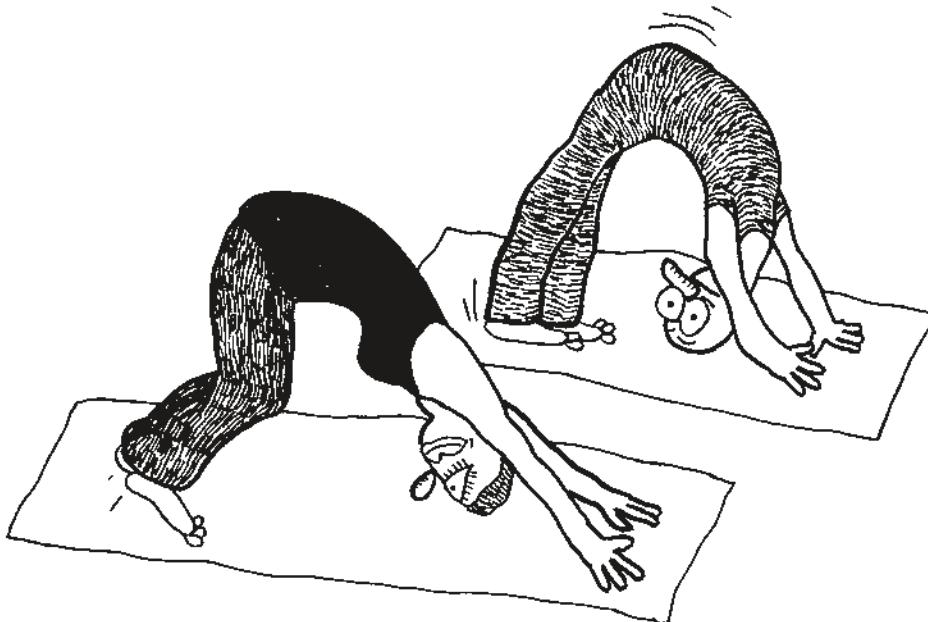
This blow to my ego didn't stop me. It just altered my medium. I was playing trombone in the school orchestra at graduation. As I diligently worked my way through "Pomp and Circumstance," I arrived at the last notes exactly one bar behind the rest of the orchestra. My B-flat rang out into the auditorium, a lone note set against the somber silence, its tone only slightly less deafening than the look coming my way from the conductor's eye.

My musical career took a significant hiatus at that point. Let's just say I've got a little problem feeling free when I sing today.

Just a few years ago, I finally felt brave enough to enroll in a beginners' singing class. I was an adult. Music couldn't hurt me and it was about time I got over my self-criticism. But the instruction began at a level far ahead of what I needed. I first had to get comfortable with the sound of my voice coming out of my body. I ended up feeling worse as the teacher assumed the group could begin at a place I wasn't ready for.

I can't tell you the number of yoga classes I've attended where teachers, with noble intentions, do the same thing. They assume a starting place without first finding out whether that starting place is appropriate for everyone. In a class with many different levels of experience, the teacher often relies on the power of modeling to help move the class forward. This can be effective in helping students achieve the correct postural architecture necessary to align the body. But modeling often avoids the most important instruction of all: noticing and accepting where the body and mind are without self-criticism or comparison to others. Even when reminding students to breathe and not push past their edge, teachers can't know how all your internal critics are conspiring to ignore the instruction.

With so much emphasis on the architectural precision of the postures as the goal of practice, it's very easy for a student to be concentrating deeply (on achieving the student's "idea" of the ideal posture, often by hoping to imitate the teacher or another student) while being completely unaware of all that mental garbage.



What is a teacher (let alone a student) to do when there are different levels of experience in a class? I wrote earlier of the newer student's travails and of how the mind pulls her away from actual experience. This same difficulty confronts the naturally flexible and experienced practitioner. For those blessed with loose ligaments, it is quite easy to become lost in the repetition of the asana. There is often minimal awareness of what is actually happening, either mentally or physically.

"It's important to teach in a way where students can be with the unfolding of sensation, which is a constant reminder not to go on autopilot. I think that's harder for experienced students than beginners. You've done the asana so many times that you just space out."

—Anne Cushman

Phillip Moffitt calls this malady the “yoga flu.” Moffitt teaches both vipassana meditation and hatha yoga. In a *Yoga Journal* column, he has written of the commonality between the physically challenged and the physically adept. Both become lost in an idealized version of what they think they’re on the mat to do, rather than simply being with what is. Whether they’re comparing themselves to another person in the room or to an idealized image of the perfect posture, Moffitt likens their symptoms to the distress of the common flu. Instead of the mind being actively engaged as part of the process of awareness, it becomes lost in a fog.

This is a special challenge for teachers. So many have been drawn to their vocation by their natural flexibility. Their personal quest for a more perfect asana often leaves them in a fog of misperception, both about themselves and their students. The common theme—the flu which causes the same suffering for such seemingly different bodies—is, once again, comparison and judgment.

“When I teach and have a mixed range of ages and interests, I want older people to feel enlivened by what they can do and introduce 20 year olds to a contemplative practice. There’s no need to give up what you love and what’s right for you, but it’s important just to know there’s a complementary side.”

—Sarah Powers

One of the most wonderful things about being in yoga (as opposed to being in an asana) is the ability Intentional Awareness affords to see and deal with judgments, whether they are self-criticism or criticism of others. Intentional Awareness makes it possible to take a small step: to notice that it is often fear, rather than a physical limitation, preventing progress. The critical next step is to acknowledge and ease into the fear rather than trying to push through it.

“Self-acceptance has a better payoff: if more people were aware and made true assessments, then their mindset would be harmonious with what’s true instead of suffering fear. Like the ‘war on terror,’ Fear is supposed to make us feel safer but actually makes us more fearful.”

—Erich Schiffmann

CHAPTER 10:

The Fear of Fear

Fearlessness is not the absence of fear;
it is the courage to look honestly at our fears.

—Ariana Huffington

To paraphrase from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's speech after Pearl Harbor, we have nothing to fear but our fear of fear.

The idea that fear is something that must be overcome is a common pitfall in yoga, in spiritual practice and life in general. Teachers and students alike are often minimally aware of the powerful role that the internal critic plays in interpreting those emotions and thoughts described as fearful. For teachers, the critic often rears its head in some variation of "If you were a really good teacher, your students wouldn't be afraid." For students, it is often a chorus of criticism centered around the admonition that "if you were really cool, you wouldn't be afraid." For both, fear is a loathsome state to be overcome. This leads to a lack of clarity, to confusion between appropriate fear and inappropriate anxiety. We seldom understand the difference. Instead, we assume the internal voices know best. Because we give so much power to them, this erroneous conception of truth prevents us from actually experiencing subtle or not-so-subtle distinctions between the fear and anxiety. When fear or its variants are present, it is very important to come to terms with the nature of the mental tricks of the internal critic and the manifestation of those "tricky" perceptions in the body.

"Fear drives us to shine a focused beam of light onto what we think we must know to keep us safe, to give us a sense of truth, of keeping the world the way we think it should be....those 'cognitive contraptions' help structure a neural attempt to make sense of a complex world, only to then entrap us in the very structures we have created."

—Dan Siegel, M.D.

Fear is a powerful constrictor. It drives a physiologically determined fight, flight, or freeze response. Blood rushes from the extremities as arteries and veins constrict, breathing gets shallow, adrenaline flows, blood pressure increases, respiration accelerates, and even hair follicles stand erect. Although there may not be a saber-toothed tiger close at hand, human bodies respond with well-honed, genetically derived preservation behaviors.

Reptiles live in a simple flight, fight, or freeze world. As more complex vertebrates evolved, the limbic region of the brain developed in layers above the originally reptilian brain stem. This was the region of the emotions where the desire and ability to nurture one's young emerged. This region is still inextricably tied to the survival mechanisms of the brain stem—not just the nurturing ones, but also our fear-based responses. The amygdala, lying deep within the limbic region of the brain, is ground zero for emotional reactions to what are perceived as fearful stimuli.

You are probably familiar with the feeling of what Daniel Goleman refers to as “emotional hijacking,” those moments when you react before you think. Fear or anger can transform a person from a fairly reasonable member of the human race into someone not unlike Freddy Kruger in *Nightmare on Elm Street*. If you’re a parent, think of the times your kids made you think you had something to teach the main character in the latest *Saw* sequel. All of your parental nurturing suddenly turned into a script for a horror movie. If you’re single, remember how you couldn’t believe how wrong you’d been about your boyfriend as, before your eyes, he transformed from Brad Pitt into Darth Vader. Or your old girlfriend still reminds you of Charlize Theron, except now she’s starring in *Monster*.

“Hopefully your friends will eventually tell you you’re being impossible.”

—Anne Cushman

The amygdala has one primary job. It was designed, manufactured, and refined to get you out of perceived trouble. It doesn’t mess around with nuance. It has no time for considering options, weighing alternatives, or otherwise pussy-footing around. It’s the “Decider.” But as we know all too well the Decider often doesn’t know what

he's deciding about. While the clarity of the Decider (let's call him "George") might be extremely useful when confronted with black and white situations, most of the reality we confront involves complex evaluations of ambiguous circumstances.

"Your understanding of reality is a far cry from reality itself."

—Sandra and Matthew Blakeslee

The Decider doesn't believe in nuance. Neither does the amygdala. To complement the amygdala and the simple decisions of mating and survival, humans developed the reflective capacity to observe their inner world and decide if an instinctual response was appropriate. Unfortunately, the accuracy of those decisions (measured by the ability of the decision to enhance well-being, personal satisfaction, and even happiness) is often clouded by a lack of practice in utilizing the correct input to decipher the ambiguity.

"There can be no truth without the courage to look at one's fears."

—Rob Robb

Think of the effects that shallow (or nonexistent) breathing have on asana practice: increased heart rate, blood rushing from the extremities, and a freezing of muscular movement. It's not particularly conducive to opening. These responses are, in many ways, physiological throwbacks to life-threatening experiences confronting our ancestors. Those earlier times required hard-wired immediacy to protect early humans from danger. But anxiety, a close concomitant of fear, has similar physiologic results. It is often generated by a stimulus that is not necessarily threatening in the present moment, but is triggered by a memory connecting the body to an earlier situation where the physiologic response was more appropriate. And not all of these reactions are genetic. As infants and children, our lives were at the whim of our parents or caregivers. To that small child, events were often appropriately fear inducing.

“We’ve all had trauma in our lives. Depending on the nature and severity, the effects in the body are significant long after the trauma is past. Self-acceptance can be especially difficult when there’s been a rupture to the sense of self.”

—Tias Little

To be sure, some anxiety is appropriate. Step off a street curb into a crosswalk. A concern for the speed of an oncoming driver and a sense of alertness about whether or not he is aware of your presence are both intelligent responses. But anxiety triggered by old fears created during childhood, when safety was not always under your control, often places your body in a state of readiness for nonexistent threats. The amygdala doesn’t have the luxury of differentiating. It sends out a red alert. When a teacher’s well-intentioned but somewhat harsh admonition to “push through the fear” reaches the limbic system, the emotional center shifts into protection mode. When you are able to bring awareness to the presence of fear, automatic responses can literally be stopped in their tracks. But that requires great patience and intention, as well as the courage to look honestly at the experience and its antecedents.

“Those with the greatest fear, have the potential for the greatest courage.”

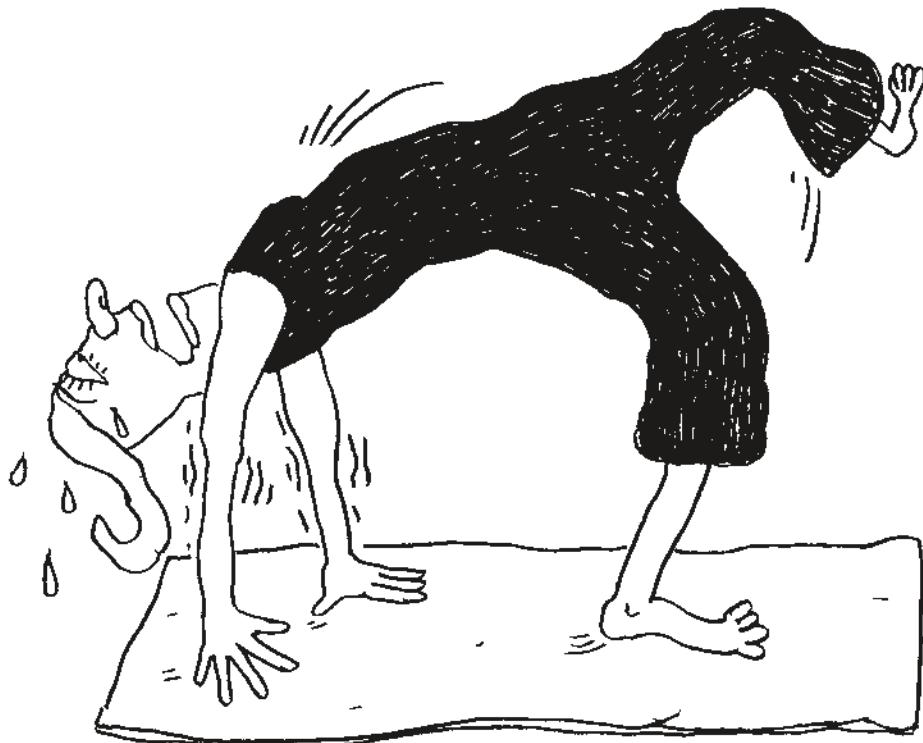
—Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche

Shallow breathing, no matter what the cause, will lead to the same physiologic responses that occur when you are confronted with an actual fearful stimulus. This is the realm of the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system. But its activation doesn’t only occur in times of danger. A better term is *arousal*, since the same activation happens with heightened anticipation of something good. Eons ago, the sympathetic branch evolved to function during times of uncertainty. When a hapless caveman found himself wandering through the savannah and suddenly heard a sound in the underbrush, he needed to discern whether or not it was a dangerous predator or a potential mate. The arousal mechanism functions exactly the same in both instances. Just think of the last time you were head over heels for someone new in your life. Remember the physical sensations? Shortness of breath, flushed face, blood rushing to parts unmentionable? Not unlike the last time you were scared by a sudden outburst of someone’s anger, was it? The commonality here is that the aroused state creates anticipation, not relaxed receptivity.

There is a complementary set of circuitry within the autonomic nervous system: the parasympathetic branch. Its role has been described as “quiescent” by Newberg and D’Aquili in their book on the physiologic underpinnings of faith, *Why God Won’t Go Away*. When activated it causes the exact opposite physiologic response. Blood pressure declines, respiration slows and deepens, pulse slows, and blood flows more evenly throughout the body. Of particular importance to asana practice, muscles relax.

And, it’s possible to have conscious control of which system is activated, especially when there is not an actual physical threat. But to be told by your internal critic or a well-meaning teacher that “it’s just fear and you should push through it” discounts the experience. It also leads away from the *now* into a fantasy of where you hope to be.

To be successful in pushing through fear to reach a goal is thrilling and exhilarating. It’s wonderful to achieve the difficult backbend in Upward-Facing Bow Pose (*Urdhva Dhanurasana*), or Headstand (*Sirsasana*) for the first time. But the way you get there is what separates a yogic practice from an athletic one. The goal is not to achieve Headstand at all costs and then look *back* at the fear. If you can notice *during* every moment of the experience what is keeping you from opening into the posture, you are in yoga even if you are not in Headstand.



“You get really wound up in moving your arm a certain way or having your foot turn in a certain way and you lose the fun, you lose the humor.”

—Richard Rosen

To be totally aware when strong emotion arises *during* asana, and to feel safe enough to look courageously at it, opens up the possibility of learning whether you are responding to fear or to anxiety. If your fear response is appropriate—that is, you sense threat from some impending physical harm—then you need to adjust the posture to address that concern. Looking truthfully at the emotion, and its corresponding thoughts, puts you in a better position to relax with it. You can then take control and move appropriately. This requires great attention and a slowing down, since so much is going on. Once you acknowledge what is, then the choice to deepen the breath is available to you. Deepening the breath helps you to relax, to soften, to let go—and miraculously the parasympathetic nervous system is engaged. Physical and mental states are aligned, there’s no longer a sense of inner conflict, and your muscles will release to boot.

“Take it easy, take it easy

Don’t let the sound of your own wheels drive you crazy;

Lighten up while you still can, don’t even try to understand;

Just find a place to make your stand, and take it easy.”

—Jackson Browne and Glen Frey

Scientific measurement indicates that once there is a response to a fearful stimulus, the chemicals which course through your body are flushed out in 90 seconds. After that, reactions are by choice. It’s not just faith that proves slowing down, paying attention, and deciding which circuit you want to run can change the way your brain functions. It is your innate physiology.

The internal storyteller—call it a gremlin, a troll, or just a critic—isn’t very attracted to contentment with things the way they are. Happiness would put it out of work. Its job is to protect you from harm and it is convinced that when fear is present, harm is just around the corner. But as Sarah Powers suggests, it is a

protection defined and crystallized in the perceptions of a child, forged at a time when personal safety truly was in the hands of someone else. If you listen to those voices you may in fact save yourself from pain but you'll never be happy. Jill Bolte Taylor suggests that you simply refuse to put up with it: "raise your eyebrows, put your hands on your hips, wag your finger and say, 'enough.'" It is a choice for Taylor—a conscious decision that internal verbal abuse is not acceptable.

"To experience peace does not mean your life is always blissful. It means you are capable of tapping into a blissful state of mind amidst the normal chaos of a hectic life."

—Jill Bolte Taylor

CHAPTER II:

Making Friends with Mat Demon

See demons as demons: that is the danger. Know that they are powerless: that is the way. Understand them for what they are: that is deliverance.

—*Milarepa*

The title of this chapter is not a suggestion on how to meet a movie star.

Instead, it's intended to make you willing to take a chance with me. Let's just say for a moment that when you are on your yoga mat, you are protected by an invisible shield. All of your mind's preservation behavior is unnecessary because, like a superhero, you are invincible. With this power, it is possible to look a bit more dispassionately at your demons as they rear their heads.

The demons gain their power because they are in cahoots with your internal critic who is forever reminding you that you'd better be careful. You are never quite sure which fear you need to worry about more. It's often better not to take too many chances. The critic thrives on your sense of imminent danger, especially when that danger is emotional.

I promise you can worry again later. But for now, you've got a new way to see the demons that come along for the ride as you unroll your yoga mat. And since you are safe and have nothing to fear, you may just notice how terribly insecure these demons are. They hate being looked at for what they are. Like the Wicked Witch of the West or Count Dracula, all it takes is a little water or a little light to dissolve them.

“You can't transform what you are not aware of.”

—Sarah Powers

Let's remember your first yoga class again. (If you haven't attended classes yet, imagine what your first one will be like). You're there without your invisible shield. It's perfectly reasonable to feel a bit anxious, since you're being asked to sit, stand, and move in ways that may seem completely foreign. You're expected to understand, or even scarier, to express strange words and phrases that everyone else in the class seems comfortable with except you. And on top of all that, you're supposed to exude a spirit of calmness.

You can try to convince yourself there is no monster in the closet. After all, you are an adult and no one in the yoga studio is out to get you. But since you don't have your invisible shield, self-acceptance is easier said than done. Instead of beating yourself up for feeling anxious, try looking at what happens when the feeling is present.

Researchers in Germany actually identified anxiety-related gene components, suggesting that some people have a proclivity to worry. They always scan the horizon looking for updated versions of saber-toothed tigers. This was a very intelligent gene sequence for early humans. Imagine the scene by the fire 40,000 years ago on a warm summer evening when a laid-back Neanderthal was looking up at the stars. He had just finished dinner and was smoking a little of the local herb. He was tripping on the constellations when a real saber-toothed tiger proceeded to make its evening meal of him, his mate, and their offspring. So much for laid-back genes.

Woody Allen would remind us, in all likelihood, that there's a good reason many Jewish people worry about getting sick, the boss's next tirade, the state of their toenails, and their daughter's new boyfriend. Imagine all the laid-back Jewish folks in the 1440s in Madrid or the 1880s in Lithuania or the 1930s in Germany. They faced the horror of Inquisition, pogroms, and Holocaust probably just as they were telling stories about their paranoid cousins who couldn't relax and instead left the family for some unknown place.

So if this tendency to worry about the future is part of you, try to use your time on the yoga mat as a demilitarized zone for your mind. Remember your invisible shield. Krishnamacharya stressed that yoga above all else is "a science of the mind." Yet many classes stress the value of overcoming physical limitations as a path to peace, with little attention to the mental imbalances every human suffers. It is as if the achievement of physical prowess will somehow free the mind. But this is backwards.

The internal critic doesn't want you to lighten up or to accept yourself for the vulnerable seeker you are. He or she wants you to be tough, to do better, to not be satisfied. Otherwise it would be complacency. Perish the thought! The critic loves the challenge of physical improvement.

But once you know you are safe, if only because of your invisible shield, it may begin to dawn on you that there is a way to reframe all that nonsense. Instead of running away from what is, the challenge is to accept yourself in the here and now—accepting all your warts and foibles as the reality from which to begin.

“In terms of actual spiritual ‘are you making progress,’ it’s not something you can label in a class. You can only look at your own life. ‘Am I feeling kinder, am I kinder to people, am I more spacious, are my relationships unfolding with more ease, when someone cuts me off in traffic, how am I about that?’ It’s not that you don’t still lose it, but what’s important is how quickly can you notice your reactions and come back.”

—Anne Cushman

With such a shift, progress takes on a new definition. Instead of being defined externally by the ability to look a certain way, progress can be measured by the increasing ability to notice the constant fluctuations of the mind and body.

At the greatest moments of self-doubt, simply lightening up and relaxing can do wonders. Pema Chodron, in her guide to dealing with life’s tragedies, *When Things Fall Apart*, constantly comes back to this simple message. To find in the heart an ability to relax and not try so hard is to find the key to freedom. She reminds us that grasping after the things we crave and running from that which we find offensive creates both tension and anxiety. To relax with the constant flow of good and bad is to begin the journey to self-acceptance and peace. And if, like many Americans, you are interested in the challenges of yoga, consider that truly paying attention to the fluctuations of the mind is much more difficult than doing a handstand in the middle of the room.

“You know it’s working if the student is happier; not a stupid happiness, but a mindset that is more congruent with life as it is because they’ve accepted themselves.”

—Erich Schiffmann

“Don’t waste energy creating tension, judging the pose or wishing you were somehow different than you are at this moment.”

—Phillip Moffitt

“Stay wise and get crazier.”

—Wes Nisker

To be able to relax internally while the muscles of the body are exerting effort in asana is the key to Yoga (with a capital Y).

Have you ever noticed the subtle smile on a statue of the Buddha? It is often characterized as his awareness of the grace of the universe, his great sympathy and empathy for the human condition. Maybe it was also his bemused acceptance of his own imperfections. Or as Wes Nisker suggests, one of the keys to self-acceptance is to remember, “I’m just the *schlub* I think I am!” While “*schlub*” may not have the nuance and myriad connotations of Sanskrit or Pali, Yiddish does provide us with similar gifts. This word captures in one syllable all the boorish, unattractive, clumsiness that our internal critic knows is a perfect description of what’s wrong with us. But what if for a moment you look at these judgments and smile, shrug your shoulders as only Woody Allen might, and grant yourself the gift of realizing you’re doing the best you can. This is not an excuse to give up or to forget the importance of right effort. It is simply an acknowledgement again of, in the words of Fred Jealous, how “perfect you are in your imperfection.”

“One of the main ideas about asana in the Yoga Sutras is often translated as ‘appropriate effort.’ For Krishnamacharya, a deeper connotation is the importance of giving up willful effort, and replacing it with the effort of paying attention.”

—Gary Kraftsow

The next time your mat demons appear, you might realize that they're just frightened, insecure little imps begging for attention. Look at them squarely and they just might float away. The goal of your yoga practice is not to come to some new, esoteric, white-robed mystical revelation. It is simply to return to your natural state.

Krishnamacharya suggested that if you are happy with your life, and believe that your patterns of behavior lead to outcomes that increase your peace of mind, then by all means bring those same tendencies to your yoga practice. But if you are experiencing any dissatisfaction—any longing for another way—he suggested adopting different patterns on the mat than those you use in your daily life.

“When we are out of balance we tend to go to what keeps us out of balance. We need to know and acknowledge any distortion that's arising, and apply a practice that helps us find equilibrium.”

—Sarah Powers

If you find yourself racing through the world, fighting imaginary enemies as a modern-day Don Quixote, conquering adversity, or otherwise questing after your next possible accomplishment or impossible dream; if you seem to be moving faster and faster yet never have quite enough time to devote to the things you'd like, Krishnamacharya suggests adopting an opposite approach in your practice. Conversely, if you find the world a threatening place where problems far outweigh opportunities, try a more assertive practice.

Dr. Kay Jamison has explored the extremes of these tendencies in her examinations of bipolar disorder and in her ode to enthusiasm, *Exuberance*. She introduced me to a delightful way to get some distance from my own patterns while still exploring them with openness and acceptance. She reflects on A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* books, where familiar archetypes abound. A surprising explication of two of the most common personality types is found in none other than Tigger and Piglet. Tigger can never get enough of the new and different. He is an explorer and adventurer driven by his curiosity. Yet Tigger is also a slave to his emotions, flitting here and there, leaving dust and disaster in his wake.

Piglet, ever cautious, evaluates and considers before acting. Piglet has the capacity to see all potential negative outcomes of a new situation, and doesn't waste energy without thinking things through. Yet Piglet is often frozen in indecision, trapped by his brain's caution. Piglet, one would guess, has little need of first aid.

Tigger, bruised and battered, races through the world consuming box after box of Band-Aids.

Everyone's personality has a bit of Tigger and Piglet. By looking within, honestly, openly and without judgment, you can identify which tendency is dominant. Krishnamacharya might simply ask you to notice the tendency and adopt the less dominant force in your yoga practice. This seems so easy—but it isn't. Just think of all the times your normal way of functioning didn't lead to the outcome you expected. You didn't know why, but you were pretty sure it was because of some external reason. It probably never dawned on you that you might be running circles around yourself.

“Hopefully your partner or your children will let you know, and your life will let you know, that you're just being insufferable. Again, if you're paying attention to yourself, to your own absurdities, it can become very clear.”

—Anne Cushman

When you don't recognize your pattern, it leads to familiar behavior but not necessarily to behavior that enhances well-being. Look at the style of yoga a teacher has adopted and you'll notice an awful lot about his or her life. So, too, with the classes that attract you. Think back to the ones that didn't work for you. Certainly there may be numerous external reasons. But once again, with your invisible shield in place, take a clear look inside and see if there was something about your own tendencies and inclinations that affected your reactions.

Archetypes are valuable in their ability to crystallize wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts. Remembering Tigger and Piglet gives a much deeper intuitive and emotional understanding than any personality profile. Archetypes can be simplistic, but more often they provide clarity. In the *ayurveda* tradition (which evolved as an essential part of yoga), an individual's rhythms are described in one of three ways. I hesitate to try to define them too exactly since each is a complex, intricate body of physical and mental characteristics to which I cannot do justice. In very basic terms, *kapha* types tend to be more accepting of the world but risk serious bouts of inactivity. The *pitta* influence tends to be decisive, sometimes controlling behavior, while *vata* brings constant motion and movement. These are neither positive nor negative traits, but have variable effects if present in excessive rather than balanced quantities. At the

risk of oversimplification, these characterizations may help you notice tendencies that have heretofore been unconscious. Or if you are aware of your profile, you might just lighten up a bit and see more clearly as you acknowledge your tendencies. Just as Paul Grilley's work allows you to say "it's my bones' fault," so too with ayurveda, you can blame it all on these tendencies (*doshas*). Excess in vata or pitta lead to much wasted energy and to tendencies somewhere between a Type A personality and Tigger, while excess in kapha finds one somewhere between Piglet and a couch potato.

I've spent much time commenting on the pace and external orientation of many American yoga classes and have stressed the importance of slowing down as the first step in noticing what's going on. Slowing down is at a physical level, if one's vata and/or pitta tendencies predominate. But what if one's kapha characteristics hold court? Here a more active physical practice would be appropriate. This doesn't preclude the need to slow down. It simply means the slowing down has to be internal even if the physical practice is active and strong.

Slowing down, regardless of what the body is doing, has to be internal so it is possible to notice all the nonsense that's been pulling the levers of your mind and body. This leads to an entirely new meaning of the fourth Not-So-Noble Truth: *relaxing* has a lot more to do with your internal state than your physical practice. It involves relaxing the mind, and easing into awareness of your patterns.

"We really don't want to stay with the nakedness of our present experience. There are times when only gentleness and a sense of humor can give us the strength to settle down."

—Pema Chodron

The exponential growth of yoga in America has been fueled in large part by the popularity of highly specific instructions (*sikshana*) and expansive (*brahmana*) practices, those which call on athletic prowess and discipline as they demand continual and constant challenge. These styles have drawn cadres of teachers and students who find a wonderful release in the physical challenge of increasingly complex and sophisticated postures.

“When I returned from Asia, I was shocked by popular yoga. But it has taken yoga to the mainstream, and it’s changing the world. Some people don’t want to hear about spirituality; they just need to get into their bodies.”

—Saul David Raye

I think Krishnamacharya might ask whether these physical accomplishments are truly serving the potential of yoga for the individual. He might ask what would happen if the highly competitive lawyer, the Super Mom, or other American achievers were instead to surrender into the equally challenging rigor of a reductive or relaxing (*langhana*) practice.

Krishnamacharya believed yoga has the potential to reprogram our very neurology so that the longing many humans feel might be salved. It’s unique to each individual yet remarkably consistent in its qualities. The Sufis call it *dervi*, which translates roughly as “homesickness”. In Greek, the word is *kaimos*, a nostalgic longing for a time or place that never was. Whatever the culture, there is some nearly untranslatable word that tries to capture this ineffable longing. All who hear it recognize it immediately as a universal human state. It often leaves one questing for its removal—when in fact it is like a doorbell announcing to any who feel it that they are at the gate of deeper self-understanding. As Jack Kornfield states, this feeling is a gift. It isn’t something to be overcome. It isn’t an answer, but it is the right question.

“There is definitely a longing, a sense that finally, we’re somewhere where there’s a whole group of people in this shared vision of the power of yoga. That’s what yoga is really about, and it’s not based on asana performance.”

—Anne Cushman

It is not far from the state that Pema Chodron refers to as the “essential groundlessness of being human.” It produces longing in some, anxiety in others, and in most, a strong tendency toward avoidance. This running from what is sets us on a never-ending quest.

Yoga offers a chance to come to the mat for an hour or so and rearrange your patterns. It requires a brutal honesty to look at those things we fear most in ourselves. This is not therapy. There is no need for the box of tissues. Krishnamacharya would say the only requirement is to stay in the present moment, to accept where you are and to see what happens. And it just may help to remember your invisible shield.

So here we are again: back to the irony that change is only possible with the acceptance of things as they are. It comes with your willingness to slow down, breathe, pay attention, and most of all to be gentle with yourself. With that gentleness comes a new illumination of the unconscious patterns that have been in control. And as if by magic, since it suddenly seems so obvious, the patterns begin to lose their power. If you don't believe me, take your invisible shield with you and see how it goes.

“What’s really radical for us growing up in this culture is the whole idea of non-attainment. When we posit a final yogic state, we always feel less than, always disappointed.”

—Tias Little

CHAPTER 12:

Humor is Serious Stuff

We need to put the ha back in hatha.

—Richard Rosen

There can be only one way to deal with the most vexing of existential questions. When confronted with the unanswerable, the best we can do is to not take it all so seriously. Humor is a very real way of dealing with the contradictions that come with being human. Humor can quickly reframe how we see a situation: from fearsome to funny. It brings startling clarity, in one pratfall, pun, or self-deprecating joke, to the common humanity that underlies the all-too-human fear of separateness. The fact that this fear is shared universally proves its falsehood: we're all in this leaky boat together. Even though each one of our buckets is filled with holes, we're all bailing together.

“Humor helps you to see that your frames of reference are totally relative. A joke is funny often when two storylines converge with an unexpected outcome. So maybe you’re not depressed, it may be just a game you’re playing with yourself and all of a sudden you just know it. Your body knows it. It just comes out as this laugh that makes you let go deep inside.”

—Richard Freeman

Laughter and exuberance are inextricably bound to the brain’s curiosity mechanisms. While humor may be uniquely human, playfulness is certainly not.

One spring, two does, each with her their twin fawns, visited each morning during my yoga practice at home. In April, the seeds of the California poppies I planted sprouted into a carpet of green and orange. But I was unaware that I had essentially purchased very expensive deer food. There is nothing more

endearing or maddening than witnessing a week-old fawn that has been sleeping in the poppies stand up from a night's sleep, eat a clump of poppies with flowers hanging out of its mouth, and wag its stubby tail as if to ask, "what's the problem?"

I had created a deer park, and two pairs of fawns pranced across it daily. As the weeks passed and their spots faded, they became more adventurous. In each pair, one would come close to the window while the other would hang back. The more curious and playful one would be the first to run at full speed across the yard like a puppy, with the other following close behind. A week or so later the running gave way to feeble attempts at the jumping motions of their mothers. The moms would stand back and watch their charges stumble and fall, but each day the fawns got their chops down a bit more. The more adventurous ones always fell more often, but they also learned the drill a bit faster.

Play has always been considered a learning tool. It is a vehicle for practicing adult moves. When Trip Hawkins and Rich Melmon proposed creating a video game company to venture capitalists in Silicon Valley in the early 80s, they built a compelling story around the power of play as a learning medium. While you might question the learning value of *Grand Theft Auto*, Electronic Arts grew to its present size in part by keeping its eye on the value of play.

This learning component of play is only part of the story. It fails to account for the frequently mean and destructive behaviors that characterize the play of both boys and girls. It's hard to find an explanation for the hurt feelings and bruised bodies that are the dark side of play. Recent research indicates that play is not simply a way of practicing adult behaviors. It also serves the purpose of exercising a broad range of brain circuitry by exposing the young to diverse behaviors that run the spectrum from positive to negative. It's a way for children to explore the potential of what it means to be human in a relatively safe environment. It underscores the fact that all human behavior includes a rainbow of possibilities, from the darkest to the brightest.

Exploring this diversity creates a wide behavioral repertoire with which to confront life's uncertainties. The brain learns that it can deal with success or failure in a myriad of ways. This flexibility is exactly what is necessary later in life to mediate our reactions to potentially threatening stimuli. Play proves over and over again that life is not a series of whoopee cushions: it is not a bunch of threatening events for which you must be constantly on guard, only to be frightfully surprised when you least expect it. Certainly there are failures and mistakes, but it is the flexibility learned in play that modulates reactions to those circumstances.

“Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing our enthusiasm.”

—Winston Churchill

Playfulness has within it all of the neurological prerequisites to openness. The parts of the brain activated during playful exuberance send messages to the musculature to relax. Tension dissipates with a smile, just as it melts under a steady pattern of deep breathing. Play in this context becomes an attitude rather than just a series of actions. It also leads to greater creative problem solving skills for dealing with life’s uncertainties.

“We don’t stop playing because we grow old,
we grow old because we stop playing.”

—Benjamin Franklin

Against this backdrop of play, humor, and exuberance, yoga classes come with all the trappings of serious inquiry. Somehow the notion of spirituality or simply of physical exercise must be accompanied by earnestness. While it may be difficult to maintain a lighthearted spirit while executing 108 sun salutations, a pervasive seriousness often characterizes many practices. It’s almost as if yoga students are drawn to some modern form of the Puritan doctrine combined with a football coach’s admonitions of “No pain, no gain.”

How did this attitude develop? Do we still buy into the notion that if it feels good it can’t be good for us? Yoga in America seems to reflect the self-criticisms of the Protestant ethic, the guilt of the Jewish, and the shame of the Catholic, combined with the dark side of the Vedic guru tradition.

“When I first started, I applied my Protestant work ethic to my practice.
I thought the further I pushed, the more poses I did, the better off I would be.”

—Tias Little

Asana practice in particular comes to eager American seekers with its precise architecture plus its system of sequential and never-ending progress. Many of the teachers who have translated this knowledge into its American idiom have themselves accepted this model. Classes are steeped in a serious belief that there is a formal body of knowledge, which the teacher will convey to students over time as physical prowess increases. The font of wisdom is out there, available to seekers who are simply willing to surrender to it.

The fascinating twist is that surrender is indeed necessary, but not necessarily to some external wisdom or to some stern father's perspective on the truth. ("Father" is used here as a reflection of attitude, not necessarily gender!) Rather, it is surrender to the natural vulnerability of our humanity, our playfulness, and our struggles that is needed.

“As teachers, we have to be willing to reveal our own neuroses
with some humor; it automatically lightens the load.”

—Jill Satterfield

Smiling and laughter actually activate the parts of the nervous system that help muscles relax. In a moment of right effort, without struggle, the ability to smile a little and to breathe gently and deeply reminds the body's systems that safety is at hand. Remember that on the two-by-six-foot sticky mat upon which all this mental drama unfolds, you are essentially safe, secure and at home. It's OK to relax and lighten up. It may take backing off a posture a bit, but you will end up thanking yourself, and maybe even chuckling a bit to boot.

Play is curvilinear; asana is mainly about straight lines. But play, and the consequent freedom of movement it offers your asana practice, can only occur in a secure environment and in the absence of stress.

“In a physical way, we're re-patterning our habits in asana, we're re-patterning
the habitual patterns of the breath, we're re-patterning the habits of
our minds, and that comes in some ways through play and humor.”

—Rodney Yee

Natural selection has always favored the curious, those who anticipated the unknown instead of shrinking from it. Imagine a young female proto-human foraging for berries in the forest. She hears a sound just beyond her range of sight. Eons before, prior to her brain reaching its present human size, she would have simply frozen, or cut and run.

Well, our young woman hears the sound. But instead of panicking, she senses it may be something to worry about—or it may also be the hunk who was looking at her back in the cave. At about the same time, the hunk is not too far away. He's tracking game and has seen tracks of that proverbial sabre-toothed tiger in the same territory. He, too, hears a sound in the bushes. He goes on alert, but in the moment after hearing the sound, he becomes curious instead of just bolting.

It's quite possible that they both should have been more cautious. It's quite possible there was a metaphorical or real snake in the grass. But in this particular case, these two got to choose how to react with their expanded behavioral repertoire. By not letting fear overtake them, they discovered each other and posterity got to carry on two more sets of curiosity genes.

“Part of the yoga philosophy is that the world is at play.
It's the goddess Lila playing and dancing, twirling around.
But yoga classes don't seem much like play.”

—Richard Rosen

The anticipatory part of the brain can be activated by either fear or opportunity. Playfulness, curiosity, and openness enhance the ability to discern between the two. When such discernment is finely tuned, then intuition is on target and gut feelings lead in the right direction. However, when a non-threatening stimulus is perceived as dangerous, or when a truly dangerous stimulus is ignored, intuition is stymied and actions are guided by either fear or blind enthusiasm.

As mentioned earlier, tension is the greatest impediment to finding and trusting your intuitive voice, the voice that can always guide and free your body and mind.

“Stressed is desserts spelled backwards.”

—Unknown

When tension is present, there is no better antidote than humor. In the Vedic tradition, which predated asana, play and humor were seen as essential to life. As Richard Rosen points out, the goddess Lila embodies the playfulness and spirit of a playful imp, never taking creation too seriously. To paraphrase William Sax (who examined the Lila story in some detail), this goddess is like a mischievous child who will build up a sand castle only to knock it down and start over again. The joy is in the act of creation, not in the end result.

This same spirit is integral to yoga and to asana practice in particular. Simply remembering that you are safe (protected by your invisible shield) gives you the ability to smile and be surprised at all the hysterical stories the mind can weave. The trick is to notice them with an attitude of acceptance. And who knows? All those stories might make you laugh out loud.

There was a child went out every day;
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became;
And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part of
the day, or for many years, or stretching cycles of years.

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

CHAPTER 13:

Science to the Rescue

Repeated experience can change the way the brain works.

—*Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche*

In the last decade there has been a convergence in the work of cognitive psychologists, neurophysiologists, and students of meditation around a remarkable conclusion. It is completely within the realm of possibility to reprogram the neuronal pathways of the brain in such a way that anxiety-producing emotions can be traded for more accepting and receptive feelings.

Now
That
All your worry
Has proved such an
Unlucrative
Business,
Why
Not
Find a Better
Job?

—Hafiz

The Dalai Lama is a firm believer in the power of Western analysis to prove the positive benefits of meditation, self-acceptance, and compassion. Through his Mind and Life Institute, the Dalai Lama draws together noted brain researchers from universities across the country to join his investigations with Buddhist practitioners and scholars. The Tibetan variation of compassion and loving kindness meditation is being shown to directly reprogram the neuronal patterns that heretofore were believed to be hard-wired. In fact, Buddhists tell us and researchers explain, the brain can be reprogrammed to more positive patterns by focusing on positive thoughts through a capacity of the brain known as neuronal plasticity.

This work suggests negative thinking, self criticism, and debilitating judgments are learned behaviors that can be unlearned; not necessarily by therapy, drugs,

or religion, but rather by first noticing the thoughts that are present and then focusing the attention on opposite feelings. The key here is that the mind (which tends to get a pretty bad rap when we speak of the traps we set for ourselves) can actually be used in a very powerful, positive way.

Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche is a Tibetan monk. He summarizes much of this work in his *The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret and Science of Happiness*. He points out the Tibetan Buddhist word for mind is *sem*, roughly translated as “that which knows.” He also points out there is no conception of *place* for *sem*. It is as if the mind is a verb, the act of reflecting. Just as the eye sees, so too the entire nervous system “minds.” To paraphrase Stephen Colbert, the body, not just the brain, engages in “mindness.” The mind is not simply a function of the brain. It is a process irreducible to a physical location. Science is discovering that the entire physical body comes into play in the activities that have come to be known as the mind. In Mingyur Rinpoche’s analysis, the mind is not a place; it emerges from deep within the functioning body.

Complementing Mingyur Rinpoche’s perspective, Dan Siegel has written cogently on the process of what has come to be defined as the “mind.” In *The Mindful Brain*, Siegel argues against the conception of brain as some kind of engineer at the front of a relatively reactive freight train. It is better to think of the brain (and, I would assume, the body itself) as being used by the mind to create itself. Much of the scientific evidence emerging in the last decade is also exposing what heretofore was considered to be an inviolate boundary between the self and others. Siegel shows how the separation, while real at the level of skin and bones (I am here, you are there), is much less clear at a neurophysiologic level. The brain is a social mechanism with large parts devoted to processing energy that flows between individuals. The deeper one looks at the operation of the body, brain, and mind, the more artificial the separation becomes.

“A human being...experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest — a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison....Our task is to free ourselves from this prison....Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.”

—Albert Einstein

Siegel spent years as an emotional attachment researcher exploring what types of child-parent interactions lead to a sense of secure attachment. His work has tremendous implications for your ability to break out of the prison Einstein describes. He has discovered the major factor leading to secure attachment is the ability of a parent to validate the internal world and experience of the child. Perhaps most Westerners grow up with a false sense of separateness primarily because their upbringing convinced them the illusion is true. Not being seen or acknowledged is a great way to feel separate.

The benefits of mindfulness accrue by replacing old neuronal pathways that were etched into the brain from the fear and anxiety of childhood. New pathways are possible that can eliminate the *optical delusion* of separateness.

“Our yoga practice has to be a bit more clever than our habits.”

—Leslie Kaminoff (quoting T.K.V. Desikachar)

As the increasingly complex neocortex of humans evolved, the regions where the “mind” does its thing developed. This is neither the enteric nervous system, the place of “gut instinct,” nor is it the emotional brain of the limbic system with its vast capacity for sizing up a situation in a non-rational way. Rather, it is where conscious attention and choice provide the ability to slow down and notice whether mental reactions are tied to the present moment or to some past or future time. It is the same capacity often denigrated as overthinking that creates the ability to pause, reflect, and respond more appropriately in a way that increases emotional well-being.

This is a critical paradox to consider. It is true that much of this book addresses the fact that humans think too much when trying to find happiness and peace of mind. The problem lies in the fact that you can’t use the same kinds of reductionist tools to find happiness and well-being that you do when trying to solve a mathematical problem, study for an exam, or evaluate interest rates on alternative investments. (“If I do this, that will happen; I did that and that’s why this happened.”) Instead, the great power of the discerning mind lies in its ability to decide not to let negative thoughts proceed. How ironic to realize that the very mental tools that have created so much unhappiness might actually be useful to eliminate that condition!

“If our minds are so smart, why aren’t we happy?”

—Jack Kornfield

While it requires a bit of non-rational faith at first to believe there is a different path, it is a completely rational choice to proverbially “stop in your mental tracks” and realize “there I go again.” These are reflective, intellectual capabilities activated in the same part of the brain that gets us in trouble in the first place.

Mingyur Rinpoche emphasizes the power of mindfulness to reprogram thinking about experience:

“If I were to become aware of my habitual thoughts, perceptions, and sensations, rather than being carried away by them, their power over me would begin to fade. Simply by looking at what (is) going on in the mind can change what is actually going on there.” (emphasis added)

His essential message is that repeated experience can change the way the brain works. Repetition is what set up all the negative patterns in the first place. Some danger came your way and your mental response patterns became rigid long after the danger passed. Now when any kind of similar event transpires, the same neuronal pathways begin to fire. Once you become aware of and accept these patterns, they lose their power. But change also requires repetition, continuously noticing the pattern, and moving the attention to more positive thoughts. Rick Hanson, author of *Buddha’s Brain*, offers a great perspective on the difficulty of harnessing the power of thoughts to take advantage of the pliability of the brain. Good experiences, he relates, are like Teflon for the brain, while bad experiences or thoughts are like Velcro. Quite simply, we’re wired to be ready for and embrace negative stuff, while the pathways of optimism are a bit more slippery.

As someone with great experience at complaining, I can assure you that just becoming aware of this capacity isn’t enough. The grooves of habit are deep synaptic furrows. It is palpably frustrating to realize the simplicity of the task, yet still be unwilling to exert the mental energy necessary to build new connections. It somehow seems easier to stay unhappy. Like any exercise, it requires effort, in

this case the effort to catch yourself, with a little forgiveness and acceptance—to notice “there I go again,” and then to change. It’s hard enough to give yourself a break. The next task is doing the work necessary to change your negative patterns, once you’ve recognized and accepted them.

Mingyur Rinpoche offers the hope that this change is not only possible, but can be achieved even with the most difficult mental patterns. His own panic attacks as a boy are a poignant example. His attacks were debilitating, even though he had an extremely loving family. Having gotten considerable value from meditation at a very young age, he decided to use these tools to deal with his panic. His first experience was to try to shut it out. Panic became his enemy and consumed him. Then he tried to accept what the panic was saying. This led to further debilitation as the panic became the boss. Finally he simply watched the panic, made friends with it, and it slowly disappeared. But he first had to accept what was happening before he could focus on feelings of compassion towards himself and others. He has been hooked up to scientists’ electrodes and subjected to brain scans, that have shown the activated areas of his brain are the same ones activated in a mother when she is with her infant. It is an overarching sense of acceptance and nurturance.

It may seem counterintuitive, but having compassion for, and gratitude towards, your demons actually makes them recede. Sarah Powers points out how they are just trying to take care of you. At some level these are voices of attempted protection, misguided as they may be.

Mingyur Rinpoche and the scientists he describes have a clear message: one needn’t be a monk to experience this same transition. All that is required is the simple belief that refocusing the mind holds promise. What better challenge for all Type A Americans than to work towards such an achievement? Thomas Jefferson would be proud: we can now pursue not happiness, but awareness.

“Our longings or worries are both overblown because we have the capacity to manufacture the very thing (happiness) we are pursuing when we choose experience.”

—Dan Gilbert.

In case this all seems easy, let me remind you of the wonderful Saturday Night Live character, Stuart Smalley (created by Al Franken). It’s easy to discount the power of diligent positive thinking after reviewing Stuart’s hilarious affirmations. But Stuart seemed to ignore a key element of neural plasticity in his attempts

to change, the importance of clear seeing. For encouragement you only have to remember your negative thoughts that you are sure are true about you are nothing more than reverse affirmations. You've just been doing them longer and have come to believe them.

“Don’t take yourself so personally.”

—Ram Das

But it’s not as simple as reciting some alternative words. For all of Stuart’s affirmations, he was not a very conscious person, not very willing to look at what was actually going on inside his body.

Asana when done in a slow, deep practice with awareness of and attention to physical sensations, provides a particularly non-threatening way to look at what is going on in the physical body and at your mental reactions. It’s not as scary as looking too deeply at your demons; it is, however, an introduction to paying attention to what is. And as the next chapter will show, knowing what’s going on in the body makes changing the mind a whole lot easier!

“The study of yoga is about moving from distraction to attention.”

—Gary Kraftsow

CHAPTER 14:

Down Here in the Tummy, Dummy

I am, therefore I am.

—*Antonio Damasio, Descartes' Error*

There may be a certain “yuk factor” when discussing subjects that include words like bowel, rectum or colon, but it turns out there is an incredibly active enteric nervous system at work in the folds of your viscera. And that nervous system has a tremendous impact on all the jabber that goes on in the mind.

Long before Descartes suggested that the mind was the most important, dominant part of our being, our human ancestors weren’t too concerned with choices such as whether to order non-fat, one or two percent, whole milk, or half-and-half once the decision has been made to go with a decaf latte rather than a mocha chai. Long before modern human beings were confronted with the often debilitating question “Paper or plastic?” our forbearers had to make quick decisions as to whether a shadow over their shoulder was a saber-toothed tiger or a harmless tree branch. The fight/flight/freeze response goes all the way back evolutionarily to reptiles. Yet that response pattern is alive and well in people, and is influenced by the same neurotransmitters found in you. And in your body, there is actually more serotonin manufactured in the lining of the gut than in the brain. That’s the source of those gut-wrenching reactions.

While we encounter fewer potentially life-threatening situations these days, one only needs to go out on a first date, apply for a job, or be a kid on the first day at a new school to know that fears and anxieties have a home much lower than the brain. Without getting too much into the “yuk factor,” think about your own physical reaction to stress. In its extreme form, the response ranges with remarkable consistency between three behaviors: constipation, diarrhea, and vomiting.

So here you are, a 21st-century human with an enteric nervous system constantly trying to get your attention, speaking to you often in the most embarrassing ways.

These responses can be traced directly back to your ancestors' need for their stomachs and intestines to be highly tuned to a changing environmental situation. This second brain, as Dr. Michael Gershon describes the enteric nervous system, evolved quite independently of the cortex. Because its normal role in monitoring and controlling digestion is an ongoing and complex one, evolution dictated it was better to place this brain where the action is.

As the cortex evolved, higher mental faculties began to mediate the fight/flight/freeze response. And as human beings were presented with decisions beyond those involving life or death, the development of the higher brain centers rapidly accelerated. Yet science is showing that bodily functions—most importantly their balance or lack thereof—have a direct impact on mental states that seem to be happening between your ears.

“Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body.”

—James Joyce, *Dubliners*

At Dr. John Allman's Cal Tech Laboratory, Antonio Damasio's at the University of Southern California, Hugo Critchley's at the University of Sussex, and especially at Bud Craig's at the University of Arizona, researchers are coming to a remarkable set of interlocking conclusions that I, as a non-scientist, have the latitude (or temerity) to muse over.

Their expertise can be loosely combined under “interoception,” a term originally coined by Sir Charles Sherrington a century ago to reflect an individual's knowledge of the material “me.” Craig's conception, defined as the ability to read and interpret sensations arising within the body, has expanded understanding of interoception dramatically. These researchers are finding remarkable correlations (although causation is still speculative) in the parts of the brain that monitor emotions and bodily sensations. The *medial prefrontal cortex* plays an essential role. In particular, the *insula* houses pathways that monitor the body's *homeostasis*, the relative balance of all internal systems. But it is also home to the higher emotions (trust, love, compassion, doubt, etc). And it is the location for the *Von Economo neurons* that function when intuition is called on. These “intuition neurons” are active when there is a need to make decisions in complex situations of great ambiguity. Allman believes these situations all seem to involve some need for a corrective response to reestablish balance.

I hope all this science doesn't seem too simplistic, confusing, or, worse yet for a reader who's picked up a book about yoga and self-acceptance, irrelevant. If you'll bear with me a bit, I hope you'll see the connection. This work presents a window into the mental patterns that seem to block the ability of yoga to return the body to a state of natural balance. That balance may have receded, so that it's only a potentiality now. But it is a state that is nothing less than your birthright. It is a state within which the mind is quiet and calm.

“The noticing and the settling exercises allow students to know where they are. It’s so important because anxiety gets locked up in the soma. Meditation is the bookends of practice. At the beginning and end it is an invitation to settle.”

—Tias Little

The Five Not-So-Noble-Truths are nothing more than a simple prescription to help remove the mental blocks that impede well-being and balance. They provide a way for you to see what is, free from the filters of the internal critic, from self-doubt and judgment. They can free you from your thoughts so you might hear your body's instructions for you. These messages can bring you awareness of the imbalances that always exist. When you can observe your imbalances, you are in a much better place to know what action to take to regain balance. But your decision of how to proceed is totally unique, since everyone's imbalances are different. Thus when you listen, it is your inner voice instructing you in the right action for you. Only then will the mind, like a friendly pet, stop pulling on its leash and instead just follow calmly along.

“Most of the time in life, nothing is wrong, so nothing has to be fixed.”

—Fred Jealous

So what is all this science about? It's to assure you that the human organism has an ingrained need to achieve balance. You have an innate ability to find that balance if you see the thoughts that arise from a place of *imbalance* for what they are.

“When we are in a state of balance, we make decisions that are in balance.”

—Timothy McCall, M.D.

Negative thoughts about what you “should” be doing are confusing. It’s like trying to learn to sing from someone who’s tone-deaf. In fact, negative thoughts are often a *function* of imbalances in the body, and they seldom point you in the right direction. The last thing those thoughts know is how to help you lighten up so you can see what’s actually going on.

“With all of my running and all of my cunning,
If I couldn’t laugh I would just go insane.”

—Jimmy Buffett

With continued evolution the brain’s increasing ability to accurately assess bodily states and to make choices that kept those states in balance, enhanced chances for survival. This is intuition, the organism’s ability to accurately monitor bodily states to increase well-being. Wellness is not some ad for vitamins; it is a result of our genetically determined survival instinct. But as intellectual prowess and the separate sense of the self evolved, it was as if the mind forgot its original role. It got cluttered up with all this great new stuff it was capable of.

Especially in the West, the mind’s intellectual prowess has trumped its monitoring skills. There are cultures in the world whose members know that when the mind is over-amplified, it’s a signal to slow down. I brought a group of Russian artists to the United States soon after the fall of the Soviet Union. We went on a journey traveling from California to New York, where they painted, taught and exhibited in numerous galleries. They were continually bemused and confused by all the choices Americans have. Our tours were characterized by too much to do in too little time. Each time I would try to hurry them along to our next adventure, one of them always said, “Just sit for five minutes.” After the first few times of resisting, thinking I couldn’t slow down, I saw how just stopping took all the stress out of the situation.

This skill is also available to meditators and those who practice other forms of Intentional Awareness. It is the ability to avoid getting caught up in negative

thoughts and instead to see them as simple reflections of imbalance; then, to actively choose to change. There is something about seeing them this way that makes room for the body's natural intuitive skills to point you in a new direction.

This is the most wonderful paradox of the human mind: it can lead you down a dead end or open you to the unlimited potential of intuition to chart a new course.

“If you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

—Yogi Berra

“Yoga says that body and mind are one”

—Gary Kraftsow

Sandra and Matthew Blakeslee cogently summarize much of this new science in *The Body has a Mind of its Own*. Their conclusions are directly relevant to yoga's goal of quieting mental distractions. It is quite possible, they argue, that these distractions increase because the body is out of whack. A part of what is called *mind*, the chattering aspect of the mental world, may be nothing more than the language centers trying to place some meaning on all of the imbalanced transmissions from the receptors in the gut and limbic system. Mood states and consequent internal dialogues are directly connected to the balance or lack thereof in your physical body. And mood states have a direct impact on what you actually notice.

“Mood state influences what is noticed, how it is remembered, and how it is retrieved from memory. Those whose temperament affords them extended periods of positive mood experience the world in a very different way from those who are dyspeptic.”

— Dr. Kay Jamison

Once again, attitude is everything.

The Blakeslees suggest the erroneous belief in our absolute separateness may be understood best by observing how parts of the brain function. The cortex houses your sense of your body's physical boundaries. It is responsible for your body schema, the perceived physical boundary between you and other people. Yet the schema is very malleable. Babe Ruth's body schema included not only his own body, but likely also extended beyond that to include his bat, the ball, and even the arm of the pitcher on the opposing team. To be sure, at a physical level you are separate from those around you. But that separateness is extremely malleable.

A fascinating series of connections (and a possible path out of our sense of separation) can be found between the work the Blakeslees describe, the brain scans of meditators (summarized by Mungyer Rinpoche), and, remarkably, in the experience Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor described after her stroke.

Most of the thoughts about what is wrong in your life deal with your perceived separateness. It manifests as a set of instructions about what you as an individual need to do to get your act together in comparison to others. As Dr. Taylor summarizes, it is the *parietal lobe* that helps to identify our physical boundaries. When it is inactive, we lose sight of where we begin and end, and how we relate to the space around us. It is the dormancy of the language center (also located in the parietal lobe) during meditative states that gives practitioners their sense of connectedness and peace. Dr. Taylor reasons that her stroke may have deactivated the separateness centers of her brain. She was left with an overarching sense of peace and acceptance, with none of the mental chatter common to her pre-stroke condition.

Your mental yammering may be nothing more than a response to your *perceived* physical separation from the environment—a perception at odds with the state achieved when these mental centers are quieted. And as the Blakeslees point out, body maps are so flexible that any sense of absolute boundaries must be a pure mental fabrication.

“By and large, language is a tool for concealing the truth”

—George Carlin

Dr. Taylor is a brain researcher by training. She had a personal realization that, at its most basic level, the brain is pretty low tech. It tends to focus on whatever its owner is looking for. When the language centers in her left parietal lobe began functioning again, her sense of separation and its concomitant mental discomfort returned. Yet she discovered she had the ability to return to positive feelings that mimicked the state induced by her stroke. It was simply a matter of noticing the details of her feeling state, what she was experiencing in her body and mind, and then deciding she didn't want to be there. Now I'm not suggesting we auto-induce strokes. The sheer power of her ability was in large part a function of an otherwise terribly debilitating event. But the possibility of retraining the brain is obvious.

It is your *choice* to focus on the emotional sense of separateness as opposed to non-judgmentally considering the physical reality of that separateness. To be sure, we have a physical body. Trust me on this one. Don't step out in front of a bus to test it. But there is often a belief system about this physical separation that is experienced in the body as sadness, grief, anxiety and a whole host of stress-producing emotions. Those emotions alter the body's homeostasis. That imbalance sends warning signals to the insula. The result is an inordinate amount of mental garbage reinforcing itself in an endless feedback loop.

The presence of *mirror neurons* is further proof (no stroke necessary for this one!) that all of our mental whining around separation and comparison is not grounded in reality. The sole purpose of these neurons is to learn from our non-physical connection to others. For example, your brain changes when you watch someone articulate a yoga posture. Mirror neurons fire, and your skill level changes, through nothing more than looking. As simplistic as it may sound, we are deeply connected to everything around us.

The safe, secure, connected state of the right brain exists at all times. Once you are freed from chemically induced stress reactions, it is always available. This is the emotional condition of the right brain. It is not a state "out there" to be achieved by some esoteric practice or mind-altering substance. The right hemisphere is aware that everything is basically OK just as it is. You will confront many situations that don't feel OK. Thank goodness the left brain's skills are able to kick in! But remember, the left side is the same one that is responsible for openness to change. At a neurologic level, meditation and other awareness practices, including the Five Not-So-Noble Truths' approach to yoga, activate those regions in the left hemisphere that create a higher probability of seeing what actually *is*. So both right and left hemispheres, when the body is in balance, have the capacity to lead the organism to wellness. This is your natural state.

“Enlightenment isn’t a process of learning, it is process of unlearning.”

—Dr. Katherine Domingo, quoted in Jill Bolte Taylor

The left brain plays a vital function in survival. While it's all well and good to realize that we are essentially complete, full of love and compassion just as we are, and that there's nothing we need to do to find those states, external factors sometimes intrude.

Whether it was saber-toothed tigers at the edge of the cave, or a deadline the boss won't offer slack on, the exigencies of everyday life do crop up. It's important to have a sense of who we are as separate entities with a set of skills to meet such challenges.

Imagine a clan of cavemen gathered around the fire. The biggest guy is grousing at the ne'er-do-wells hanging out at the back of the cave:

“Those damn cavies, all they do is sit around, eat mushrooms, and paint pictures of animals on the wall. Who do they think is out there killing the damn animals so they can sit around here, cut their hair off, and paint all day?”

“Geez, man,” can be heard from the back of the cave. “Don't be so stressed. Relax, enjoy life, everything's cool.”

Had all the big guys listened, we might not have been here today. Instead, a whole bunch of large, well fed carnivores might have replaced Homo sapiens.

So hurrah for the left brain, for our uncanny ability to think logically, and to use those same talents to realize they are indispensable—but also limited. Left brain skills are only as valuable as their ability to see their own limitations.

Your emotional feeling of separation is a *learned* reaction, not a natural state. Since it is learned, it can be unlearned. It begins with the first “No” uttered by a parent to a toddler. That “no” creates reactive, muscular tension. It wires into the brain a sense of distrust—first of oneself, and then of that part of space that comes to be known as *others*.

The body/mind is always available to guide in the really important stuff. It just hasn't been used very often in an integrated way since infancy. It's as if the “self-trust muscles,” (which are exercised by the awareness that you are connected to

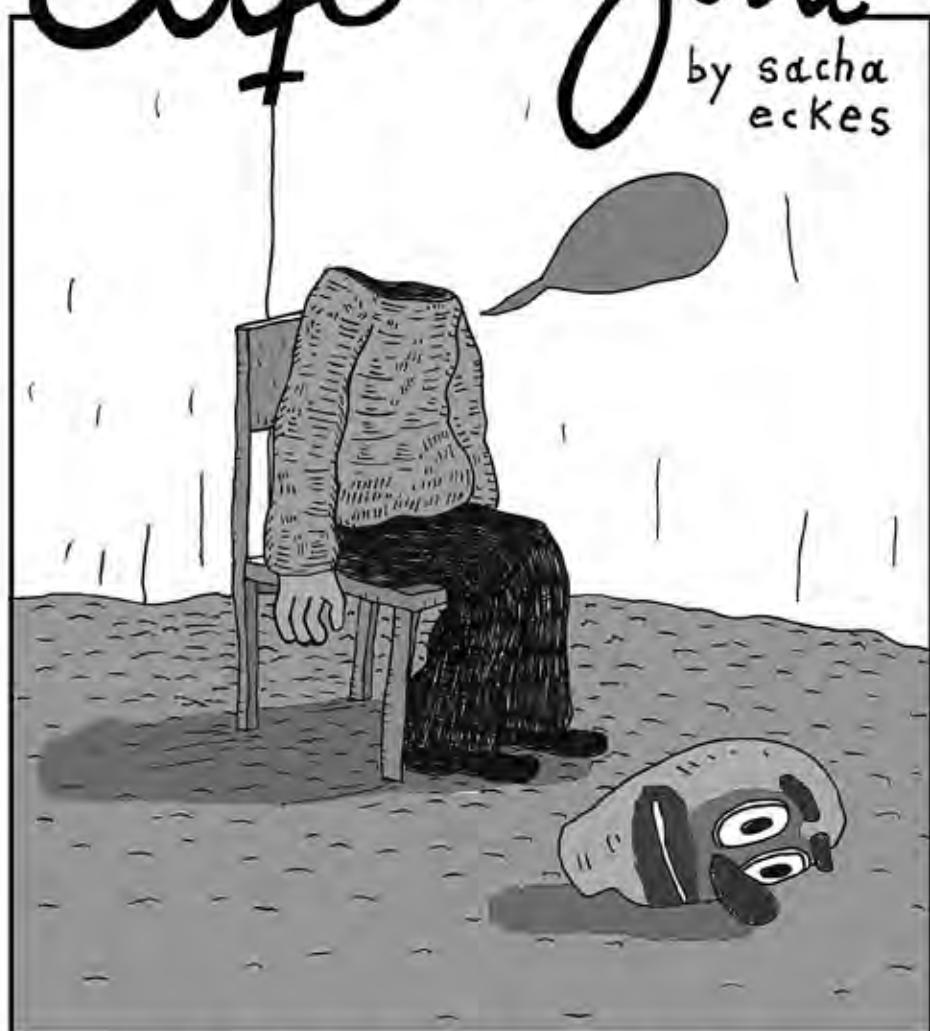
everything at birth, and the knowledge that this connection can never be taken away) just haven't been used very much. The brain has been trained to use other pathways. I'll return later to how yoga provides the perfect, safe environment for practicing self-trust, refocusing attention and redirecting neuronal pathways to depend once again on self-trust and intuition. There's nothing to worry about. All you need to do is to place yourself in situations over and over that leave you feeling better.

One needn't sit on a zafu for hours on end, although adepts can share tools that quiet the mental centers so that the rhythms of the body can be heard through the din. These rhythms are quiet tones, unwilling or uninterested in competing forcefully with our higher mental powers. They are no match for the verbal acuity of the left brain's story-telling skills. The rhythms know they are right, and have no need to prove it. It is only necessary to slow down enough so that it's possible to hear them. And when we listen to them, they provide the passwords for going on-line to Big Mind.

As the next chapter will show, exploring your limits in a new way during asana can reveal your own password for going on-line. It will help you develop twenty-twenty internal vision.

Life is Good

by sacha
eckes



Well, at least now I can think clearly.

CHAPTER 15:

Edging into Your Edge

Yes there are two paths you can go by
But in the long run
There's still time to change the road you're on.
And it makes me wonder.

—*Led Zeppelin, Stairway to Heaven*

One of the most misunderstood concepts in American hatha yoga is how to deal with your physical limits. Every practitioner knows the admonition not to go past your edge (as it is often described), to stay present and always to know how much is “too much.” But I’ve always been left feeling that the edge is some sharp precipice that must be approached with care for fear of falling off into pain and suffering on the other side. To counteract this, I try to imagine the edge as a broad plateau with plenty of room to navigate.

“I’m not afraid of heights, I’m afraid of widths.”

—Steven Wright

I was once hiking high in California’s Sierra Nevada mountains. As a 40-year-old in the first throws of denial about my body’s presumed infallibility, I was accompanying my son’s ski team on a 300-mile hike from Lake Tahoe to Mount Whitney. After many grueling days, I asked the coach how he could arise day after day to lead a group of 16-year-old, finely-tuned physical specimens, when his own aging body was showing more than its first signs of wear and tear. The coach was a five-foot-four Austrian fireplug. He had done ski stunts for films, including a triple flip over a moving train. He simply looked at me and said, “Zis is a var zat cannot

be won, but a battle zat must be fought.” At that point I decided it was time for a discreet exit, while I had what was left of my body intact.

Unfortunately, we were deep in the Sierra, and I was unwilling to backtrack over the 150 miles I’d navigated so far. But there was a trail over an 11, 000 foot-high pass on the eastern slope, which would bring me to civilization after only 22 miles. I began the hike. As I approached the pass, still some four miles above me, it looked like a sharp vertical barrier. I put my head down and just kept putting one foot in front of the other. Eventually I came over a rise as the trail suddenly leveled. I realized then that I had achieved the summit. But it was not sharp. It was a smooth plateau about 10 yards wide, with the trail continuing down from the other side. This was the edge I had both yearned for and dreaded. Once there, I realized it was the most peaceful part of the hike, since the descent down the far side looked steep and unforgiving.

The edge in yoga practice is not unlike that pass. It can be a wide and potentially peaceful place, as long as you recognize that you don’t have to expend a lot of energy to keep from falling off the other side.

Earlier, we used an easy Wall Hang to explore your visual imagination. We’ll come back into the Wall Hang in the next practice to explore how wide your edge can be.

“Pain is the teacher, self-acceptance is the lesson.”

—Erich Schiffmann

PRACTICE: EXPLORING YOUR EDGE

 <http://www.yosa.co/a8>

- Drop into your Wall Hang again, but this time go to your limit. It's as if you're in class and really trying to do the posture right.
- Feel the pressure start to build. Notice where you are feeling it.
- Back off two inches, or as far as necessary so that you still feel the pressure, but not the strain.
- Breathe very deeply into your shoulders.
- Slide your shoulder blades down your spine.
- Drop your chest toward the floor, pressing your hands against the wall. But let your shoulders be at ease.
- Deepen your breath.
- With your visual awareness, look at your shoulders and imagine them relaxing.
- Back off another two inches and “see” if you still feel the effort. If not, drop back down until you do. Find your sweet spot: effort without strain.
- Keep the breath moving into your shoulders and imagine that it's the breath opening the muscles, not the pressure of deepening the hang.
- Take three deep breaths, then come out of the posture.
- Take notes on your experience.

—What happened when you went past your comfort zone?

—Did you feel you should be pushing further?

—How did you know you had gone too far?

—What happened when you backed off two inches?

When you explore the edge in this way, the effort is still there, but you can engage the effort peacefully and consciously, with deep complete breaths. You will also be able to engage your visual imagination to encourage the opening further. If conversely, you push yourself to your limit, you will begin breathing sharply. Your anxiety may increase as a result of nothing more than your forced respiration, but possibly also from a reasonable concern about hurting yourself. The sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system is aroused so that blood leaves the extremities faster than a dam bursting. The very things you need to expand your muscles, breath and blood flow, run for cover, away from your muscles and into your abdominal cavity.

“If you’re imposing your ideas about the form of an asana you can achieve that form with muscle contraction and override your ability to sense what is really going on. But if you let go of those ideas (or at least keep them in the background) and listen for the subtle relationship of the breath to the movement of the spine, then yoga will happen.”

—Gary Kraftsow

Exploring your edge allows you to directly experience the different bodily sensations that occur when the sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the autonomic nervous system are engaged: one through anticipation or stress, the other through relaxed effort. Regardless of what posture you’re in, if you go at least an inch *less* deep than you normally would, you will keep the breath deep, the blood flowing, the parasympathetic firing, and the muscles opening. Playing with the edge in this way is a vivid reminder of how often your ideas of what you think a posture should be overpower your intuition.

Investigating your edge presents a clear opportunity to move away from the *interpretation* of experience to experience itself.

“Evolution has created blockages in the brain to preclude the perception of pain. This was useful when running away after being attacked. But the physiological body response is to tighten and protect, even when the pain isn’t perceived...The brain allows us to hallucinate certain body states.”

—Antonio Damasio

Embracing your edge in this way lets you see the glorious dance possible between effort and relaxation. That dance is only possible when you are balanced in the middle between the extremes of rigidity on the one hand and lack of effort on the other. In the middle is a wonderful flow of energy—all you could ever want.

“We are in touch with only three percent of what’s here. It’s such a small part of reality, yet we act as if we get it. I just try to create space to allow people to connect with themselves. If there’s struggling, that’s ok, but I try to encourage people to trust themselves. That can open their connection to the truth. Pushing ourselves without softness puts the power in others. I can’t get there without surrender.”

—Saul David Raye

Asana practice, when you back off from what you thought was your limit, is a wonderful opportunity to see, in a non-threatening way, what happens when you do trust your own inner voice. It requires knowing whether you are listening to your body or to your ideas. The habit of trusting your body is not firmly established. It is not something familiar. It’s much easier to follow the rules of alignment offered by a teacher or a video.

Much of what instruction has to teach about proper alignment deals with preventing harm. So it is essential, if only at a physical level, to become familiar with what the tradition has to teach about alignment. It is impossible, however, to prevent harm with generalized instruction. Your personal bodily experience doesn’t lie. If you begin paying attention to the body’s subtle messages rather than to the messages you *think* you should be listening to, you’ll start to learn how to make the rules work for you.

“Ninety percent of all mental errors are in your head.”

—Yogi Berra

If you still are doubtful, just remember that doubt is the mind fighting for survival. I’ve talked quite a bit about the voices everyone carries around in their heads. The Buddhists call them “monkey mind” since they seem to go on incessantly. I call

them the “troops” since there are so many conflicting messages. Now you’re being told that if you trust yourself, your yoga will follow. But your mind may not buy any of this. I’d ask you only to consider those moments, however brief, when you experience total absorption. Perhaps it was during an athletic event. Maybe it was while you were gardening, or listening to music, or maybe in the presence of a newborn child. Whatever the event was, if you felt completely absorbed in the experience, I’d venture to say that the voices went away. Many of us are hoping to find our inner truth. It’s been inside us all along. It’s just that we’ve been using the wrong tools to try to find it.

“Trusting your own inner sense is a smart thing to do. It’s inevitable if you believe that the life force will emerge, and you use the teachings to get into your actual experience (because that is the life force being alive in your body) inevitably you will transcend the path that got you there.

Try doing it with decisions that aren’t too important, like picking out a shirt in the morning. You can’t have a vested interest in the outcome. Learn to not care about the answer, so that you can hear the clear answer. That’s really risky. Because you don’t know what Big Mind will say!”

—Erich Schiffmann

CHAPTER 16:

Bananas, Savannahs, Muscles and Bones

The practice of asana is not a sporting contest. Just because one person can bend forward further than another does not necessarily mean that she is more advanced in her yoga practice. Such comparisons lead to a satisfaction that relies on a feeling of superiority, or to a dissatisfaction that stems from a sense of inferiority. In both cases the origin of the feeling remains hidden from us.

—T.K.V. Desikachar

It is certainly not unreasonable to want to be more flexible, especially if you find yourself with aches and pains or an inability to sit comfortably. Since this book is about self-acceptance, let's just admit that it would be really cool to look like the folks on the cover of *Yoga Journal*. The question then becomes: if you want to be more flexible, what's the best way to achieve that at a physical level while maintaining emotional and mental flexibility as well?

It helps to remember that there is nothing *new* you need to discover. You are only trying to get back to where you started, to your natural state. As Erich Schiffmann has suggested, in order to begin engaging this part of your being once again, it makes sense to try safe, small ways of validating your own voice. And the best way to practice is to see if backing off, lightening up and not trying so hard lead to more progress.

“When we let go of our battles and open our hearts to things as they are, then we come to rest in the present moment. *This is the beginning and end of spiritual practice.*” (emphasis added)

—Jack Kornfield

One of the more infuriating (to Western minds) paradoxes of asana practice is that increases in flexibility are achieved by what is *not* done to a muscle as often as by what *is* done. Appropriate stretching, i.e., stretching that achieves maximum flexibility without injury, given each individual's musculoskeletal uniqueness, recognizes the body's elegant intrinsic equilibrium. If that equilibrium is upset (and it is unique and specific to each individual), the result will be tightness and rigidity rather than openness and flexibility. The mind can only fake out the body for so long. Eventually the body fights back in the only possible way it can.

One day after weeks of struggling in forward bend, my muscles seemed to spontaneously open. I remember thinking "Finally, this is paying off." But instead of deepening my breath, experiencing and accepting this new feeling, I thought I could go further. My ego trumped my intuition until the next morning when I couldn't get out of bed. So much for "more is better."

"Breath links conscious awareness to movement. If you're focusing on the breath you can be aware of subtle movements in the spine. If you're focusing on achieving a form you are outside your experience. It's like having a third person relationship with the asana."

—Gary Kraftsow

There are numerous texts available on the anatomy and physiology of stretching. In particular, R. David Coulter's *Anatomy of Hatha Yoga* and Leslie Kaminoff's *Yoga Anatomy*, offer tremendous insights into the physiologic and anatomic issues of yoga practice. Kaminoff's book, in particular, weds neuromuscular findings with extensive multicolored illustrations of asanas. His book is invaluable to see what is actually going on in the muscles during asana. Drawing on those two texts, I hope to give you one more reason to believe that your body will straighten you out eventually, even when your mind thinks otherwise.

Muscles aren't too complicated at the level of unconsciously controlled reflexes. They include receptors that signal the muscle to contract fully or not at all. Whether muscles return to their resting state depends in large measure on how nicely they've been treated while stretched. For flexibility to increase, stretched or contracted muscles have to be able to get a little R&R themselves.

These receptors can lead to a variety of reflexes, some that cause contraction and one that leads to release. The *myotactic* stretch reflex occurs in the large muscles

of the leg. It keeps you from collapsing when you jump from a few feet above the ground. When the receptors in the leg muscles receive a strong sharp stimulation, the spinal cord gets the message and sends word back to tighten up. This reflex is why overstretching or pushing just a bit more often backfires, because the reflex happens before the brain gets the message. This reflex has to protect the body in less time than is required for the danger signal to be transmitted all the way up the spinal cord. So waiting to know if you've gone too far can never lead to anything but an after-the-fact "Oops." Or worse.

"I overrode my common sense trying to respond to the teacher telling me stuff I thought would make me more 'OK' if I did it."

—Erich Schiffmann

When the same muscle is passively stretched, that is stretched just to the point of resistance, and then held, an opposite (knife-clasp) reflex occurs. The proprioceptors known as Golgi tendon organs, which lie within the musculotendinous connections, send a message to the muscle to relax and lengthen.

As an example of the differential results of myotactic and knife-clasp reflexes in asana, Coulter contrasts the fast, sudden movements of jump-backs with slower stretching held for longer periods. While highly active practices definitely build strength (defined as the body's ability to resist gravity through the development of more muscle mass), it often comes at the expense of flexibility. Note the experience of long distance runners who fight a constant battle between endurance and tightness as the long muscles of the legs come under continual and sudden reflexive contraction.

Just when you thought you understood the impact of these reflexes, when it seemed like you could still push a bit harder to progress a bit faster, if only you don't jump around so much, the *flexion* reflex makes things more complicated. This is the muscle contraction that happens in response to pain. It's my guess that every reader of this book has been hurt in one way or another during practice. Certainly many injuries come from the outside. Perhaps someone crash-landed on you as he fell unceremoniously out of handstand. Maybe you were the victim of a well-meaning teacher adjusting you into her idea of proper alignment. But most injuries are self-inflicted, coming as they often do seemingly out of nowhere, since injury can occur even if your conscious mind is telling you to relax.

When you push yourself into tension, the flexion reflex is what yanks a muscle away before the mind even knows you've gone too far. The reflex will happen even if the conscious mind thinks everything is fine. And often, by the time pain is experienced, the flexion reflex has already fired. Once there is pain, it may be too late to back off.

“Yoga shouldn’t hurt.”

—Erich Schiffmann

If you know in your heart that you are afraid, your body will tighten. Fear is seldom accompanied by the kind of smooth, deep breathing that muscles love. As diligent as attention might be, the desire to progress and to get somewhere new always runs the risk of leaving Intentional Awareness behind. By focusing first on calm, complete breaths as the *prerequisite* to additional effort, the whole body will know the experience of being comfortable on a wide edge even during rigorous effort. This focus allows you to distinguish that condition from one that feels as if you're dangling over a precipice like Wile E. Coyote. He never realized his predicament until it was too late.

But just as your mind can override your body's natural messages, it can also intercede to move you beyond unconscious control of muscle activity. The key is to know what is actually happening in the muscle. And this requires clarity, a curiosity, and once again, an awareness of *what is*. Your quest to understand *what is* happening can neither be served by what you hope, wish, or think is happening, nor by what might be happening, will be happening, or might have happened!

“We should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality.”

—Albert Einstein

Kids fear demons in their closets and monsters under their beds. Adults fear their own internal movies. Knowing the difference between a muscle that is contracting and one that is relaxing allows the mental focus to rest in *what is actually happening*, not on what we *wish* was happening.

“There are certain facts of reality being constantly presented to us by our senses through the practice. The question is, what do you choose to focus on? Yoga increases our ability to shift focus from the habitual to the unaccustomed.”

—Leslie Kaminoff

It's fascinating (to me at least) that you have the conscious power to stimulate either the Golgi tendon organs and hence muscle release, or the flexion/myotactic reflex receptors that respond to and perpetuate tension. Flexion reflexes often radiate to muscles throughout the body in a general and pervasive tightening. It's as if the body's subtle mechanisms know how to make up for our thick-headedness. Plus, your internal critic then gets to shift from beating you up for not being able to stretch further to yelling at you for hurting yourself! Jeez, it never lets up, does it?

I tried for years to sit comfortably on the floor, only to have the constant drum-beat of self-doubt drown out any possible optimism (“I'll never sit in lotus, I'll never be a yogi.”).



It wasn't until I stopped trying so hard that my body actually opened to sit comfortably on the floor. In the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, which is thought to be one of the first pictorial representations of actual asana instruction, many of the postures are basic seated variations to Lotus (*Padmasana*). If the original yogis themselves had to devote this much energy to finding alternatives to Lotus, imagine us lesser mortals. So once again, take it as it's given and lighten up. Sitting in any variation, even Easy Pose (*Sukhasana*), requires a complex interplay between muscles of the lower and upper body, and those muscles' relationship to the hips. Those relationships are dramatically influenced by the alignment of the spine. That alignment has often been compromised by years of postural imbalances. But before you can work with those imbalances, your body has to be in a receptive mode...Try putting a pillow under your buttocks if you find yourself struggling just to sit on the floor. Once you can relax, you just may be able to look inside.

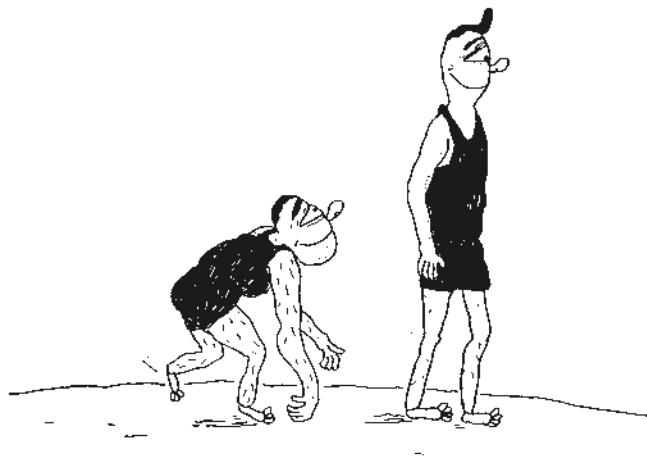


Nature quests for simplicity. The forms that recur in the natural world often reflect the basic simplicity of opposites: energy traveling in one direction is often counterbalanced by equal energy traveling in the other. The primate spine is an amazing example of this conservation of energy. Consider *Homo sapiens*, a vertical mass with a huge head needing to be supported far from the body's center of gravity.

Imagine the forces of natural selection at work as our forerunners were loping along on four extremities, foraging with their heads down. Suddenly some smart guy started looking up. He'd been getting nothing but grief from his buddies because, quite by chance, his backbone didn't curve like the others' backbones did. Instead it had a bit of a concave shape, raising his head and allowing him to see over a wider distance. He was able to see bananas growing just beyond the bushes his friends were marauding. He made his way nearby and feasted. But his neck was killing him.

No sooner had his descendants learned to dominate the savannah than a new weirdo started standing on only his rear extremities. He and his offspring became the ones who could see further than anyone and score more bananas. Just in case you think this has nothing to do with you, just remember you share 25 percent of your DNA with bananas and 98 percent with chimpanzees.

Along with their stomachs, the heads of these new kids on the block had been growing. Now their bodies had to support an oversized skull. This was only possible through a remarkable engineering trick. The development of multiple opposing curves in the spine allowed an upright position to support a disproportionately large head. But like many aspects of primate and human engineering, this required a complex series of feedback mechanisms. If the human body were a building, steel and rivets or bricks and mortar could fix these relationships in place. But, contrary to how your body sometimes feels, its only fixed structures are the bones—and they are all connected by flexible (relatively speaking) fibers. Humans are literally in a constant balancing act with muscular and skeletal systems often working at cross-purposes. For the upright spine with its multiple curves to continue to support a now oversized skull, the muscles of locomotion had to also help keep the vertebrae piled accurately one upon the other.



One aspect of this remarkable invention was the need for periodic rest to relieve both the gravitational pull and the muscular effort required to maintain proper alignment. Our forbearers had a simple solution, still evident among many cultures around the world: the squat. Folding the body in on itself lowers the center of gravity. Muscles contracted during locomotion are allowed to relax.



But leave it to the human mind to screw things up. In the name of progress, someone invented the chair. Suddenly the muscle most in need of relaxation, the psoas, is in contraction. The psoas is a hip flexor. It lifts the leg during walking. When sitting with upper legs perpendicular to the spine, it is in a constant state of shortening. The psoas is the only muscle in the body that connects upper and lower body. It, too, needs a break once in a while.

Chairs, the Western solution to the rigors of standing and walking, have been ruinous for the psoas. So too for hamstrings which, in a chair, can only shorten. Weight is borne on the tailbone and sacrum at just the time when these structures need extension and relaxation in the surrounding musculature.



With repeated and unrelieved pressure on the sacrum, the lumbar spine often loses its natural curve, thus forcing the thoracic spine into an exaggerated kyphotic, or hunchbacked, curve to compensate. As if that weren't enough, the cervical curve often flattens in its own compensatory response.

In addition to the effect that devices like the chair have on our posture, each human body has its own unique structure. As Paul Grilley reminds us, the very nature of our skeletal idiosyncrasies often preclude bodies from fully articulating postures. Only your spine and the rest of your body can know if a postural choice is right for you. Part of being mindful is becoming familiar with your own body. Then it's possible to accept the myriad unique characteristics that differentiate your body from others. Forensic pathologists would not need DNA banks to identify victims if only we had a data bank of each person's bones. They are all so different. How could all these bodies be expected to look the same in asana?

“There is a fundamental misunderstanding about asana in America.
The study of asana is not about asana. It is about the practitioner.
Their only value is in how they serve the practitioner”

—Gary Kraftsow

In the following two chapters, I'll present you with a number of variations to practice at home. They are intended to bring your awareness into the parts of your body that are most critical to achieving *sthira sukham asanam*: postures performed with an equal portion of effort and lightening up. Lightening up doesn't mean you suddenly become a stand-up comedian. It is simply a shifting of focus away from the habitual concepts embedded in your cerebral fear centers, and into the body, so that effort and relaxation occur simultaneously.

Each variation is not for everyone. Rather they are offered as a portal into your own body. Use your body as a research project. Get curious about how these adaptations affect you. See if they bring a new expansiveness to old postures. See if you find yourself focusing on what's happening from a place of awareness rather than from fear or tension. The most important thing to remember here is that your body will tell you what's right for you, better than any picture or photo of ideal alignment.

“Tension is an extension of ego. It’s a shell that’s very visceral. It is a kind of violence when you try to force yourself into a mold.”

—Richard Freeman

It may be too difficult for you to change your practice immediately, especially if your teacher or fellow students follow a very specific path. The closest I can come to delivering this to you in a plain, unmarked envelope, so no one will see or know, is to suggest that you find some private time to yourself as many days of the week as possible and spend it getting to know your practice in a new way.

“If we can get students to inquire within, in a home practice, where they’re taking quiet time to really search out something within themselves, then I think we’ve done our job.”

—Rodney Yee

And as you’ll see in the next chapter, there’s no better place to get to know your own body than in bed!

CHAPTER 17:

Lie Down & Get Personal

Remember Zonker....Bed Yoga

—*Swami Nap-ananda*

Before he nodded off and began snoring, Swami Nap-ananda's musings didn't escape me. I remembered the *Doonesbury* series where Zonker raised "doing nothing" to high art as he trained for the tanning Olympics. In a flash of insight, I realized the value of not getting up in the morning.

I want to acknowledge two other pilgrims who also have discovered and taught the benefits of doing yoga before getting out of bed, either by channeling Swami Nap-ananda's energy or by connecting with the essence of his teachings from some other source. Carol Dickman's *Bed Top Yoga* brings a gentle series of stretches to be experienced in bed or on the floor. Edward Vilga's *Yoga in Bed* also addresses the importance of the one place we spend almost a third of our lives.

In the average waking day, humans manifest a myriad of personality traits to cope with life's pressures. But first thing in the morning there are really only two types of people: those who jump out of bed already convinced they don't have enough time to do what needs to be done, and those who don't even want to get out of bed because they are convinced there's nothing worth doing. Actually, there is no better time to find self-acceptance in your yoga than after you wake up in the morning and before you even think of getting out of bed. The mind hasn't become alert yet, and it's the body's turn to hold court. It's OK to get up and pee. Just make sure you don't look in the mirror or you risk accelerating all that mental chatter that will distract you for most of the rest of the day.

“Practicing alone is a great way to undermine the tendency to perform. There’s nobody to compare to or show off for. At home you tend to practice for the direct experience of it.”

—Sarah Powers

This approach may initially wreak havoc on your domestic situation if you share a bed with someone else. Depending on the stage of your relationship, beginning asana practice in bed, especially the hip opening suggestions that follow, will either suggest to your partner that you are getting frisky or that it’s time to put out the cat. In either case distraction may arise. If on the other hand, you are single and occupying that giant bed by yourself, you finally have something to do other than wish for something other than what you have. This is the beginning of self- acceptance.

“Hermits don’t have peer pressure.”

—Steven Wright

It makes no difference if you are a beginner or an adept. Lying in bed before all the troops in your head start arguing about your day is the perfect time to realize your body is perfect for doing your own yoga. And best of all, no one (including you if you do it under the covers) can see you. Ever the punster, Swami knows this will lead to a true awakening.

It is a fact of contemporary yoga that few practitioners carry on a home practice. It somehow seems easier to carve out a couple of hours, including commuting, to attend class. To be sure, there is value in a community of like-minded souls sharing the yoga studio. It is often the only place you can find a quiet and calm environment. And learning the rules of alignment from an accomplished teacher is invaluable. Maintaining a home practice seems elaborate and daunting. You might imagine it requires inordinate amounts of discipline. The secret to an ongoing home practice is to realize it’s not that involved. Don’t think about an hour or an hour and a half. Rather try a few poses and see if you want more.

“The best way to quiet the comparing mind, the best way to find self-acceptance in one’s yoga is to have a home practice.”

—Sarah Powers

Once you actually experience the freedom from comparison and performance, a new light comes into your practice. Almost miraculously, it gets longer as you try new poses and reinvent the old ones. The whole ball of wax becomes *yours*, not your idea of what you *should* be doing.

Each of the postures below can be viewed as a complete yoga experience. Each involves a connection of breath, body, and mind. Feel free, depending on the time you have available, to do just one or more if the spirit moves you. The main thing to remember is that Bed Yoga is about *Being Extremely Delighted*. It is about being *in yoga*, not trying to get somewhere else. While you will be engaging specific muscles, those muscles won’t be asked to work against your spirit or against gravity.

The key is a relaxed equilibrium with hips resting evenly on the mattress. As you move into each side, let this balance determine how far to stretch. Always have a strap to wrap around the limb you are stretching if necessary to maintain the equilibrium in the hips. Remember that how far you stretch has nothing to do with getting to Yoga Heaven.

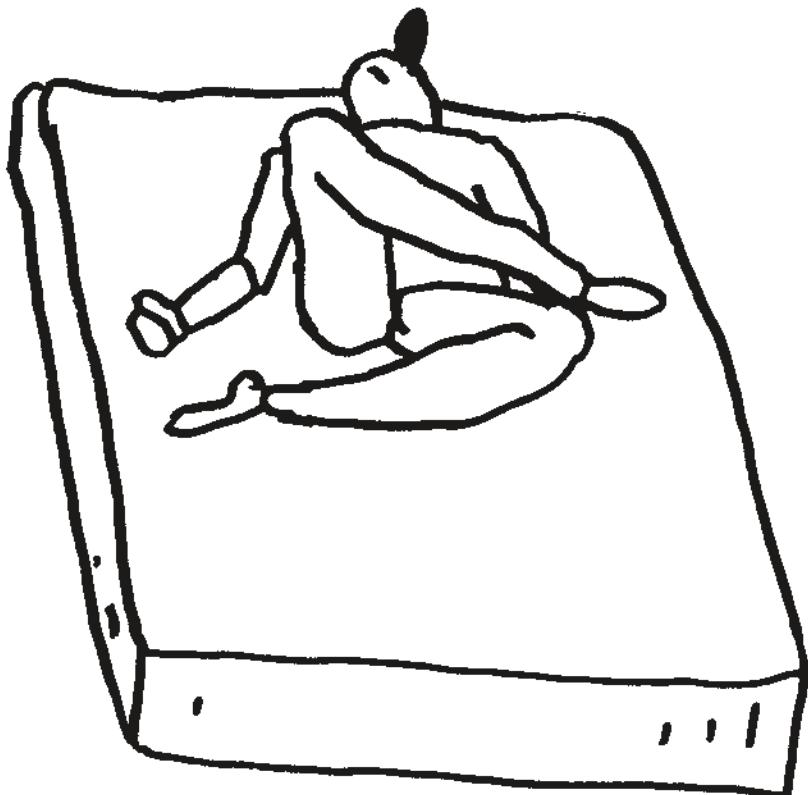
MODIFIED DOUBLE PIGEON

Don't worry, this isn't lotus.

🎥 <http://www.yosa.co/v1>

- Lying on your back, notice if your low back is arched off the bed. If so, place a small pillow under it to support the lumbar curve. But every body is different. If the pillow causes discomfort, don't use it. Bend your knees bringing your heels toward your buttocks. Let your left knee fall to the side resting on the bed. Move the left foot toward the right side of the bed so the lower leg lines up parallel to the bottom of the bed. Lift your right ankle and set it down just past your left knee, so the lower shin, not the ankle, is resting on the left knee. Your right knee will in all likelihood lift the blanket up. Don't worry. Let the right knee come as high as is necessary to feel no strain in your hips.

- Now here's the hard part: Do nothing.



- Beginning at your left hip, take your attention down through your upper thigh to the hamstrings and into your knee, where the ankle is resting. Pay particular attention to the sensations you are experiencing. If anything feels forced, notice the pressure. With your mind's eye, look at it. See if you can increase the depth of your breathing rather than the depth of the stretch, so that your inhales and exhales travel to and from the place of sensation. And see if these new, deep breaths can come slowly and steadily so that the exhale from your nostrils would hardly wave a feather in front of your nose.
- Continue moving your attention down the left leg into the foot and notice the specific places you are feeling sensations. Stop and focus your attention on the physical experience. Aim deep inhalations and long exhalations into, and from, those places. Take as much time as you need to fully experience each place of sensation. Are the sensations pleasant or strained? What would have to happen to have an experience of effort without strain? If you find the sensations too intense to allow deep breathing, then something is being forced. Remember to keep the right knee as high as necessary to relax into the sensations. This may be the only practice you do today. Take as much time as you need for your body to ease into the posture. You may eventually find that gravity will allow the right knee to drop towards the left ankle. This may take moments, days, or weeks. Does your internal critic start spouting judgments about your progress, or can you come to know and accept whatever you are experiencing? If it isn't dropping already, very gently drop the right knee towards the left ankle. Mainly notice your mental desire to drop the knee more than the hips and the rest of your body want!
- Now move your awareness up to your right hip. With your mind's eye crawl into all the attachments at the right side of your pelvis and inner groin. See if you can find the place that is keeping the right knee from dropping further. Don't try to get it down toward the left ankle, just notice where the resistance is.
- Scan both legs to find the places where most sensation is occurring and draw your breath to those places. Breathe deeply, with long inhales and even longer exhales. Take five breaths at each point of sensation.
- Then switch sides and repeat.

When you have finished both sides, if your spouse hasn't filed for divorce, your kids haven't mutinied or your boss hasn't fired you, decide if you want to proceed to the next posture. Now you see why swamis often live in caves. It's tough being a pilgrim.

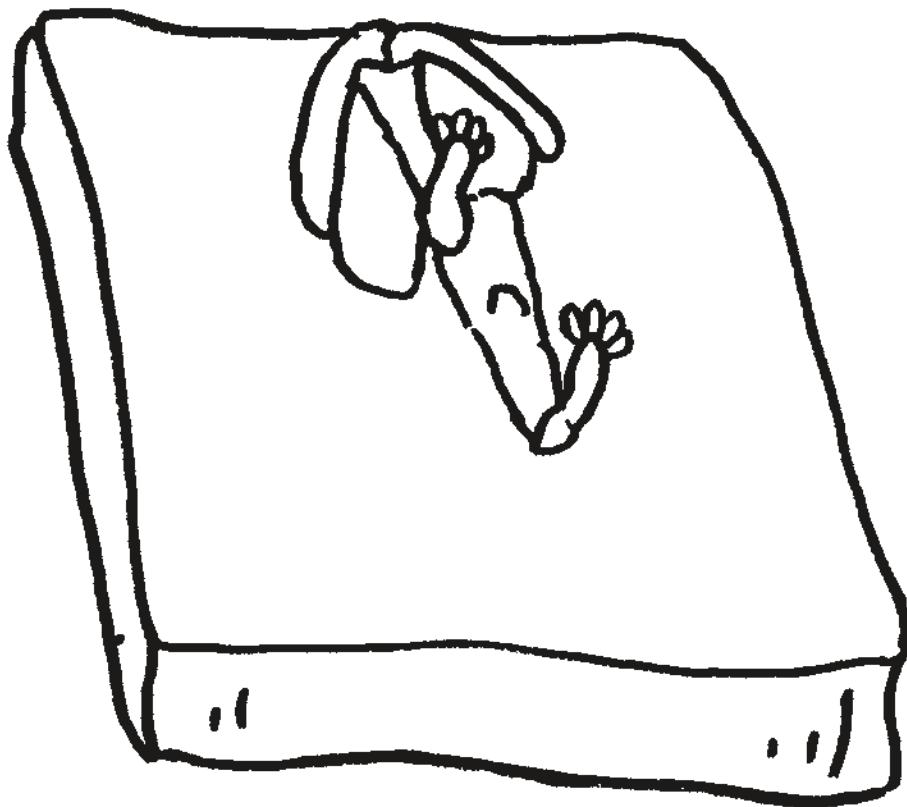
ALTERNATE KNEES TO CHEST

This is a wonderful preparation for twists and forward bends. It is also of great assistance in stepping forward from Plank to Lunge. Swinging the leg forward with openness presents challenges to even the most experienced practitioner.

For most seated postures, the position of the hips is where it all starts. If, like many chair-bound practitioners, you find yourself bending from the waist during forward bends, you will be fighting gravity, your self-image, and your muscles. Fibers you intend to stretch end up contracting instead. By lying on your back, the hips are freed and the focus can shift to your hip flexors, gluteal group, and *piriformis*. This also will allow the psoas to relax. When it becomes time to twist or bend forward, the spine will now be as close to its natural curves as possible.

 <http://www.yosa.co/v2>

- Again, with a pillow supporting the natural lumbar curve if it's appropriate for you, lie for a moment with both legs extended.
- Draw your right knee towards your chest. If you are able to reach your knee with your hands, wrap them around the knee. If not, interlace your hands behind the thigh. And if this is not possible without great strain in the shoulders, use the strap. Hold this position while dropping the tailbone towards the bed (or if you feel your lumbar region in an exaggerated curve, tuck the tailbone). The ability to hold the lumbar region in a relaxed curve is the starting place. It is the place to which you continually return to check on whether you are in yoga or just stretching your muscles. Stop at a place well before your limit. You are working the *piriformis* and possibly the *gluteus minimus*. Once you release your knee into the grasp of your hands, the *psoas* can move toward relaxation, even though it is in a shortened position. As a hip flexor, it is engaged but not straining. Begin a series of alternating contractions and releases, connected to your inhales and exhales. First hold the right knee for 15 seconds in as relaxed a way as possible. Breathe the relaxation into the muscles of your outer hip and inner groin. Every body is different, so where you feel this is where your attention wants to be. Wherever that spot is, relax and breathe as if your lungs are bellows, blowing lubricating energy into the muscles that are speaking to you. On your next inhale, count slowly to five, pushing your knee against your hands, flexing the muscles of the inner groin. Then relax the muscle fully, as you exhale, again to a count of five. Then inhale leaving your knee right where it is, counting to five. Then through your next exhale, gently pull the knee closer to your chest. Repeat three times.



- Once you find your knee midway through your edge, play with moving it towards the shoulder and then towards the midline. With your mind's eye, notice which muscles are engaged and how the pressure varies. Make friends with the pressure. It should never be so intense that you find yourself wanting to get out of the pose as soon as possible.
- Release the leg and notice how it feels next to the left leg. Compare the sensations in the right and left hip. Breathe as you scan up one leg, into the hip, across the pelvis, and down the other leg.
- Repeat on the left leg. Repeat the release, relaxation, and scan of the legs, pelvis, and hips.

HALF A HAPPY BABY

Whether it's called Dead Bug or Happy Baby, this posture (often coming at the end of a full practice) affords a way to access and open many hip connections. Because of this, it's actually a great posture to experience early in a practice session. Unless you're very open in the hips, there is often tremendous strain placed on the lumbar spine and shoulders just trying to get into the posture. By doing one side at a time and by doing it in bed, you might feel more like a happy baby than a dead bug.



<http://www.yosa.co/v3>

- Again find the curve in the low back with the tailbone resting on the mattress. Bring the left heel up towards the buttocks, bending the knee. By bending the left leg, opening on the opposite side becomes more available. Draw your right knee up towards your shoulder and grasp the inside or outside of the foot in the palm of your right hand, or place the strap and leave enough slack so the arm and shoulder are not straining. Let the knee move away from your body as you draw the inside of your foot towards your face. Play with the position of the knee and lower leg. If you are flexible you may find you can bring the shin perpendicular to the mattress with the upper leg resting on the bed.
- The final position is less important than maintaining a feeling of movement and openness. This is a big challenge to the ego. Some of the most evolved practitioners let go of their pride and pull out the strap. It can be way more fun then. Once you find a comfortable position, begin extending the lower leg, visualizing but not forcing the toes toward the mattress beyond your right shoulder. More important than where you end up is finding fluidity in the movement rather than static traction. Like all of us, muscles want to know what is expected of them. By gently bending and releasing the leg, you are pumping energy into the hip, hamstring, and iliotibial band. And the muscles learn they don't have to be on guard. Don't push! Please know that if you are part of the human race, just raising your leg to the starting position is pretty cool.



- Once you find yourself comfortably within your edge, place your left hand on your left hip letting it know it can release down towards the bed. Remember the relationship of the pelvis to the spine. You don't want to extend the right leg only to have the left hip rise up off the bed. Release the right leg so that the left hip can rest comfortably. Then begin to extend the left leg. Notice all the muscles of the hips and legs that are speaking to you. Pay attention to the sensations. See if you can name the experience. If you feel strain, see if you can soften so it becomes relaxed effort.
- Most importantly, maintain the integrity of the hips equally balanced on the mattress.
- Refocus the breath and watch what happens in the hip connections as you deepen your inhale down into the hips. Watch the breath from the beginning of the inhalation at the nostrils down into the lungs and on down into the muscles that are opening. Then allow the exhalations to exit smoothly.
- Switch sides and repeat.

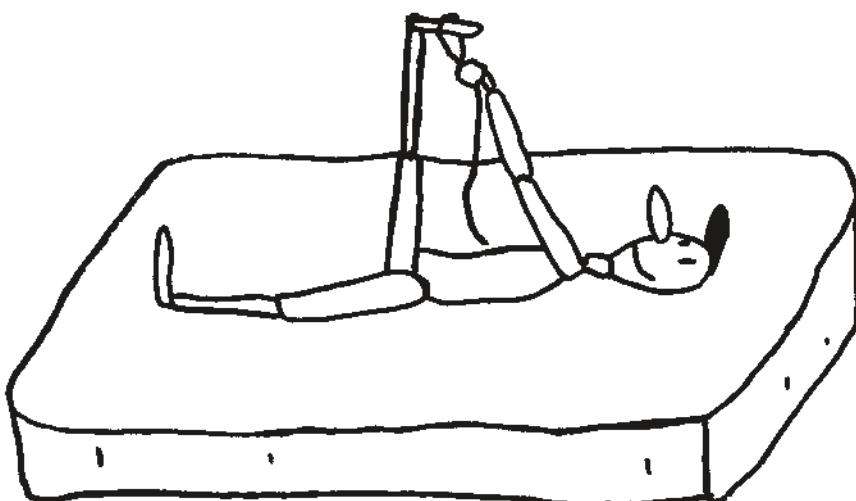
HIP SIDE STRETCH

The *iliotibial band* is a sheet of dense, connective tissue attaching at the outside of the knee and the hip. It has attachments to the *tensor fasciae latae*, and the gluteal group so its softening is critical to the release of many muscles

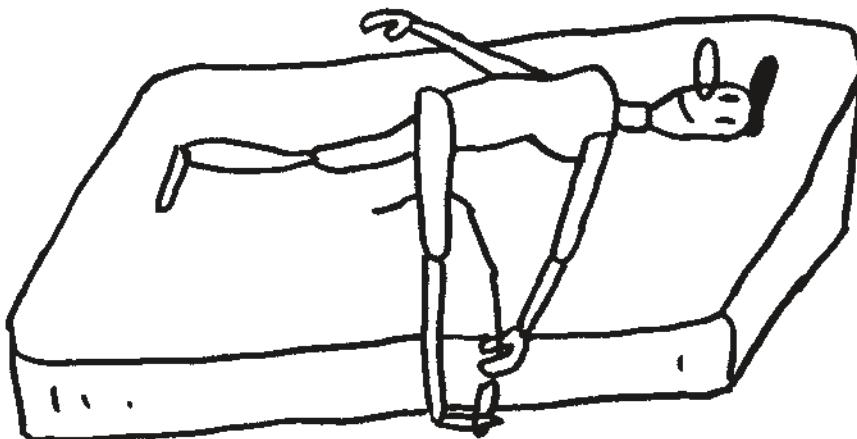
For our purposes, let's just say that the I.T. band gets cranky and can screw up your hips if it's allowed to contract excessively. It has less blood circulation than muscle does, and is not capable of the same kind of extension. Overstretching it invites risk to the knee and the hip attachments. Hence a gentle bend and extension of the lower leg, repeated several times, can bring openness without damage.



- Lying flat with your knees bent and heels close to your buttocks, press down on your feet, making sure your weight is balanced. Lift the hips and move them to the right of your midline; then drop them back to the bed. Draw the right knee into your chest, extending the left leg flat. Keeping the right knee bent, grasp the outside of your right foot with your left hand. If there is any strain, use the strap. Gently begin lengthening and releasing the leg. Don't think of a fully stretched leg as the goal. Instead, make the goal an awareness of when effort turns to strain, by constantly monitoring your breath, your jaw, the skin around your eyes, and most of all, whether you are smiling or grimacing.
- Notice if the resistance is in your hamstring or on the outside of your leg.



- Now move the right leg to the left side of the body with the left hand holding the outside of the right foot, or use a strap. Go slowly and stop way before your limit. Bend the knee to release tension in the leg and notice how the sensations change. You will find resistance initially, but by assuring that the body is comfortable, you can begin expanding the breath. Imagine the lungs pressing up against and expanding the ribcage. Begin alternating between extending and bending the right leg, but don't try to straighten it fully unless you can do so without strain. Play with straightening the leg only so much so the breath can remain completely free. Repeat through several breath cycles and then switch sides.

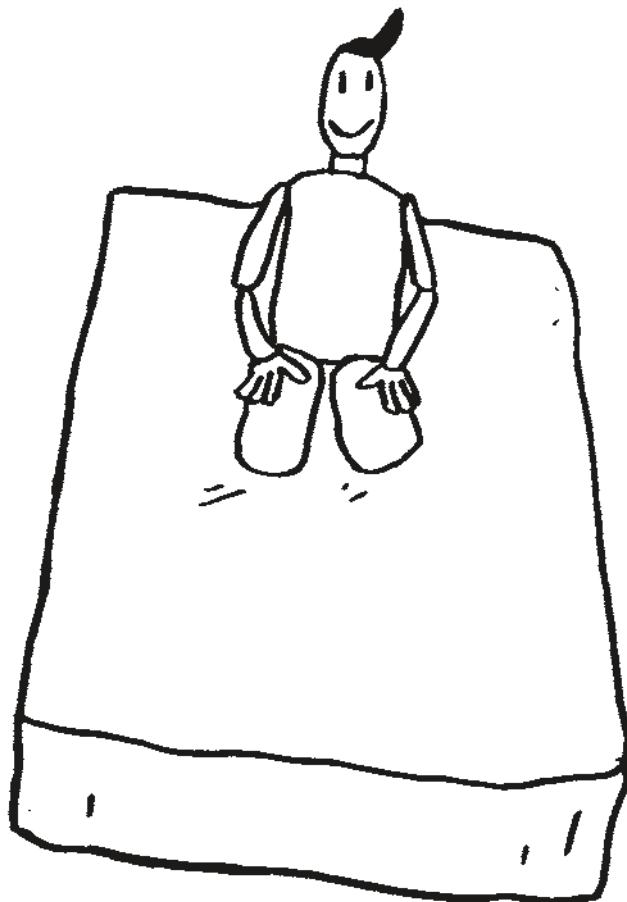


- Now let your legs slide down the bed, and reposition the pillow under your lumbar spine if you notice any strain in your back; you're coming to Savasana. Let your awareness scan your body, from the crown of your head down to your toes, seeing and feeling the opening and relaxation in the muscles you explore.
- Repeat the practice on the other side.
- Roll over to your right side—but don't worry, we're not done yet!

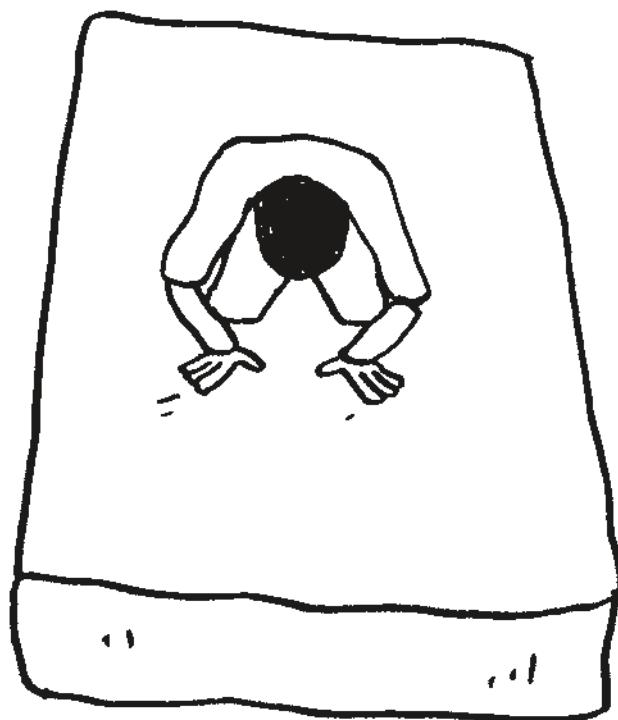
HERO'S POSE, CHILD'S POSE, AND MODIFIED FROG VARIATIONS

🎥 <http://www.yosa.co/v5>

- Come to your hands and knees, then to sitting in Hero's Pose (*Virasana*) with your buttocks resting on your heels, facing the bottom of the bed. If necessary to take strain off the quads or knees, place a pillow or two between your buttocks and heels. Notice the curve of your low back and see if you can flex and release the spinal muscles. This will tell you if your back is relaxed. If it is locked up so the flex and release aren't possible, add more pillows. The key here is to know (possibly for the first time) what an engaged yet relaxed spine actually feels like.



- Slowly bring the upper body down toward the thighs into Child's Pose. If your hips are open this will happen with ease. If not, or if the lower back muscles that attach to the top of the pelvis are themselves contracted, you will not be able to drop forward to rest on the thighs without the hips rising off the heels. Stop before this happens. Don't let the hips rise up or move so quickly that you lose touch with the tight places. Just notice where the restrictions are.
- As you rest at whatever place your upper body stops, the action of the inhalation actually expands the back body. Spend as much time as you need breathing into your back. The ribs are widened and muscles are gently stretched. Stretching isn't the goal. Instead, it's about making more room within the body cavities. When that space increases, breath and muscular opening follow.



- Come back to sitting on or between your heels. Spread your knees to the sides and come down again toward Extended Child with the knees apart. Reach toward the bottom of the bed while at the same time dropping your hips toward the mattress. Again, only come forward to a point where your hips don't rise off your heels or the pillow. Let your hands or forearms support you. Breathe here deeply for 5-10 breaths. Notice what is happening in the back, hips, and inner groin. Or perhaps

some other muscle area is asking for attention. It is your body, your practice. Make sure to notice where you are. Accept that condition with all the grace that deep, open breaths cascading down into your tight places can give you.

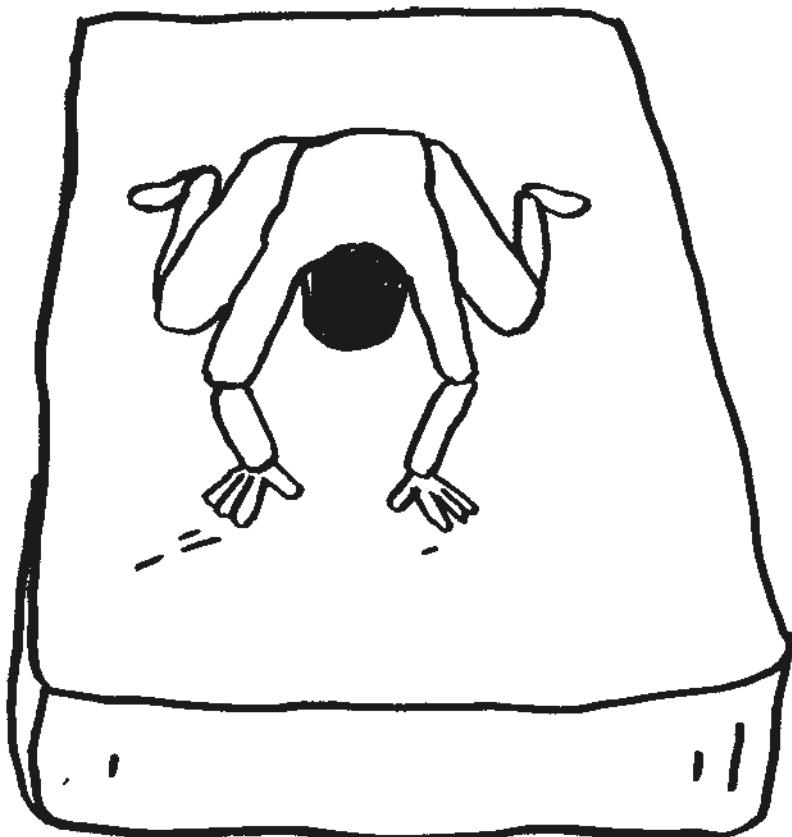
- After this sequence of breaths, see if the upper body will come gently forward a bit more, without the hips rising up. The goal here is to actually feel what happens when muscles relax gradually; it is not about how far you get. Take as long as you want. Use your trust muscles to decide when to come back up.

Bed Yoga is about making friends with resistances that you usually don't perceive until there is pain involved. In normal practice, you often move quickly past them. But with the mattress as your protector, you can move safely into the resistance. You can be with it and perhaps move through it. Wherever you find your upper body, rest there. Use pillows, forearms, or whatever else is necessary to support the upper body so you can simply be present with your limitations.

The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* has a beautiful introduction to the primary purpose of the forward bends, which is to allow the breath to flow along the back of the body. While this ancient text was referring specifically to Seated Forward Bend (*Pascimottanasana*), focusing the same attention while in Child's Pose keeps the attention, and the breath, on the back.

- Now take five deep breaths and feel the breath open your back.
- Come forward so that you are resting on parallel forearms, elbows directly below your shoulders, one knee below each hip. Let the natural curve remain in the lower back. Move your knees and feet out as far as is comfortable, keeping the lower legs parallel. Keep your weight forward as much as necessary so you can move your toes toward the sides of the bed, with your insteps resting on the mattress. Don't worry if your heels don't come all the way down. This posture is all about knowing your own hips. There is no correct way to do it other than to know that it is a deep hip opener and therefore must be accomplished with great awareness, deep breathing, and forgiveness. Remember, we love our hips. They are the source of great salsa moves, babies, and that wonderful lap you hopefully were able to crawl into when you were a toddler. But they get cranky. Ignore them and they fight back.
- This posture is about getting to know them again just as they are. With a very deep inhale, come forward so all the tension is off the inner groin. On the exhalation, slowly and gently let the hips come back until you find resistance. Stop immediately and back off an inch or two. Notice that the work is still happening. Come forward on the inhalation and back on the exhalation. After five cycles, move back and stop

at your point of resistance. Inhale and exhale an additional five times. Remember: resistance is also your friend. It is natural, normal, and a wonderful teacher. Don't try to ignore or overcome it. You'll miss a great time.



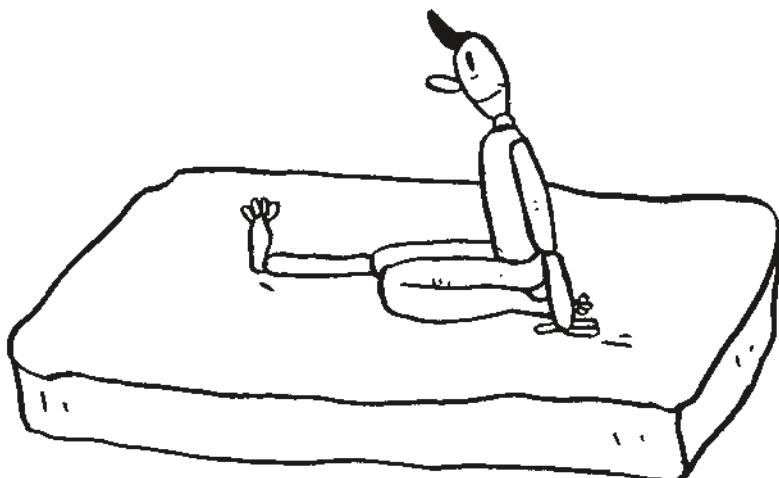
- Come back up to a modified Hero's Pose with your knees spread to the sides, the tops of the feet on the bed. If your hips are resting on or between your heels in contact with the bed, just breathe and feel the opening. Otherwise, place enough pillows under your buttocks so you don't have to hold yourself up. Soften the buttocks down into the bed or pillow. And notice how the inner and outer hip attachments feel.

ONE-LEGGED RECLINED HERO'S POSE

Every attempt to lengthen the hamstrings is influenced by what is happening in the *quadriceps* and vice versa. Much of the tightness in both these muscle groups exists because of their strained relationship to the hips. Easing into this posture on a comfortable mattress (with plenty of pillows supporting your back if necessary) is a great way to see how your hips are not equally balanced. It can also show you how your unique physical characteristics are harder to see or feel when you attempt the full posture on a hard floor.

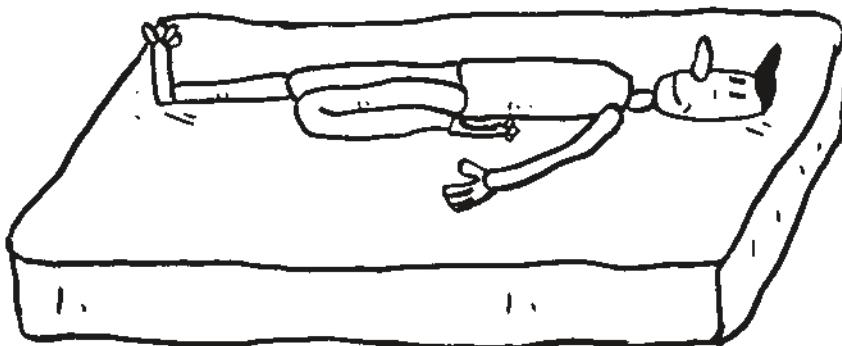


- Begin again in Hero's Pose, either sitting with the hips between the heels or resting on a pillow or two between the buttocks and feet. Have a number of other pillows within reach. Unbend the right leg, bringing it forward to rest on the mattress. With your hands or elbows resting on the mattress behind you, bring the upper body back until you feel slight resistance in the left quad. Stop here and on your inhalation engage the quad, by flexing and raising it, without coming off your sit bone. On the exhalation allow it to return to the mattress, and release. Do this five times: lifting and contracting on the inhalation, lowering and relaxing on the exhalation. Now let the upper body move back a bit further, repeating the contraction and relaxation.
- Depending on how flexible your quadriceps are, you might quickly come back to lying flat on your back, or you may find yourself wanting to skip the whole posture



because you can't imagine your legs ever achieving this contorted position. Notice the judgment and the criticism. Awareness is more important than the stretch. See if there is a voice that says, "I should be able to do it." Remember the path to Yoga Heaven is not lined with flexible quads. Take the pillows and place them behind your back so that you've got enough support to allow the quad to stretch while the hips and back are relaxing.

- Once you find your spot, begin to focus on the hips. Wherever you end up, you may discover that the hip on the side of the stretching quad is raised up and the muscles attached to the outside and inside of the hip are not relaxed. They are compensating for all the effort going into the large muscles of the leg. So now is the time to switch your attention. You can only do this if your quads aren't screaming at you and you're not praying to be freed from the posture.

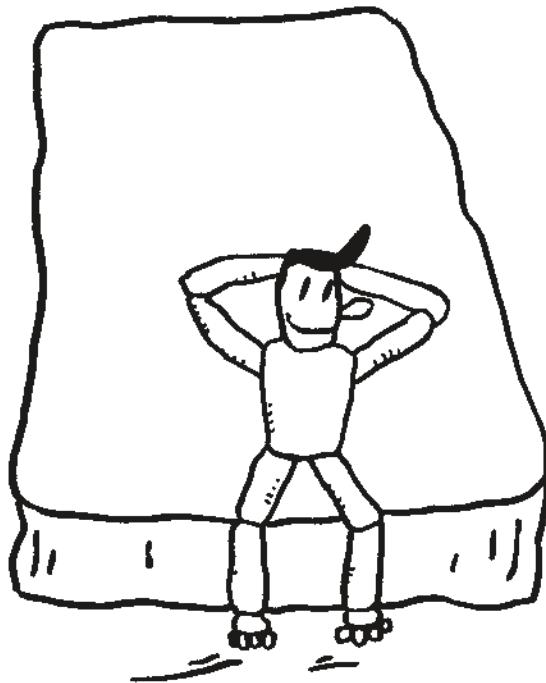


- It's critical to get comfortable first—so don't come back too far. Close your eyes and direct your Intentional Awareness down into your hips. What is keeping the two sides of the hips from feeling equally open and free? Find the points of resistance. Just breathe and notice. Back off on the quadriceps (by using more pillows, or supporting yourself with your elbows) so there is equilibrium between the opening of that muscle group and the release of the hips. Do this all with the breath.
- Now come up, dropping the hips into the mattress. Switch sides and repeat.
- Once you have completed both sides, lie flat on your back with your arms at your sides and your legs extended. For five breath cycles, focus your attention on your hips. Then move your awareness up your body. Scan back down to the hips and on down to the toes. Breathe, relax, and release into each part of the body that calls your attention. This is what Savasana is all about.

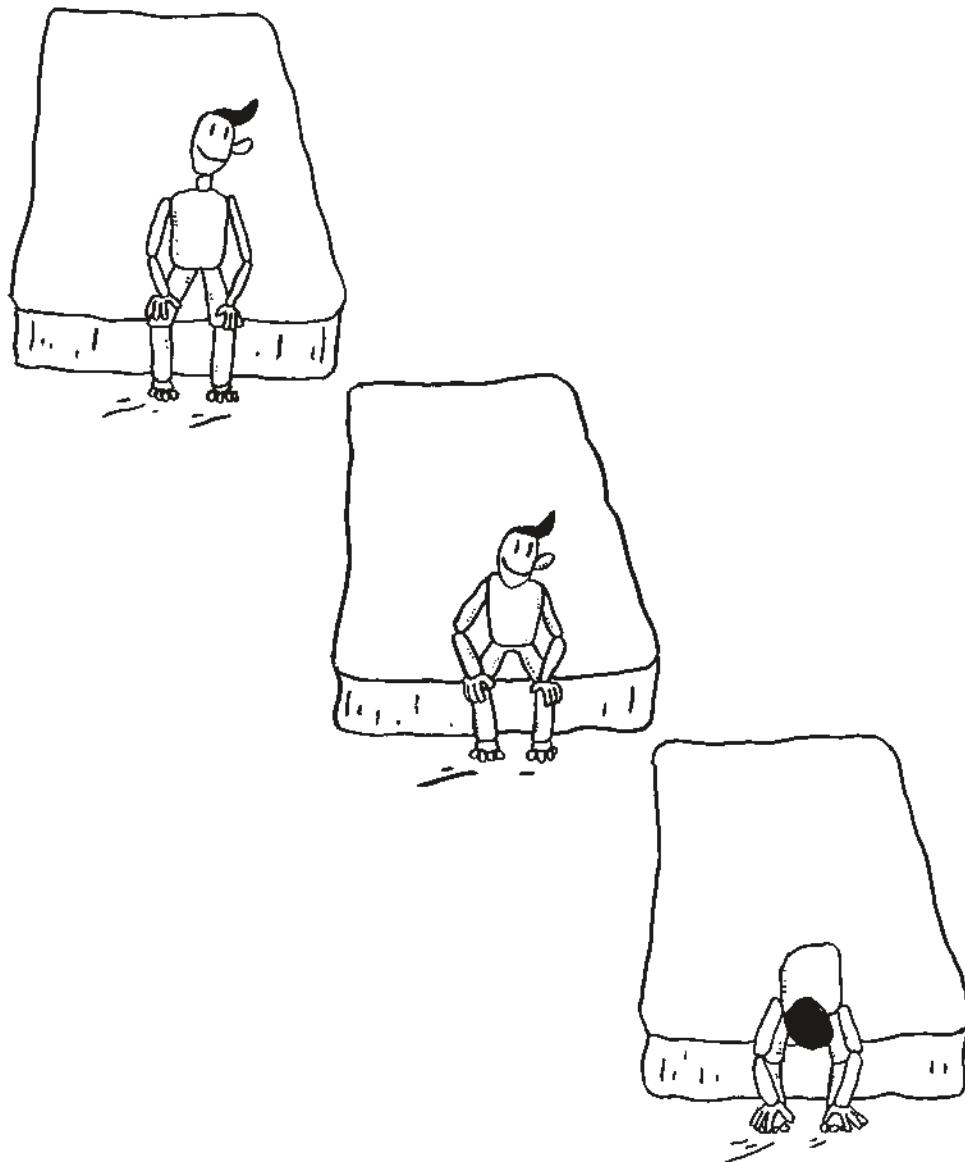
SEATED FORWARD BEND WITH EMPHASIS ON THE BACK

🎥 <http://www.yosa.co/v7>

- Bend your knees. Roll toward the edge of the bed and sit up with your feet on the floor, hip-width apart. Interlace your hands behind your head and draw your belly in. Come forward with your upper body only to where you are able to maintain a flat back. Begin the contraction and release, pressing your head back into your hands and flexing the muscles of the back. Feel them engage as you inhale before releasing them and moving a bit forward as you exhale.



- After three or four cycles, release your hands to rest on your knees. Gently let your spine bend forward at the hips, with your belly coming down toward your thighs. If this happens easily, bring the upper body down to rest on your knees. If it doesn't, see if your knees are starting to splay out to the sides. If the knees won't stay parallel, press the hands into the outside of the knees and then gently press the knees inward. After several cycles, see if the upper body can drop a bit more towards your thighs. Do this for as many cycles as you like, watching as your upper body moves slowly farther down your thighs.



- Roll the body back up, come to standing, and greet the day.

In addition to being a great way to delay getting all the way out of bed for a few minutes longer, this movement utilizes the same muscles involved in both standing and seated forward bends. The only difference is that the hamstrings are totally out of the picture. You can concentrate on the relationship of the upper body to the hips without those recalcitrant hamstrings confusing things.

Perhaps because your day hasn't quite begun, or perhaps because Bed Yoga supports your body's curves with your familiar, comfortable mattress, you might feel more relaxed than you do after your regular practice. The more gentle the extensions you experience, the more your body comes into that unique combination of relaxation and effort. Hopefully, you will find yourself energized yet relaxed—an all-too-infrequent experience for many who move from one extreme to the other. If, instead, you find yourself falling wistfully back into the folds of sleep, let it happen. Remember, ours is a sleep-deprived culture. We often know only how to pile one obligation onto another, which can only lead to dis-ease. Think of the times you had to race to get to your yoga class. While it's a bit of an oxymoron to speak of hurrying to yoga, sometimes there seems to be little choice. And in the spirit of this book, honor the fact that you got there at all. But when you do allow yourself the luxury of Bed Yoga, get everything you can out of it—including a nap!

CHAPTER 18:

Bend It, Wiggle It, Let It Move

Asana variations are not just for people with specific physical problems.
They can help all yoga practitioners remain open to discovery.

—T.K.V. Desikachar

Once you experience the benefits of Bed Yoga, the possibility of an enjoyable home practice emerges quite naturally. Home is a great place to explore the uniqueness of your body through variations of traditional postures.

Rather than presenting the thousandth book on the details of asana, I thought it might be useful to see how some of the more common postures can be altered so that you can truly visualize and feel the relationship of your shoulder and pelvic girdles to your spine. These two transverse axes deeply influence how much lengthening is possible. Often tightness in shoulders or hips actually constricts the spine. Freedom in asana is only possible when these spinal relationships are not compromised for the sake of the posture's idealized form.

These variations are intended to help you find your own personal *sthira sukham asanam*. They are not intended to be the right way to do the posture. Rather they are simply a means by which you may realize the *function* of the postures with less strain and effort. There is another subtle yet powerful benefit: you may just become more flexible and comfortable in your body! Those trust muscles will be very happy.

“The purpose of adaptation is to remove danger or provide a benefit. The form of asana was traditionally worked out between teacher and student based upon the uniqueness of the practitioner’s needs. Today asanas have become icons we worship, yet many of them as practiced today are only 50 or 60 years old.”

—Gary Kraftsow

It's important to remember the *function* of the posture you are exploring, not just its form. If you focus only on form, your energy will gravitate away from what *is* towards an image of what you think *should* be. The essence of each posture has been developed over thousands of years, but the form must be adaptable to your body, especially if you are straining while trying to achieve a full articulation. By concentrating on function, your body's particular uniqueness can be aligned with the posture's intention. Be sure that whatever movements you undertake are done with awareness of the breath and with particular attention to the physical sensations that accompany the inhale and exhale.

For example, an emphasis on straight arms can lead folks with tight shoulders into some strange contortions.



And thinking only of straight legs, when the hips and back are tight, will lead to bending at the waist, not at the hips. That puts tremendous strain on the back, defeating the purpose of the forward bend: to bring energy into the entire back-side of the body.



If you normally experience strain in the shoulders, pelvis, hip or low back areas while practicing, softening the elbows or the knees can offer a window into the tension and resistance that otherwise goes unnoticed. Softening the joints in this way redirects your attention from the extremities into the spine and its attachments. Tias Little stresses a simple fact in his yoga anatomy teaching: the spine humans inherited can be traced back to that of fish, who propelled themselves without arms or legs. The over-emphasis we often place on the extremities reduces awareness of the spine. Where a hand is placed or how the feet are positioned is of little consequence if the hips are torqued or the shoulders are strained.

“It’s the job of the teacher is to bring students to an awareness of the potential physiological benefit of the posture. Bending elbows can take tension out of shoulders thereby liberating attention so they can focus on what’s happening in the spine. But bending can also be an unconscious habit so other students actually get more awareness by extending the arms.”

—Gary Kraftsow

At a structural level, yoga postures are directed toward increasing inter-vertebral space so the many processes that emanate from the spine can flow freely. This is one more reason to always consider the relationship of the transverse axes (as represented by the shoulder girdle and pelvis) to the spine. When emphasizing placement of the arms or legs, it's easy to lose sight of these two intersections and their reciprocal influence on the spine.



By varying traditional alignment rules to minimize strain and tension, the alterations suggested below provide a way to reframe your attention. The goal is to create focus that is calm and clear—free from over-exertion so common in many yoga classes today. Each variation is not for everyone. Use your body as a research project. Get curious about how these adaptations affect you. See if you find yourself focusing on what's happening from a place of awareness and discovery rather than fear or anxiety. That's the only way to know if they're right for you.

“No one ever achieved enlightenment through asana.”

—Saul David Raye

Traditionally, yoga practice begins with standing postures—in part because of their ability to warm the body. But these postures, occurring as they do in space, place demands on musculature that often force muscles that need to be relaxing to work instead. For example, if the muscles that attach at the pelvis are contracting they will create strain throughout the standing postures. If the goal of a particular posture is to *lengthen* the hamstrings, a strained connection at the pelvis is counterproductive. Contraction can be used effectively to relax muscles, but it must be combined with release.

If your range of motion is limited by tight hip flexors and hamstrings, standing postures won't allow your muscles to return to their resting state. Tight muscles in the legs exaggerate inflexibility in the spine, which in turn causes more tightness in the legs as these muscles have to support the now more rigid upper body. The legs are working extra hard just to keep you upright, so standing postures often don't let them relax. It is impossible to ask them to let go when they are in a constant protective state of contraction.

But standing postures can build both strength and flexibility if they are done in a balanced way. Many active practices build endurance and strength, but fail to acknowledge the importance of returning to a state of rest between the working postures. It's as if something will be lost: aerobic conditioning will be compromised and (heaven forbid) the heart rate will slow below its conditioning range.

*“Don’t always make your yoga practice your time for aerobic exercise.
It’s fine sometimes, but you can do that somewhere else.”*

—Sarah Powers

Once again, it's important to remember what you're asking of a muscle. If you have chronic tightness, if you continually feel like you're straining and not getting anywhere, go back to bed, lie down, take a load off, and do Bed Yoga. Remember, the goal of Bed Yoga is Being Extremely Delighted. Once your hips and shoulders have a greater sense of ease and openness, the variations I suggest below may bring that same comfort to the standing posture. If doing Bed Yoga isn't practical, make sure you do seated postures with plenty of support under the buttocks. This will allow the hips to release and the back muscles to relax.

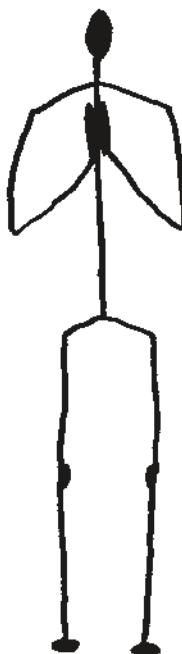
A great way to be reminded of the importance of the breath to all postures is in a variation of sun salutations, suggested by Leslie Kaminoff. He reminds his students that the breath is the beginning, the middle, and the end of each asana.

SUN SALUTATION

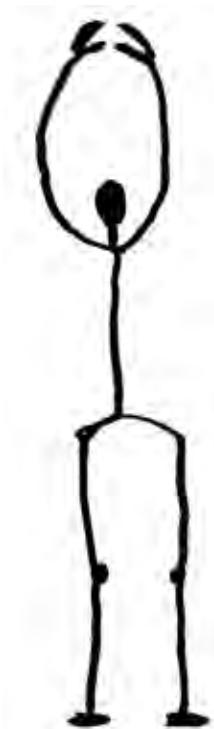
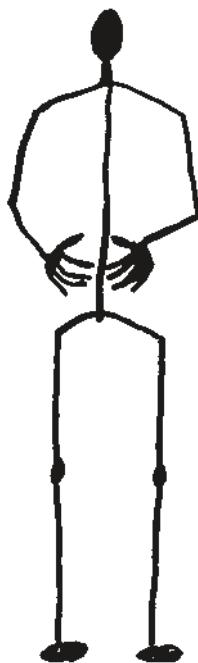
This variation has none of the rigorous alignment specifications most teaching emphasizes. Instead it focuses on bringing awareness to the breath.

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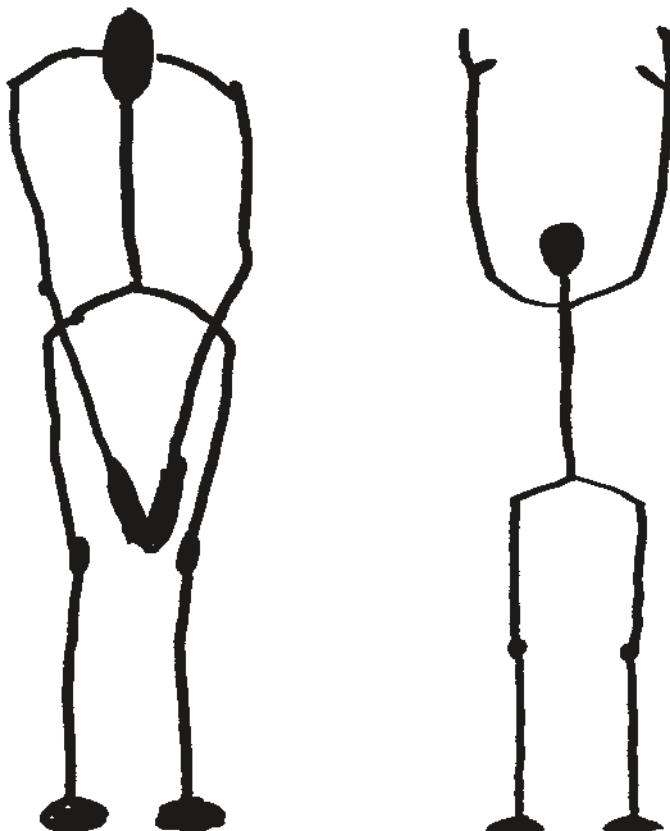
- Stand in Mountain Pose with the feet spread hip width apart, hands at your heart.



- Instead of first thinking of raising the arms, bring awareness to the chest. As your inhale begins, allow the belly to soften so the diaphragm releases and more breath fills the body. Then as the belly seems to fill with air, expand the chest cavity. Imagine this expansion (as opposed to the muscles of the shoulders) lifts the arms to the sides, keeping your elbows soft as the hands touch overhead and the spine opens to lengthen.



- Imagine the out breath begins at the base of your spine. As you exhale let the arms come back down, softening the knees. Let the shoulders roll gently forward as all the breath is expelled from the lungs, ending with the backs of the hands touching and arms resting on the front side of the body. Drop the head gently and let the mid-back roll forward. Let the breath begin the physical movement, not vice versa. Breathe in and out, letting the back of your spine expand.
- Repeat five times. On the sixth time try straightening the arms. See if that traditional posture is right for you. Does it bring increased openness to your chest cavity? Does it allow the breath to expand even more? If so, then it's right for you. If not, keep the elbows bent. Experiment with varying the arms and notice the difference.



In the sidebar, make some notes to compare your physical experience in the variations.

—Were you able to let the breath begin before the movement, or did the movement come first?

—Could you visualize your spine lengthening in each direction?

—Did you feel its curves changing?

—Did your mind react to not doing Sun Salutation as you learned it originally?

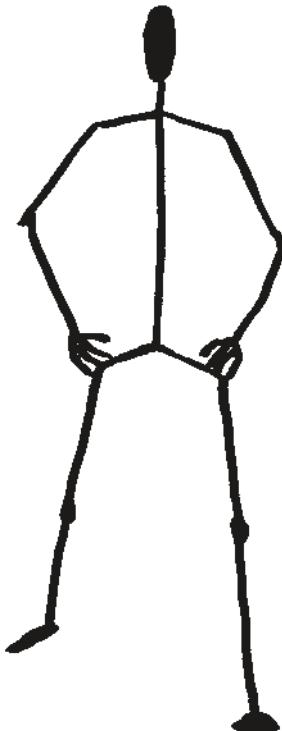
—Did you react to the instructions or were you able just to follow them?

—What is the perfect Sun Salutation for your body?

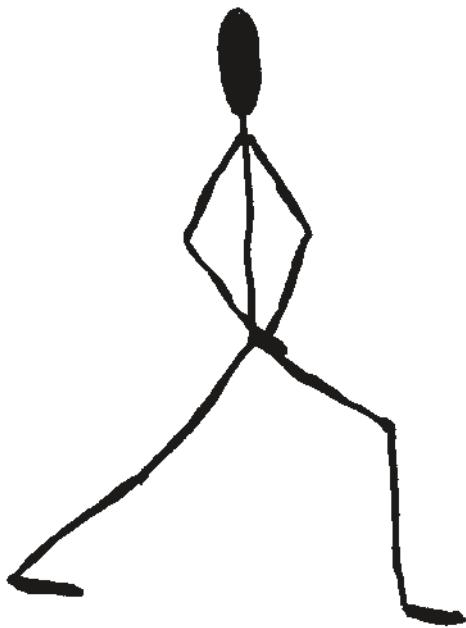
WARRIOR ONE

🎥 <http://www.yosa.co/v9>

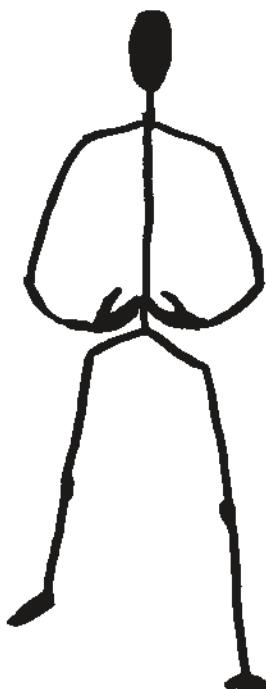
- Stand at the front of your mat and bring your right foot approximately a leg's length behind the left with your feet hip-width apart, rather than aligning the front heel with the rear arch. Keep the front foot perpendicular to the front of the mat. Bring the back foot to approximately a 45-degree angle.
- Place your hands on your hips. You will notice that the right hip moves back, drawn by resistance in the inner groin and the angle of the back foot. Bring the right hip forward with your hand. It will feel almost spring-loaded, depending on the tightness of the psoas muscle.



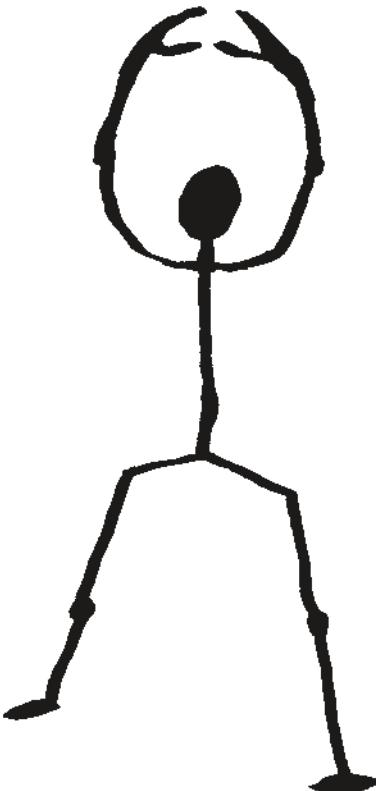
- Keep your awareness in the right hip as you drop the left knee slightly forward on your exhale. Come back up on the inhale, keeping your attention on the dynamic energy that occurs as you bring the back hip forward while moving the front hip towards the back. Do this for several breath cycles until the front knee has dropped comfortably forward.



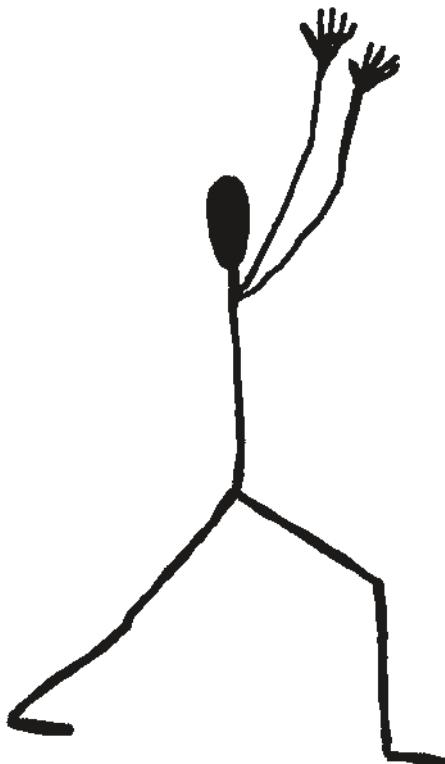
- Now come up a few inches with the front knee. You are still working well within your edge, even though you aren't at your limit. By backing off in this fashion you can bring more attention into the spring-loaded rear hip, drawing it forward.



- On the next exhale, drop the left knee again; this time on your inhale, raise your arms to the sides and then overhead. Let the widening of the chest cavity float the arms overhead.



- Keep your eyes open and your hands in view. Make sure to keep your elbows soft. On the exhale, let the arms drop down. After three breath cycles, raise the arms to your sides, so the upper arms are parallel with the floor, lower arms perpendicular. Keep the elbows bent so you can draw them back. By softening the elbows, the entire shoulder girdle is relaxed even though the muscles are working. This allows the spine to approach a gentle back bend as the chest cavity expands. Breathe several cycles, paying particular attention to the front of the spine reaching forward and up. Imagine the shoulders resting gently on the rib cage. If you are able to maintain this openness in the shoulders and back, try straightening the arms. If you lose the openness, return to bent elbows. As you breathe, let your attention move to the muscles that are working. Don't assume anything. Let your visual awareness follow the breath into the musculature that's speaking to you.



- Are there any “blind spots” in your body? Chronically rigid areas are difficult to visualize. This is a fascinating aspect of visual imagination and functional resistance. It’s as if both your imagination and physical awareness are blocked. If you find such a place, deepen the breath and see if the light of your breath illuminates those places. This is an practice where patience, faith, and a sense of humor are critical. These blockages won’t let go easily. The mind will jump in and challenge the whole enterprise. Just slow down, pay attention, breathe, relax, and lighten up.

“The body is a house, and we’re only renting it! There are rooms in the house where we don’t go anymore. They’re filled with the old letters and memories of hurts, big and small, that we haven’t wanted to deal with. They are areas of the body that we stop being conscious of. In a typical yoga class we just skip through so much and only go to the sunny places. But it’s the locked rooms that we want to open that we need to pay attention to.”

—Jill Satterfield

- On the next exhale, bend your elbows and bring your upper body all the way forward resting on your thigh. Sweep the hands back to rest on your sacrum, remembering the bent elbows. Come up on the inhale, again raising the arms, with bent elbows if necessary, to allow a gentle back bend. Repeat a number of times. See if you can let the breath initiate the movement so the arms are just along for the ride.



- Now do Warrior One on that same side, as you normally would, and notice any difference.
- Repeat the new variation of the posture, followed by your usual one, on the other side.

Which variation is more challenging? In this and the following postures, each time you've identified the differences in the two sides, spend more time on the more difficult side. Don't try to open it more. Just be aware of what the resistance (physical and mental) is. By noticing where the resistance is and giving it a bit more attention, it will tend toward release, but will probably never feel the same as the other side. Thank goodness we are regularly irregular!

Now answer the questions in the sidebar, and write down any other thoughts the posture raised.

—Did you notice any differences from how you normally do Warrior One?

—If so, where do you normally focus your attention?

—Any differences side to side?

—What are you trying to do usually in Warrior One?

—Were you aware of the “spring loaded” hips as you emphasized bringing back hip forward; front hip back?

—Did you see how the emphasis on hips and back bending changes the posture?

—What did bending your elbows do for you?

—Were there any blind spots as you tried to visualize the muscles?

—If so, do they correspond to any places you have pain or discomfort?

—Did focusing on the breath change anything for you?

—What is the perfect Warrior One for your body?

TRIANGLE

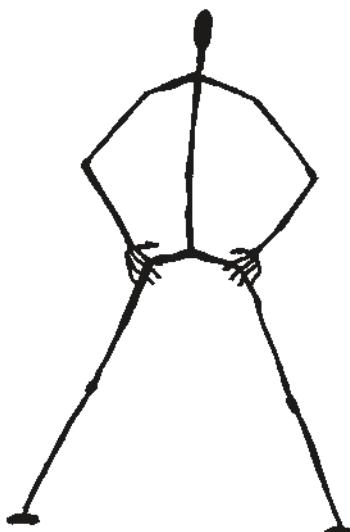
Triangle (*Uttita Trikonasana*) provides a way to experience one of the most obvious ways we get ahead of ourselves in yoga. Before reading further, go into Triangle as you normally would and notice your primary movement. What leads the posture? Just do the pose on one side then come back to the book.

Most students have a preconception of how Triangle “should” look. You may have noticed that your attention was drawn to the placement of your arms. In so many of the postures, there is a tendency to think of the ideal final posture, without considering the dislocations your body goes through to achieve the form. The primary function of Triangle is to extend the side of the body without compressing the spine. So its *function* calls for parallel upper and lower ribcage. It is relatively easy to get the front hand to the floor, but to do that often requires arching the spine, and rolling the top hip forward. The pose then becomes a combined version of a side and forward bend. Try to remember the function of the posture, not just its form.

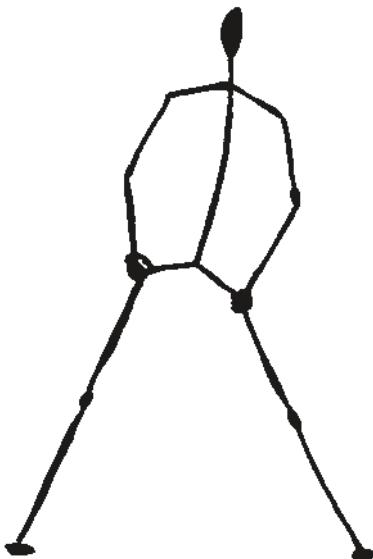
Try the posture in the following fashion.



- Establish a firm base with the feet approximately three-quarters of a leg's length apart. Place the front foot perpendicular to the front of the mat and the back foot at approximately a 45-degree angle. The entire front of the body, including the hips, are in a plane parallel to the side of the mat you are facing.

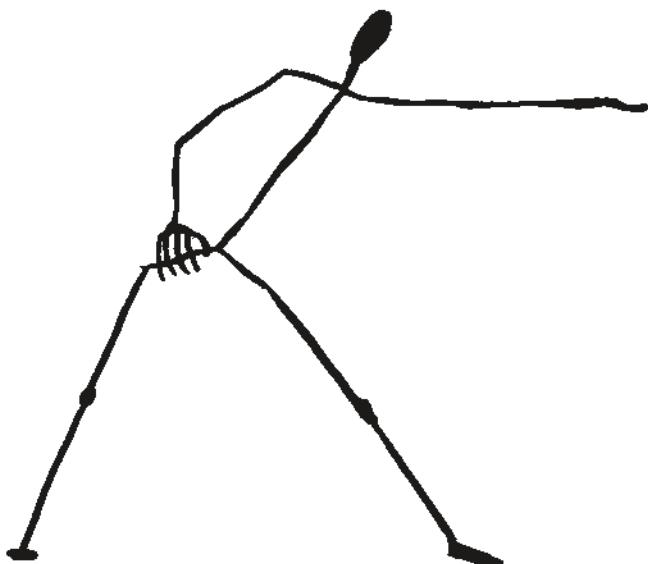


- Gently grab the fabric of your pants at each hip just below the waistband, making sure not to let the hips rotate out of this plane. Imagine they are like a pendulum. Begin to first move the back hip back and up, then release and pull the front hip forward and up, swinging the pendulum. Many of you will learn quickly why “White Men Can’t Dance” (even if you’re female and non-Caucasian). The restrictions in the outer hips and groin often limit mobility, impeding the ability to swing the hips or even move them side to side. Instead, the upper body moves. You may notice that one hip rolls forward when you try to move beyond your limits. Stay where the hips remain parallel to the side of your mat, and try to not move the upper body. Just play with this for several breath cycles. Get especially familiar with where you meet resistance and what happens in your mind when you do. See if your upper body gets into the action. Try to keep it still. Now, instead of tightening against the resistance, imagine how a pendulum would swing effortlessly but only as far as its natural momentum carries it. See if you can bring this awareness into your movement.



- The next time the pendulum swings backward, extend the front hand parallel with the floor, making sure not to let the back hip roll forward. Let that front hand drop to where it comes naturally, resting (probably) somewhere near (but not on) the knee. This position may lead to some internal criticism as your mind compares where the hand actually rests on the leg as opposed to how far down you thought (or wished) it would be. Without judgment, just notice if the thoughts in your mind start commenting. If so, what happens to your attention? It will take

some effort to bring your attention back to the body, but try to lower your focus from somewhere up in your cranium down into the side of your rib cage closest to the floor. Find your breath again and let this lower side of the ribs drop toward the floor. Visualize your spine remaining straight, with upper and lower sides of the rib cage parallel.



- Hopefully this variation will bring a much different awareness into your core, and will inform your Triangle of its actual purpose: extending the side of the body without compressing the spine.
- Place your upper hand on your sacrum and concentrate on maintaining your hips in a plane parallel to the side of the mat. Don't let the upper hip roll forward. Gently pull up on the inner groin of the front leg keeping your weight off the front hand; it should rest passively on the front leg. Take a full, deep breath in, drawing it down into your front groin. On the exhale, bend the front leg slightly at the knee, allowing the hand to drop down the leg. On your next inhale, leave the hand in this new position and straighten the leg. Make sure the top hip doesn't roll forward. Bring your attention to the sides of your rib cage and try not to let them arch. If they do, bring your hand back up the leg so that the two sides of the rib cage are parallel.



- By attending to the rib cage and the hips, your body will give you the kind of feedback necessary to guide your hand to its proper position on the leg. Continue through a few breath cycles, remembering that the placement of your front hand is the least important consideration.
- Repeat on the other side. And remember to spend more time on the more difficult side.

In this and other postures where the large muscles of the hamstrings, abductors and adductors are involved, softening the front knee while maintaining the integrity of the pelvis and spine will allow the true function of the posture to emerge. Flexibility will follow. Don't just trust me on this. See how, after a few days of bending and straightening the front leg to relieve the hamstrings and groin, your triangle does actually start to feel better. And yes, it will look pretty cool too.

In the sidebar, recount your experience.

—When you focused on the pendulum at your hips, what happened to your idea of Triangle?

—Was not moving the hand toward the floor, and instead keeping the hands on the hips, disconcerting?

—Were you able to find the places of restriction in your inner groin?

—Could you see how restrictions in the hips and groin limit the side extension?

—What happened when you focused on not letting the top hip roll forward as your front hand dropped?

—By focusing on keeping the upper and lower sides of the ribs parallel, what happened?

—What did your ego do when your front hand didn't go down as far as you'd like?

—Did bending and straightening the front leg change anything?

—Does thinking of Triangle as a side extension, not a side bend, change your view of the posture?

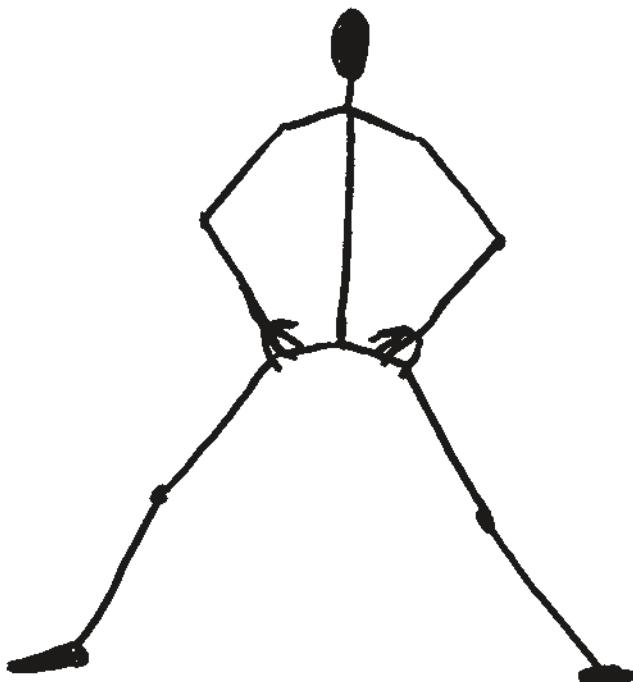
—What is the perfect Triangle for your body?

WARRIOR TWO

This is a wonderful posture to practice getting to know how *wide* your edge is. It also allows you to remember the importance of focusing on the pelvis and its relationship to the spine. This is not an exercise in alignment. It is a way to get to know your own habitual patterns. By observing your inclinations, it is possible to see how easy it is to practice unconsciously. Autopilot takes you out of yoga, even when the physical posture is by the book.

🎥 <http://www.yosa.co/v11>

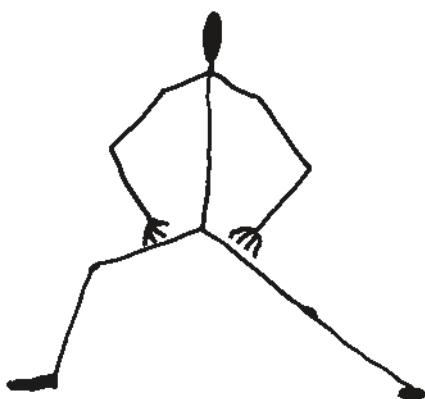
- Stand in preparation for Warrior Two, facing the side of your mat with feet spread a leg's length apart. Keep the front foot perpendicular to the front of the mat and the back foot at a 45-degree angle. Place your hands on your hips and let the front knee bend on the exhale. As you inhale, come back up again, making sure the hips stay parallel with the side of your mat. As you drop the knee again, imagine there is a line passing from the crown of your head down the middle of your body and through your perineum to the floor. That line should fall between your legs so you are not leaning too far either towards the front or back of the mat. Note we have done nothing with the arms.



- As you straighten the leg, draw your breath in. Bend the front leg again on the next exhale, raising your arms parallel to the floor. Be gentle and not rigid. Repeat three breath cycles, then hold with the knee dropped. Keep the arms extended. Let the energy start to build. As it does, get curious about what is actually happening. If your mind starts to worry, come back to the sensations and increase your breath. What happens to your concerns if you deepen your breath? Try smiling. Soften the muscles around your eyes, soften your jaw, neck and shoulders. Try to let all the stress drop to the floor.
- Focus your lens of awareness with increasing magnification so you can describe the vibrations that start to build in your body. Try not to judge them as good or bad but notice when anxiety or tension arise. What is the mind doing as you hold the posture? You have the ability to reel in your attention. Like a distracted kid who can't focus, the mind doesn't want to stay put, especially in the presence of strong sensations. Effort can serve awareness, but only if you actually follow what is going on and don't get lost in the mind's game. It's also a time to decide if you should back off. If tension in the muscles or the mind replaces effort, it's time to lighten up. And remember to smile.
- If you haven't already, unbend your knee about three or four inches. Notice the muscles are still working. You are still within your edge. Remember it's a very wide place for you to explore. Arms and shoulders relax within their effort. Find your own sthira sukham asanam. Get curious and let go. When you straighten the leg, be aware of your intention to do so before you actually move. Too often the mind gets tighter and tighter waiting for the teacher to release you from the hold. Be aware of your choice to come out of the posture when it's right for you.

- Repeat on the other side.

Review your experience in the sidebar.



—Were you able to maintain Intentional Awareness, looking at the muscles working and pressure building?

—Did you feel pressure changing to tension?

—If so, what happened?

—Do you have a way to stay in the effort without tension?

—Did softening your eyes and jaw change anything?

—Did you follow the instruction to smile?

—If so, what happened when you smiled?

—Did the focus on Intentional Awareness, dropping through your midline, and keeping the hips parallel with the side of the mat change your view of the posture?

—What is the perfect Warrior Two for your body?

After doing these standing postures you may have become aware of how difficult it can be to lengthen and work muscles at the same time. It takes diligence and awareness to separate which muscles are doing what. It is a challenge to focus your energy appropriately. If you're able to bend the body without compromising the relationship of the hip and shoulder girdles to the spine, then both working and lengthening are possible. But if the muscles you intend to relax and open are instead contracting, then your spine is getting serious mixed messages. There is nothing more anxiety provoking than hearing the mellifluous voice of your teacher inviting you to gently come forward when your back is screaming at you.

When your focus is on lengthening, flexibility, and openness, it is often easier for the body to do this work on the floor. It is easier on the hips, and the natural curves of the spine can remain in place. Then the pelvis can tilt forward. Pressure is off the leg muscles so hamstrings and quadriceps are free enough to allow for maximum release.

Paul Grilley's perspective on yin yoga emphasizes the need to focus on the pelvis. Postures are done while seated, reducing the potential conflict between *working* a muscle and *releasing* it. Paul addresses the importance of lengthening through tensile extension and engagement of the Golgi tendon organs. Yin also reduces the risk of myotactic and flexion reflexes. Long, gentle stretching while in a seated posture reduces the risk of reflexive contraction since muscles don't have to over-exert to keep the body upright in space. Then it is easier to relax, holding a gentle stretch long enough for the muscles to release.

A great way to notice the differential effects of standing and seated postures on flexibility is to compare Standing Forward Bend (*Uttanasana*) with Seated Forward Bend (*Pascimatasana*). While many practitioners' bodies fall effortlessly into forward bends, their tranquil breathing is often drowned out by the huffing and puffing of those with tight hamstrings and backs. Just in case you're afraid you alone are cursed with hamstrings that resemble blocks of stone, I came up with 109,000 entries when Googling "tight hamstrings." It's OK to lighten up. We're all in this together.

Remember the function of forward bends is to bring breath to the entire backside of the body. I'll include the picture used earlier to stress that when the hamstrings are tight, it is difficult to focus equally on the backs of the legs and on the back. The position of the pelvis—attaching as it does to both the legs and the torso—is critical to maintaining equilibrium between upper and lower body. If the pelvis is tilted back such that forward bends happen from the waist rather than from the hips, the muscles of the back will be in contraction while the spine will be folded

in on itself at the lumbar region. This constricts, rather than increases, inter-vertebral space. Here's the picture again:



This backward tilt of the pelvis is exacerbated by tight hamstrings, pulling as they do on the rear of the pelvic floor. This makes lengthening the muscles extremely unlikely and might have something to do with the clenched teeth and frowns that often accompany forward bends. But have no fear. A great solution is a variation of Uttanasana.

🎥 <http://www.yosa.co/v12>

- Stand in Mountain Pose (Tadasana Samasthit) with feet hip-width apart. Place your hands on your hips. Inhale deeply then exhale as you begin to bend forward very slowly. Keep your back flat and your tailbone moving to the rear. Engage your hamstrings, and when you are no longer able to bend further without rounding the back, stop. You may not go as far as you're used to.
- Inhale again. Exhale, bending the knees deeply. See how this frees the hips and allows you to deepen the bend without compromising your back. Continue deep breathing, especially long exhales as you move forward, until the chest rests near or on the thighs. Keeping contact with the thighs, inhale, and try to move the tailbone back, rather than straightening the legs. Now straighten the legs, but only to a point where the upper body doesn't rise up off the thighs. Pay attention to the

energy in your back. This is your beginning point in Uttanasana. The back opens, the hamstrings lengthen, and there is an equal stretch in both.

- Go through several breath cycles, bending the knees deeper on exhale and then slowly straightening them on inhale.

Remember that in a Standing Forward Bend, any attempt to free the hamstrings comes up against one major obstacle: these muscles are largely responsible for holding up the entire body. Along with the quadriceps, the large muscles of the legs must engage to keep the body from collapsing under its own weight. You are trying to release muscles that are already working. So they don't want to let go. By firming the quads, more release is possible in the hamstrings. But it is not possible to bring the hamstrings to a completely relaxed stretch while standing. The next variation will show you the difference when your hamstrings aren't working to keep your body erect.

 <http://www.yosa.co/v13>

- Sit on the floor in Staff Pose (*Dandasana*). Notice if you are able to sit comfortably, or if the energy of the hips is strained. Tightness in the hamstrings pulls on the bottom of the pelvis, causing the muscles of the back to contract to hold the upper body erect. General tightness in the hips precludes the kind of forward tilt necessary to remove the strain on the back. If this is your experience, place a pillow under the hips, raising them above the level of the legs. This often allows the back body to relax. Notice the release of tension here. Take the pillow out and compare the feeling. You'll know whether it's a good idea or unnecessary for you.

But please remember two things as you compare the two options: no one is watching, and the gates to Yoga Heaven are only opened by self-acceptance, not by hope or denial. And I have it from a good authority that strain and tension lock up the gates tighter than a cramped hamstring.

The whole purpose of these modifications is to create the optimum starting place for release in the lower body, hips, and back before engaging the muscles in a lengthening activity. This is critical from a neuromuscular perspective, as well as for the esoteric flow of *prana*. Beginning a stretch from a contraction is self-defeating. Find your own unique place where relaxed effort is possible.

- If you are still feeling some tension in the back, bend the knees. Keep the breath moving deeply and as you begin to move remember this mantra: Change the Breath, Change the Body. Place your hands on the floor behind you, pressing down so that

the hips rise up a bit, allowing them to begin to tilt forward. Don't worry about bending forward yet. In these first stages imagine you are in a back bend: the chest is open, the natural lumbar curve is present. The spine extends. When you are no longer able to come forward without releasing the spine, stop and bend the knees more. You may continue to bend at the hips until the upper body approaches or makes contact with the thighs. Release the back, roll forward and rest. Draw the breath through several cycles. Fill the back body on the inhale. Imagine the breath is moving from the lungs down below the diaphragm and into the legs. On exhale just let everything go. Don't try to stretch anything.

- After several rounds of breathing and releasing, begin to gently straighten the legs. Do not think about the knees reaching the floor unless they come easily and openly to this position. Instead, visualize the back of the hamstrings as living, pulsing tissue, softer than taut bands of fiber. It is possible to manually engage the Golgi tendon organs, resulting in muscle release. Wrap your hands around the hamstrings just above the back of the knee. With your fingertips, press into the connections between tendons and muscles and apply a gentle pressure as you breathe deeply. Release and extend the legs with each breath cycle. Notice the difference in the hamstrings as you sit on the floor. Realize they don't have to hold the body up and see if you can let them go a bit more.
- Review your experience.

—Were you able to feel the function of the pose?

—Did the hamstrings overpower awareness of the back?

—How did bending knees affect you?

—Did your ego get involved when you bent your knees?

—Were you able to bend from the hips?

—What was the difference when you moved from standing to seated?

—What is the perfect Standing and Seated Forward Bend for your body?

While many of the external forms of the asanas have been refined quite recently, their essence dates back to before recorded history. Early yoga masters found they could unlock the energy channels of the body when the postures were articulated in their ideal form. But the key thing to remember is that ideal form exists only *in relation* to the individual practitioner.

“There is an idealized form of each asana, but it can only be discovered by the person doing it. An asana doesn’t have a life of its own. It’s like a car that needs a driver before its purpose can be realized. Learning an asana is about how it relates to you. It’s not about the *asana*.”

—Gary Kraftsow

CHAPTER 19:

The Wizard's Just a Guy Behind the Curtain

If you see the Buddha in the Road, Kill Him

—*Linji*

When Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodsman, and the Cowardly Lion finally made it to Oz, they were escorted to meet the Wizard. They were sure he could get Dorothy home to Kansas. But their hopes were dashed as Toto pulled back a curtain to reveal an ordinary man. He appeared to be a carnival huckster, hiding there, manipulating the levers that gave him, what Dorothy and her friends had believed to be, such awesome power. Once he was unmasked, they felt hopeless and helpless.

It's very important to find a yoga teacher who can lead you beyond your limitations and blind spots. It is equally important to know that the teacher is only a guide, not a wizard.

A great way to find your guide is to attend a variety of yoga classes, taught by different teachers. See for yourself what they emphasize. Do they present a simple and direct perspective that the postures are wonderful tools to help students pay attention to what is going on in the mind and body? Do they provide clear instructions, delivered with the intention of helping students return to the present moment? Do they stress the primacy of the breath? Do they focus on the internal, as well as the external aspects of yoga?

That's the easy part. The really difficult task is to notice whether the teacher's style encourages you to notice and alter your patterns. It is extremely important to let your intuition—rather than your habits—guide you.

As I suggested earlier, if you are a hard-driving individual, try a teacher who challenges you to slow down and sit with yourself, if only for the hour you spend on

the mat. Conversely, if your life tends to be characterized by reticence and caution, find a teacher who challenges you to stretch beyond your comfort zone without frightening you.

The teacher's role is a powerful and difficult one. By words, tone, and action, a yoga teacher attempts to transmit an oral tradition that has evolved over thousands of years. It's good to honor and value the teacher's point of view. It is equally important to know and honor how that point of view relates to you.

The history of yoga is rich with millennia of masters passing the teachings to new generations of students in a remarkable dance of tradition and interpretation. Honor and respect for the teachings, and for your teacher, is an essential aspect of learning this ancient practice. As essential is a recognition that the teachings are different for each practitioner. The knowledge of those differences is what makes the teachings *yours*. It's what transfers them from the master to the teacher, and from the teacher to you.

“Without a connection to the sacred source of all traditions, we'd have nothing; but there is a middle path. It's not all dogma. We need to remember these are oral traditions, constantly evolving. It reflects the practitioner. The secret is to allow the beauty and truth of each individual.”

—Saul David Raye

It's clear, from many of the contemporary teachers I've spoken with, that yoga is an *adaptable* medium. We are a long way from the admonition in the *Hatha Yoga Pradapika* regarding preparing one's space to do yoga practice. This section closes by reminding practitioners to spread a fresh layer of cow dung prior to commencing practice. To deify a small portion of the teachings as Yoga (with a capital Y) is not unlike a fundamentalist in any religion picking a section of their scriptures and building a belief system from that one narrow passage.

“The only really valuable thing is intuition.”

—Albert Einstein

I chose the wonderful teachers I've interviewed for this book for a number of reasons. Most remarkable is how each of their teaching styles has undergone a similar and rather remarkable change. There is now a receptivity to something much deeper than the rules of alignment. Whether they came to the deeper teachings from asana, or whether the physical practice was a small part of their contemplative exploration, all the teachers have a sense of *lightness* about them. They each manifest this attitude in a unique way. And it is that very uniqueness, to me at least, that is so delightful.

“When I hang out with all my wonderful Buddhist teachers,
I get to see how light they are, how much they have studied
and practiced to create that lightness; it rubs off on me and
it’s like, ‘don’t take yourself so goddamn seriously!’”

—Jill Satterfield

The experiences of these highly skilled practitioners may give you a willingness to try a different pattern if your yoga has become less nourishing than it once was. Or, if you are facing recurrent soreness, pain, or injury, this new pattern will allow your intuition to interpret the teachings so they are right for you.

Change to any physical system (in particular the human body) follows some fairly simple rules. Behavioral economics and physiology make use of the *Law of Diminishing Returns*. The beginning stages of yoga practice, based as they are on the development of physical prowess, are often accompanied by wonderful changes in the body. Slowly, the pace of those changes diminishes. If you've confronted this, your internal critic probably had a field day as your new openness changed to struggle. Increased range of motion can give way to injury, and enthusiasm often morphs to self-doubt.

There is a way to use this transition positively. When it happens, and it does happen to all practitioners, it's a wake-up call to pay attention to what's really going on. For many of these teachers who had dedicated their lives to sharing what they'd learned with others, it was as if achievement finally gave way to acceptance and acceptance opened them to exploration. As Desikachar reminds his readers, the means became much more important than the end.

Several pointed to the role of injury in coming to this new perspective. Erich Schiffmann relates, “I overrode my common sense trying to respond to the teacher

telling me stuff I thought would make me more ‘OK’ if I did it.” There was another mechanism at work as well: the aging of the physical body. These universal changes can be either a debilitating calamity or a blessing. Once the realization sinks in that the body is past its peak performance, the whole game changes. The only possible final result of a strict orientation toward physical achievement is disappointment. Once denial of aging dissipates, a new opportunity for *accepting what is* opens. And that is the essence of what each of these teachers has to say. It’s not magically wrapped in some secret cloak of initiation. Rather, all suffered from the same human frailties as their students. It’s simply that their diligence and longevity led them to the inexorable truth that self-acceptance was the only way for them to keep or rediscover the joy that initially infused their commitment to yoga.

“No matter how much you stretch, no matter how well you eat, no matter how much you do trying to make it otherwise, the body gets old and dies.

The only real thing we have while this is happening is our knowledge of who we are. If you don’t start cultivating that now, it won’t happen later.”

—Nischala Devi

All of these teachers offered poignant stories of their own evolution. All came to a point in their practice and in their teaching, where they had to step back, reflect, and either change or stop. It was as if the music had stopped. The glorious excitement that accompanied their discovery of this ancient tradition gave way to tedium. They each had to slow down, pay attention, breathe, relax and lighten up into the belief that if they truly listened, the music would come back clearer than ever. Hopefully, their stories will remind you that the best teaching comes from within, even for those you seek to follow.

“It has taken me a lifetime to learn to draw like a child.”

—Pablo Picasso

When *Erich Schiffmann* began teaching, he was immediately drawn to the elegant architecture of the postures. Their math-like precision captivated him. Over time he noticed that his energy was getting dammed up. He stopped going to class, stopped teaching, holed up, and instead let the energy of his body teach him. He

trusted that his intuition would guide him. But it was a slow, confusing shift. His process wasn't supported by the clear guidelines that asana architecture provided. It wasn't like math anymore. Trust built, but it wasn't quick. It *felt* right, but he wasn't being validated by the mores of the yoga community.

“The poses are a context for beginning to trust your inner energy.”

—Erich Schiffmann

Because his own experience was not validated, Erich commits his teaching to helping people discover their own path in yoga and their own inner truth. Schiffmann does whatever he can to share tools for each individual to access what he calls *Big Mind*. Once people begin to trust themselves to select their own approach to the postures, Erich believes self-trust is the only possible outcome. They then see truth as emanating from the *inside*, not from some outside source. There is still a need to teach and learn the basic rules of alignment and articulation of the postures. This teaches the power of focused concentration, a key component of mindfulness. But once the rules are learned, the real teaching is in helping students to trust themselves.

Rodney Yee also came to yoga with a love and fascination for precision and form. As a gymnast and dancer, and as a physical therapy and philosophy major, he was attracted to form—in the art world, in dialogue, in philosophy, in ballet, and later, in yoga. He found what he calls “truly subtle alignment” in the way the practice brought concentration to his heart and mind as well as his body.

Perhaps because of his early training, he never lost his respect and appreciation for form. But he is careful to distinguish his ideas from the simplistic views about asana that lead many students to become dissatisfied with how they execute the postures. Whether in an ancient Greek sculpture, a Rodin bronze, a Picasso nude, an Olympic diver's feat, or an adept's forward bend, he sees all as beautiful because they include movement and the flow of energy. The form of an asana is beauty when it embodies *sthira sukham asanam*. Rodney realizes the pitfalls of static form, when attention is limited solely to architecture. He stresses the importance of finding the movement, the openness, and the space *within* what otherwise appear to be static forms. His teaching is to help students find that fluidity.

Rodney and his wife Coleen exhibit remarkable candor in describing the perils of being popular teachers. They recognize how easy it is to get lost in the masquerade

of ego. Living what they teach requires an ongoing act of balance. This awareness has helped them understand the true meaning of the guru, and the risks any teacher or student faces in misinterpreting that role. At its best, the guru is a mirror held up so that the student can truly see herself. It is a mirror of love and of a belief in the inner wisdom of each individual, not in the transmission of external knowledge.

“The whole thing of looking up to a teacher can be a dangerous thing. It gives away responsibility so when the teacher does something human, there’s disappointment. It brings you out of the place you’re trying to get to which is self-acceptance and turning the practice inward.”

—Coleen Saidman (*from an interview with Rodney & Coleen*)

Richard Rosen was also initially drawn to the elegance and art of the asanas. He found beauty in how Iyengar refined the postures. Prior to Iyengar’s publishing *Light on Yoga* in 1966, modern teachers paid minimal attention to the details of the postures. Iyengar merged the art and science of alignment. When the book was published, it had a profound impact on Richard and thousands of other Americans. Iyengar’s attention to detail and to the rigors of the system complemented many Americans’ desire to be challenged. Richard and many other students were intrigued by the practice’s emphasis on continuous progress: today’s maximum became tomorrow’s minimum.

The approach had a profound effect on him. It led to a teaching career that began, much as his training had, with strict adherence to the details of the postures and even stricter adherence to the tone and style of his own teacher. When he and Rodney Yee opened Piedmont Yoga Studio, alignment and rigorous physical accomplishment were extremely important elements of the style of teaching they then introduced to thousands of Bay Area students.

Over time, while he still felt that attention to form was a valuable part of yoga, he found himself getting lost in the detail.

“It got so I didn’t see the forest for the trees, you get so caught up in the physical details, it’s hard to know why you’re doing what you’re doing.”

—Richard Rosen

He soon discovered his own diminishing returns. Instead of achievement, he confronted recurrent, repetitive, and debilitating injury. As if that weren't frustrating enough, the injuries were accompanied by fairly substantial amounts of self-criticism and doubt. In his classes, he became "not very kind."

Then, after a chance encounter with another teacher who held a more contemplative perspective, Richard began exploring how the postures affected him internally. He realized that this must have been what Iyengar experienced in developing his system: an experimental curiosity about what's actually going on in the mind as well as the body.

When Richard confronted the onset of a condition that placed severe restrictions on his physical body, this contemplative, exploratory perspective grew into what has become a much richer practice. The paradox for Richard was that in discovering his physical limitations, the potential of his yoga practice has become unlimited. It has taken a healthy dose of humor, lightheartedness and self-acceptance, but in spite of the physical malady, he feels much kinder these days towards himself and towards others.

Tias Little began his yoga practice and teaching from a decidedly active, and he would say, aggressive point of view. He was captivated by the rigors of the *astanga* series. He saw, in the detailed specificity of the instructions, a way to channel his mental energy. Only with time did he discover that the physical effort was simply masking all the doubts, judgments, and criticisms that characterized his life off the mat.

With his introduction to Buddhism, he began a slow transition from the external architecture of the asanas to an inner exploration of how physical energy gets trapped in the body. It is counterproductive to attempt "progress" in an asana that involves muscles that are in energetic contraction. It is as if you are trying to overwhelm your body's intuition.

He now combines his study and teaching in somatics with learning from Buddhism and yoga. For Tias, his teaching has evolved in parallel with his own acceptance of his inner truth. That acceptance comes with the paradox that his strict Protestant upbringing still infuses his life and his teaching. So it is a constant challenge to stay aware of, and awake to, his older patterns. Yoga for Tias is a way to remember and always to begin again.

"It's really absurd to be caught in self-criticism or self-blame about how you're 'doing' the postures, when physical flexibility is such a small part of yoga training. But that's the emphasis in our goal-oriented culture."

—Tias Little

Sarah Powers came to yoga with a deep interest in personal inquiry and psychotherapy. Yet her early practice had a strong outward focus, with emphasis on the architecture of the postures. However, over the last 10 years, she has become much more interested in the investigatory potential of the practice. She focuses on slowing the postures down and finding what is possible through stillness.

“Meditation allowed me to relax from the assumption that asana was a performance thing. I knew that my practice is meant to stay alive, speak to my life. It’s not about me needing to adhere to something I was passionate about in my 20s.”

—Sarah Powers

But she had more difficulty bringing this new awareness into her teaching. The popular yoga styles required her to be like a physical fitness instructor. That role didn’t feed her, since she had come to yoga as a platform for self-discovery. Physical yoga was fun, but she was drawn to exploring the heart and mind. Slowly, others were drawn to her new approach. She still brings physical challenge into asana practice so students can feel more competent. Sarah is clear that when you’re out of balance, you tend to gravitate toward that which *keeps* you out of balance. It’s important to know and acknowledge whatever distortions you put in your own way and do a practice that helps you find equilibrium. Her goal is to help avoid deprivation and excess. One kind of asana can’t be right for everyone.

When *Paul Grilley* began his yoga practice he was a dedicated weight lifter and a self-described “gym rat.” Paul had great success molding and shaping his body to increasing states of physical prowess. At first yoga was simply a tool to assist in his conditioning, because of its promise of increased flexibility. He discovered a new openness and range of motion in muscles and joints that had previously been constricted and immobile. He was excited by the imagined outcomes, given how much change he experienced in his first couple of years.

But slowly, dissatisfaction crept into his practice. His pleasure was directly proportional to the level and pace of his progress. Like the rest of his conditioning program, yoga was a tool of achievement. There seemed to be never-ending potential for improvement, yet he confronted diminishing returns. Yoga was completely complementary to his other achievements until he stopped achieving. When the pace of change slowed, when physical progress stopped, he was miserable.

“When I stopped progressing, it poisoned my practice. Instead of doing a forward bend, then lying back and saying ‘doesn’t that feel good,’ I’d say ‘God, I’m never getting better at this.’”

—Paul Grilley

When he finally accepted that “this is it, this is as open as I get,” it was “a huge monkey off my back.” Acceptance led to an entirely new conception of yoga. He began to examine how he was reacting to the resistance he felt, and no longer was driven to overcome it. By admitting that his progress might be limited, his attitude became more balanced and peaceful. Paul used to approach yoga like weight lifting, with clearly measurable reference points for progress. Today, he uses the analogy of taking a bath to describe his evolving attitude. When he gets ready to take a bath he doesn’t think about whether it will be a better bath than yesterday’s. Rather, he does it because afterwards, he feels better.

Anne Cushman began practicing yoga in her twenties. She was drawn to a strong vinyasa style. It served what she needed at a time in her life when it was very difficult to sit still. Plus, she admits to being part of the “looks-obsessed, form-obsessed” culture, that just carried over into her yoga practice. But at a certain point, it didn’t nourish her the way it previously had. It’s obvious to her now her earlier perspective was doomed to failure, if only because her body stopped being 25 years old.

The evolution from performance to something deeper has been an organic process. She was lucky in that asana came into her life after meditation, so asana became a way to embody her mental practice. While she loved the physicality of it (the “tricks,” as she calls them), she never thought of asana as the end of the practice. It was always in the service of something larger.

As director of Spirit Rock’s *Mindfulness Yoga and Meditation Training* program for yoga teachers, Anne is acutely aware of the need to integrate the internal orientation of mindfulness into yoga practice.

She is also aware that yoga runs the risk of becoming one more “scene” in our appearance-obsessed culture. Her book, *Enlightenment for Idiots*, pokes fun at many of the sacred cows of the performance-based yoga scene. Her ability to observe the human condition and how it manifests in the yoga world is both serious and humorous. In capturing the struggles of her heroine—a relationship challenged, life-challenged, yoga teacher/travel writer—Anne manages to allow all her readers to laugh at the traps, pitfalls and promises of the spiritual path.

“The teachings of the spiritual world are so valuable, but the ‘scenes’ are so comical: it’s irresistible to poke fun. Humans are the funniest beings, and they’re wonderful.”

—Anne Cushman

Jill Satterfield got faked into yoga. She attended a movement class before yoga entered mainstream popularity. When she asked the teacher what movement it was, the teacher whispered, “yoga.” It’s hard to believe that wasn’t so very long ago—but at the time, Jill felt she was beginning something quite radical. Her teacher, a woman she stayed with for seven years, was extremely aggressive in her manner and tone. She was loud, opinionated, and her adjustments were “brutal.” Jill quickly learned that there was a correct way to do the postures, and that the teacher knew best what position she should lock Jill’s body in regardless of its impact. It was Jill’s job to overcome her resistance since the teacher and the posture were “right.”

Jill treated her teacher almost as a deity. She was someone with the knowledge, information, and commitment to mentor Jill. The irony was that even within the harshness, Jill gained a new sense of her physical competence. The strength and physical power she developed through the early years of her practice were wonderful. The constant improvement was extremely rewarding.

When she began teaching, she emulated her teacher. She was tough, harsh, and strong. It wasn’t as if the teacher didn’t say to pay attention to the breath—but because the emphasis was on aligning the body in a certain way, the instructions about the breath became like elevator music.

“There are lots of things said by teachers that are just kind of piped in, so it all becomes background and very easy to ignore, especially when you’re being told to concentrate on where your big toe is.”

—Jill Satterfield

During her first meditation retreat, it dawned on Jill that all of the physical activity in her yoga practice was occurring with absolutely no awareness of what was happening in her mind. She discovered that yoga provided a way to observe her

mental dance. She found that moving breath around her body was also moving her mind, and she could observe both. Meditation made her realize how necessary it was to slow down and to stay in the postures longer so she could access what was unfolding. Yoga became a physical manifestation of meditation. It allowed her to see the subtleties of her body. It gave her mind the opportunity to investigate the physical form that her body was in.

Saul David Raye's introduction was quite different than the previous teachers'. Yet his ultimate confrontation with the demands of teaching led to a similar outcome. He came to asana as a small part of broader spiritual training in Buddhism and classical yoga. During several years in Asia, he lived with a monk and was steeped in the wholeness of yoga. Upon returning to the United States in the early nineties, he found himself in the middle of the burgeoning popularity of performance-oriented, physically-based yoga. Within this milieu, something was missing for him.

He gave up the security and comfort of a successful teaching career and, in his words, "stripped it all down to the essence." He returned to his inner voice for guidance. Now he tries to create a space for people to connect with themselves.

"I'm not there to tell people what to do or even how to do it. Much more important is just to listen and know your body. Even if you're struggling, just try to trust yourself."

—Saul David Raye

That energy connection to a student's own truth, will release one's own rhythm and way of doing yoga. Rhythm is an essential part of his teaching. The twin concepts of *ritam* (the root of *rhythm*) and balance infuse his teaching through music and a gentle approach to even the most challenging postures. Excess becomes impossible. He is able to translate the musical concepts of harmony into the physical practices he teaches. There is a universal rhythm to the cosmos and yet each person has a unique chord structure. It is only by acknowledging that unique signature that harmony with the universal becomes possible. For Saul, intuition is the only true option, both in his teaching and his students' interpretations.

Saul insists that humor is critical to wash away the veneer of seriousness that accompanies so many classes. Seriousness reflects your ideas of who you're supposed to be; that's ego and not harmony. At the muscular level, seriousness is

equivalent to tension. It locks the body up when the goal is just the opposite. For Saul, the only rule for hearing the truth is listening to your own body.

It took me most of my life to realize the only thing we can control is our attitude. *Gary Kraftsow* had a similar revelation at the age of six, while whining to his mother about the rain. With a child's simplicity, he realized that even though he couldn't change the weather, he did have control over his choice to be happy or unhappy about it.

Years later, as a highly competitive, performance-oriented gymnast who had injured his back, Gary was introduced to yoga by a teacher who put him in Child's Pose. This simple posture relieved his recurrent pain. Then, as a religious studies student, he came upon the *Yoga Sutras* and found profound depth in the teachings of Patanjali. He was introduced to Krishnamacharya's work and became a student of Desikachar. Asana was always about how the postures could heal and serve the practitioner. He never learned or taught that their value could be found in some specific architecture, divorced from the uniqueness of the person executing the posture.

Since physical competence and performance had been such a large part of his self-image, the hardest thing for him to learn was that "I am not my body." The teacher's role then, is to help students be present and pay attention to the patterns in their minds and bodies that cause dis-ease, and then to encourage new behavior to counter that conditioning. The intention to attend to the breath (and its relationship to the movements of the spine and limbs) is the essential first step in this awareness.

"You can dig a ditch paying attention or not. Either way you get a ditch. But the first way you do it as you always have and eventually you may hurt yourself. If you dig with attention, you can notice your patterns and then dig in a way that is not harmful."

—Gary Kraftsow

The teacher is a "conductor of attention," constantly leading the students back to their own awareness of how the postures might be done to minimize harm and enhance well-being. Just as with a group of violinists, the conductor can only guide. Skilled performers will each interpret his directions, and no two performances will be the same. So too, asanas only come alive in their relation to your uniqueness.

The arc of *Leslie Kaminoff's* career is a true testament to intuition. He knew from his earliest adult days that teaching yoga was his calling. Through the Sivananda organization, he became a swami himself and immersed himself in hatha yoga teachings.

His body work practice brought him into contact with injured students and he began an exploration of the breath and its impact on yoga practice. When he learned of the work of Desikachar and his principal American student at the time, Gary Kraftsow, it was as if he was no longer a lone seeker. Desikachar had examined and explained many of the questions he was exploring, especially in terms of the role of the breath. In his own words, Leslie became “a pest,” until he was able to develop a relationship with both these teachers. He found a lack of emphasis on physical achievement in this new tradition. Not that flexibility wasn’t important, but Leslie found a simple answer to the question “just how flexible do I need to be in my life?”

“I have a fairly jaded perspective, since the people I see are the ones who get hurt elsewhere. The real question is: are you living your life so you can do yoga, or are you doing yoga so you can live your life?”

—Leslie Kaminoff

Leslie dedicated his practice and teaching to addressing the suffering so many experience during asana. He isn’t critical of the paths that lead to the many injuries he sees. Rather he finds in people’s difficulties a very Buddhist idea, and one that Desikachar states explicitly: the recognition of suffering is the primary motivator of change.

A good deal of this book addresses the pitfalls of a strictly externally oriented practice. Many of the teachers’ stories recount their own transformations as they’ve moved to a more contemplative practice. In emphasizing this more subtle aspect, I am not relegating active styles of asana to the category of “sport.” *Richard Freeman*, one of the foremost teachers of the astanga school of Patthabi Jois, stresses the importance of the inner path even within the most active practice. Within the strenuous effort of this approach, it’s easy to forget that the goal of yoga is a reintegration of mind and body.

While many students are drawn to the pace, speed, and challenge of Jois’s orientation, Freeman emphasizes the need to slow down so that it’s possible to begin the

practice from within. It's essential to notice the activities of the mind and to realize there is no yoga without incorporating them. This is particularly challenging for many of his students who come seeking the constant motion of the astanga series.

Richard believes there is a huge risk in adhering to any one interpretation too strongly. He recognizes, in his own past and in many of his students, a tendency towards fundamentalism. It feeds on the narcissism of many teachers. It's natural to appreciate praise, but when the truth is defined in terms that exclude all else, teachers tend to surround themselves with the like-minded, and keep the doubters away.

“You see it in astanga and at least five other ‘styles’: people can’t just sit still for two minutes of meditation. They can’t bear to be with things the way they are. They go to yoga to keep moving. It becomes a very extroverted sport.”

—Richard Freeman

He feels one of the teacher's primary jobs is to remove all of the metaphysical beliefs that infuse the yoga world so that students may just watch how the mind makes up all its stories. He tries to teach with humor, to help his students avoid grasping onto the system, and to ease out of their fundamentalism instead. He's fallen into so many traps himself that he wants to save his students from the same suffering. Yet he is mindful that everybody needs to make their own mistakes and that, as with injury, mistakes are often the best teachers.

When *Waz Thomas* was first exposed to yoga, he felt he was coming home. A meditator for years, Waz found a physical way to do his meditation through yoga. When he began teaching, it just seemed like a logical extension of his own practice. For over 25 years, he was director of Commonweal's Yoga program. His was a specific audience: cancer patients confronting a potentially terminal illness. The Commonweal program offers support to those facing the possibility of death, while still working to enhance chances of survival.

Waz was diagnosed as HIV positive over 20 years ago at a time when such a diagnosis was often a death sentence. Yet he went on to a career at Commonweal that touched other lives as much by his own example as by his specific teaching. Waz's life experience gave him the “street cred” to speak to people whose own lives were

threatened. While his is an extreme example, his words have great relevance to the question facing each student and teacher: does the teacher *embody* what he or she is teaching? The essence of that embodiment is not the chants, the clothes, the tone of voice, or the incense. Rather it is the humble willingness to admit and expose all of the warts and wonders of their humanness.

After more than two decades as a monk and disciple of Swami Satchidananda, *Nischala Devi* has devoted her life to the integration of yogic teachings and healing. As a past director of Dr. Dean Ornish's program to reverse heart disease, she, like Waz, brought the teachings to a particular at-risk audience. For her, asana can only be valuable as part of an overall yoga practice. She found a wonderful paradox in the burgeoning growth of yoga in America. It introduced millions of people to a powerful set of teachings. Yet by focusing mainly on the physical aspects of yoga, Americans bring their competitive energy to this practice and run the risk of doing little more than "puffing themselves up." There is nothing wrong with only doing asana. But she recommends slicing off a part of the total time you devote to do something else—something more contemplative, or something involving service to others. This will balance the physical aspect without negating the energy that brought you to yoga in the first place.

Her personal studies delved for decades into the spiritual intricacies of yoga. She sees tremendous value in introducing small parts of this wisdom, especially in a class where there is much competitive energy. She believes that people need to be introduced to an alternative to the style that made them stressed in the first place. But she is extremely pragmatic. During a ninety minute yoga class, after which she might not see her students again for a few days or a week, she wants to be sure that what's given to them is useful. For the teacher, this requires not getting caught up in the trappings of the teaching. The ability of a teacher to truly connect the wisdom of yoga to the students' real lives becomes a small measure of whether this teacher is being of service to the students. The real skill you learn as a student (which becomes a measure of the teacher's talent) is whether you can take the learning off the mat and actually make life more harmonious for yourself and for those around you.

"It's important to give them something that will help when they're weak. So I'll say, 'take this with you so that when you're driving the kids to school and they're screaming and they're driving you crazy, instead of reacting right away, just take one deep breath.'"

—Nischala Devi

Whether their transformations are reflected in their approach to asana, or simply in a new sense of lightness accompanying the realization that they don't need to take life quite so seriously, all of these teachers' experiences are mirrored in their teachings. Look for this openness and non-physical flexibility when you seek out a teacher. After all, any teacher can direct you, but a common attribute of really *great* teachers is their talent in directing you back to yourself.

Nischala Devi repeats a common theme: you're drawn to particular teachers whose message resonates in you. It's critical to ask yourself whether that resonance comes out of awe of someone else or whether it arises out of your recognition of the teacher's intention, with humility and clarity, to help students find their *own* voices.

The Wizard was not a charlatan; he wasn't a fake. Once Dorothy and her friends realized he was just a mortal, they were able to hear and accept his *real* teaching. They all found that what they were looking for was with them all along: they were home already, and there really is no place like home.

Take your yoga home with you; it's been there all along.

CHAPTER 20:

Flexing Your Self-Trust Muscles

Imagine going to an alignment kissing school: ‘put your lips here... move that corner of your mouth this way...the lower lip up... now the upper lip down...etc.’ Learning the basics is a good thing. But eventually you have to go with what feels right.

—*Erich Schiffmann*

Yoga has the potential to remove what Dan Siegel calls the “focused light of fear” with the open light of intuition. Everything lights (and lightens) up. But, since most of us haven’t been using intuition much for many years, it’s not always easy to know where to look.

“The one simple thing I do is to help people to listen to their bodies. The body has knowledge the mind doesn’t have. I try to create a space to not struggle.”

—*Saul David Raye*

In addressing the simple reality of the Five Not-So-Noble-Truths, I may have over-used the “it’s not rocket science” metaphor. So to all the yogis and yoginis out there who also happen to be astrophysicists, my sincere apologies for the over-simplification. Yet, rocket science is like a sandbox compared with the variety of systems in the human organism that must work in tandem to allow you to find and trust your intuition on a regular basis. If one of the links isn’t integrated, the resulting choices often lead not to decisions looked back on as correct but rather as disasters, the emotional train wrecks that humans end up in over and over again.

One result of the tendency to repeat old patterns is self-flagellation. Instead of learning to access and train intuition, you learn to doubt yourself and to look outside for guidance. Whether they are the rules of alignment, a mother's point of view, a boss's pontificating, or the church's admonitions, outside experts become arbiters instead of mentors. It's not that your intuition failed you. It's simply that you couldn't find it and listened instead to the wrong message.

What needs to happen so you can use the intellect to refocus attention on the presence of bodily balance or tension? How do you train intuition? Milarepa was a dedicated Tibetan Buddhist and poet in the 11th century. One of his longtime students asked what the secret to life was. How did Milarepa do it? After many days of being asked the question, Milarepa suddenly turned around, dropped his pants, and pointed to the calluses on his bottom.

“Eighty percent of success is just showing up.”

—Albert Einstein (*often quoted by and attributed to Woody Allen*)

Just showing up may be the best advice. Have you ever noticed that after a lifetime of contemplative work, it's still called "practice"? I've never heard teachers say they're going to do meditation perfection. Malcolm Gladwell is the latest author to discover this basic truth. It takes practice to get good at anything. His magic number is 10,000 hours and it seems to cut across all disciplines, including the Five Not-So-Noble-Truths. No wonder Lightening Up is so important. This is work. But it's also play.

“Every musician makes mistakes and will hit a bad note.
A good musician knows what note to hit next.”

—Aloudin Mathieu

During your years of practice, an attitude of self-acceptance is the key to accessing intuition, specifically because it is a long process. To develop intuition—that capacity to know at a level beyond the intellectual the right thing to do on a regular basis—requires re-training the self-trust muscles. It requires the same perseverance and

diligence as the 10,000 hours required to become exceptional and to transform a skill into an art form. It is boot camp for the brain. But it can't be done without the body.

“Everybody gets so much information all day long
that they lose their common sense.”

—Gertrude Stein

Some in the scientific community would argue that we often misinterpret fear as intuition simply because the neural underpinnings of intuition (an ability to access the truth in a situation without conscious reasoning) developed when proto-humans were living in a much less complex world with fewer variables to be considered.

“ Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.”

—Yogi Berra

However, there is a much different way of viewing this apparent shortcoming. It goes to the heart of what yoga is all about. It is not that your intuition comes up short. Rather it is that you misinterpret (in a neurological sense) the messages that internal bodily states send to the brain. When you are not clear that your ego is pulling the strings, its sneaky creativity will often con you into believing you're on the right path. See if that path leaves you feeling more balanced and calm over time. That's the test.

“At every juncture there are all these storylines converging in our heads. You have all these choices but you have to be able to let go of your preexisting conclusions in order to come to the kind of discrimination that allows you to be neutral.”

—Richard Freeman

By intentionally focusing on the physical sensations occurring in the body during yoga, and reflecting on the mental reactions to those sensations, you are in a place to

discover the difference between what your intuition is saying and the stories your ego is telling you. In order to achieve this differentiation, asana practice can't be static, and it can't be focused on achieving a particular outcome. Yoga must be an experiment. It must be an exploration of what is actually happening in the mind and body, on a moment-by-moment basis. Then you can validate whether your choices lead to a greater sense of harmony, balance, and well-being on and off the mat. This is the ability to find truth without resorting to conscious reasoning. This is training intuition.

“If my sense of efficacy in yoga is based solely on my ability to master these postures then I am pursuing something which is by its nature, extremely temporary. Peace of mind, equanimity, the ability to remain balanced in face of changing conditions, the ability to connect with other people, are the most important results of asana practice.”

—Leslie Kaminoff

Whether your tendency is to look through the lens of yoga, Buddhism, or neurophysiology, the message is the same. You can be directed by the instinctual reactions of fight or flight, by the ego's use of your planning and calculating mind, or by your intuition. Finding and trusting intuition requires remaining fearlessly present so you can distinguish. Only then can you observe whether habitual patterns are blocking your ability to trust your internal messages. You must begin in small ways to test the premise that your intuition is accessible and has your best interests at heart. It takes practice to find and trust what is often little more than common sense, but start with small steps.

The power of the inner voice, of intuition, is not some new age mumbo jumbo. It is a very real ability tied directly to your neurophysiology. It is always present in the homeostatic balance of the whole body. But since you have, for the most part, paid minimal attention to maintaining this balance, your inner voice of truth is often drowned out by the voice of habit or fear. How often have you wondered if your inner voice is fear or intuition? If there's a doubt, the body is out of balance.

*“The mind can assert anything and pretend it has proved it.
My beliefs I test on my body, on my intuitional consciousness,
and when I get a response there, then I accept.”*

—D.H. Lawrence

The self-trust training regimen that reactivates intuition is not as simple as going through a weight training circuit at the gym. Just breathing deeply or thinking about compassion won't overcome years of negative thoughts. Besides, there's no beginning or end. All the stages have to be integrated. But you are given a window into the integration by paying attention to your heart. You can't go wrong by making sure there's no tension in the muscles that surround the heart, and by deepening the breath to lower the heart rate.

“Find a way to slow down, find a way to relax, find a way to relax your mind, and do it often, very, very often.”

—Pema Chodron

Then what is required is the courage to listen to the messages that relaxed state creates in the mind, and to intentionally choose the next place to go with your body based on those messages. The prerequisite is a calm body. Then mental choices will be intuitive and not ego driven. You'll begin to make choices on the mat—and in your life—that will leave you feeling wiser. Since you'll be right more often, this will lead you to a new relationship with yourself, and to self-acceptance. Over time, that same sense occurs in relationship to others. This is neither magic nor rocket science. It's simply accepting what is, and choosing what comes next based on that knowledge.

“Part of the yogic journey is about training intuition. Lightening up is essential. The fundamental dharma of all individuals is to be happy.”

—Gary Kraftsow

So how does this conception of the importance of intuition relate to the rules of alignment? If you are to follow intuition, does that turn your practice into a free-for-all? Certainly not, and by looking at a different art form (for yoga is an art as well as a skill), the interdependent roles of rules and intuition will be evident.

For this perspective, I'm indebted again to Mark Perlman, whose experience as an art teacher has direct parallels to accessing intuition in yoga. Mark's medium is

the ancient technique of encaustic painting, using heat to mix wax with pigments. Mark creates complex abstract works of art, but he is also a skilled realist. To him the rules of drawing are essential to the art of painting.

When teaching drawing, Mark emphasizes the twin components of rules and intuition. He stresses that both require training and both are necessary to create art. Both things are operating at all times, yet they often seem to be in conflict. If they can be viewed as paradoxical rather than contradictory, their interdependence emerges.

Mark uses the example of learning to draw the human form. On the one hand, it is essential to learn proportion. The relationship between various body parts falls within a fairly narrow range for all human figures. Not knowing those rules makes any attempt to recreate a human form inelegant. But if we only pay attention to the rules, then the result, while proficient, seldom rises to the level of art. Equally important is the ability to trust the movement of the hand. It requires the student to be non-judgmental, fluid, and not to be stymied by fear. Mark is not teaching anything new here. He simply tries to help his students remove the barriers created by self-doubt.

“We are fearing something in the present that was only dangerous in the past. We are still afraid of what is no longer fearsome.”

—David Richo, Ph.D.

A drawing student relearns the self-trust of a child, of a beginner, and in so doing learns to allow natural intuition to guide the hand. The only way this talent can be learned is simply by doing. It evolves by allowing broad, fluid arm movements, and most of all, by a willingness to make mistakes.

The real trick is to bring these two seemingly disparate skills together. If there's too much freedom it looks, in Mark's words, “good but uninformed.” If it's all measurement and proportion it looks “stiff and academic.” The best results come from an ongoing blending of the two, since they are two parts of a whole.

Using the drawing analogy as a guide, think of exercising your self-trust muscles as a new kind of calisthenics, designed to help you relearn what you always knew, while at the same time developing a new skill. You learned not to trust your

intuition. But that learning is not hard-wired. You can *unlearn* it. It might take 10,000 hours, so there's no better time to start than right now.

“Don’t let the noise of other’s opinions drown out your inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition”

—Albert Einstein

My son and I learned to ski at about the same time. He was four years old, and skiing seemed as natural as his only recently acquired ability to walk. He learned with his body. I was 29 and tried to learn with my brain. About ten years later, we stood on a cornice at the top of KT-22, 9,000 feet above sea level, looking down at the cobalt blue of Lake Tahoe in the scarce January air. This particular ski run at Squaw Valley is named in honor of its narrow steepness and the 22 kick turns required to make it safely to the bottom, a kick turn requiring the irrational experience of purposefully thrusting one's body as far from terra firma as possible, making it possible to reverse direction prior to jamming the edges of one's skis back onto the acute slope. Faith affords the momentary illusion of control before the next patellar ejaculation once more raises the hope of gravitational release. Otherwise, KT-22 is often negotiated as God meant it to be: ass-over-backwards if one is fool enough to try.

That day, the blue sky was fractured by rainbows of frost. The cornice had built up overnight so we seemed to stand with ski tips hanging in space. I couldn't catch my breath from fear and cold. My only consolation was that if I lost control of my lower gastrointestinal functions, the results would probably freeze.

My paternal macho failed me. As a child I had a recurring dream of flying off cliffs into the sea. The initial stark terror always gave way to a warm womb of release as I floated down to my bed on the ocean floor. But as I stood atop the cornice, unable to see what was just below me, memory and faith failed. “You expect me to go down *that?*” I asked the question as if he were the adult. “My stomach is churning. I can’t breathe. My heart is pounding. I mean this is really scary.” I managed a weak smile.

He looked up at me with his goggles resting on his forehead. His crystal blue eyes saw something I never would. “I know,” he said, “isn’t it great?” He pulled his goggles down and jumped into the abyss.

Before retreating down a safer route, I watched his skis send arcs of snow into the wind. He used the mountain as an ally, disappearing into his own plume. He’d

learned or perhaps had never forgotten to love the sweet ache of uncertainty, the fire that burns in your belly when you don't know what's coming next. He wanted the delicious pain I'd run from most of my life.

His was exactly the same bodily experience as mine, but he defined it in a way that allowed actual experience to guide him. I defined it completely differently because my mental reactions interpreted the experience and kept me separated from it.

Attitude is Everything.

Your intuition is with you always. Your genes are programmed to lead you in the direction of increased health. There's no need to try too hard. Just remember your invisible shield and then slow down, pay attention, breathe, relax, and most of all, lighten up.

Afterword

“Damn Everything But the Circus”

—*ee cummings*

“Lately I’ve noticed a disturbing tendency to accept things just as they are”

— Roberto Belaño, *Savage Detectives*

“O wondrous creatures, by what strange miracle
do you so often — not smile.”

—Hafiz, (*courtesy of Wes Nisker*)

“Start slow...then taper off”

—Harry Truman

Life is Good

by sacha
eckes



He's been so sweet since his operation

Yoga Dana Foundation was formed in 2007 as a not-for-profit charitable organization whose mission is to support yoga teachers who bring yoga to underserved communities. Yoga Dana Foundation invests in grantees that have a deep commitment to yoga and the sharing of its benefits.

Spirit Rock Meditation Center is dedicated to the teachings of the Buddha as presented in the vipassana tradition. Spirit Rock provides silent meditation retreats, as well as classes, trainings, and Dharma study opportunities for new and experienced students from diverse backgrounds with a willingness to develop their own practice.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Sacha Eckes was born here and there, everywhere and nowhere between Berkeley, CA and Bruges, Belgium. She's also an artist, and cartoonist (she drew "Life is Good" for *The San Francisco Chronicle* for five years) and when she's not sweating the small stuff, she's in her studio throwing paint around trying to forget that she spends too much time sweating the small stuff. She currently lives in Antwerp with her boyfriend Jan and her three-year-old son August Jay and V, the cat. She moved back to Belgium from San Francisco five years ago. She likes to make people laugh because there's just too much serious stuff in this world.

With a healthy dose of Desikachar and Buddhism, neurophysiology, anatomy, and a good deal of common sense, as well as interviews with some of America's leading yoga teachers, *Lightening Up: The Yoga of Self-Acceptance* takes you on a journey to the essence of this ancient practice. It offers a humorous yet serious antidote to the performance and achievement orientation common to many contemporary classes, and might be seen as a training manual for accessing intuition and trusting your body's wisdom.

"Spiritual practice is neither an athletic competition nor a grim duty. It is meant to open your body and spirit to mystery and love. *Lightening Up: The Yoga of Self-Acceptance* can help show you how."

—Jack Kornfield, author: *A Path with Heart*

"Tony skillfully and humorously disarms the rampant fallacies of many modern yoga enthusiasts. He redirects us to yoga's true roots, a genuine path of self-acceptance and self-realization."

—Sarah Powers, author: *Insight Yoga*

"This is a sincere and heartfelt book, beautifully expressing the self-healing power of yoga. Wolff reminds us to go inside, to trust and accept ourselves. I recommend it as a wonderful source of inspiration."

—Saul David Raye, Director, Ritam Healing Arts

"Tony Wolff's *Lightening Up: The Yoga of Self-Acceptance* provides a much-needed antidote to modern yoga's often aggressive and self-critical approach to practice. Its essential message can be summed up simply as: BE HAPPY BE YOURSELF."

—Richard Rosen, Director, Piedmont Yoga and author: *Original Yoga*

"Wolff blends just the right amount of neuroscience, yoga philosophy, personal reflections, and anatomy to make me want to whip out my notebook and start jotting things down. This wise and funny book should enjoy a prominent place on everyone's yoga bookshelf."

—Linda Sparrowe, Editor-in-Chief, *Yoga International*



TONY WOLFF is a former achievement addict, recovering from a career of pursuing the American Dream. He initially approached yoga with the same competitive zeal he used to acquire material success. But a funny thing happened along the way: he stopped enjoying the practice. After years of injury and dissatisfaction, The Five Not-So-Noble Truths emerged: Slow Down, Pay Attention, Breathe, Relax, and Lighten Up. Tony spends a lot of time sitting on his *zafu* at his home in Big Sur, and talks about this stuff to anyone who cares to listen.

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