

Beginning to See Beyond the Mat

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All I remember about my first yoga class is the ceiling. We were in a large room with wooden floors, upstairs at the Student YMCA/YWCA in Austin, Texas, and the year was 1970. It was an hour that would change my life, not only by igniting my love of yoga but also by starting me on the path of a profession I love – teaching yoga.

At that first class, we would lie down between each of the poses and rest. I found this perplexing because we didn't seem to be "doing anything." Nevertheless, after class I felt refreshed and more alive, so much so that the next morning I practiced what I remembered from the class, and have been practicing daily ever since.

What struck me from that first experience, besides the conscious resting, was the thought that went through my head repeatedly during class: "Ahh, here is someone (the teacher) who knows that movement is sacred, that it is a form of worship." Asana felt like a form of worship for me right from the beginning. This combination of movement and worship was something I had longed for during the Sundays I had spent in church worshipping in more traditional ways. Specifically, I longed for a deep sense of connection with something beyond myself, some sense of why I was here on the planet.

In that very first class, specifically during the practice of Savasana (deep relaxation) I was instructed to watch the flow of my thoughts. That was a very "new thought" for me, and introduced to me what I believe is the single most important thing that any human being can learn. That learning is "I am not my thoughts". I certainly have thoughts; they tumble forth one after the other endlessly through my day, my practice of asana, and during part of my formal seated meditation practice.

But lying in Savasana that first class, I was instructed to and in fact did began to, observe my thoughts. I began to understand on an experiential level that my thoughts and my consciousness are separate. This understanding is the root of the freedom or moksha about which the scriptures teach. This learning was the first of many gifts I have received from my yoga practice. And it started at that very first class.

After I began practicing I began to seek out every book I could find on the topic of yoga. I read practice books which were written for the general public as well as more esoteric books which were seemingly written in some sort of code for the students of antiquity. While I read many tomes about the various states of samadhi, I made the novice's assumption that I could attain this state of bliss simply by following the "recipe" of asana, pranayama and meditation. So I hurled myself at the task with enthusiasm and confidence. I also believed samadhi would not be a gradual thing, but instead a sudden and complete transformation. I strove for this state with passion; I held poses for excruciatingly long periods, I chanted, I practiced what I thought was meditation and I sought out a teacher in India. While I learned a lot "about" yoga, strangely not that much evolved inside me. I became convinced that samadhi was not available to me after all. I got caught up instead in raising children and teaching classes, gradually deciding that this lifetime was about different things for me.

Paradoxically, one day while practicing I had an experience of total stillness. At last! I have "got" it I exalted. Of course this experience faded in a few minutes and that left me in greater despair. Then a few weeks later while watching a gymnastics class for our children with a yoga student, I mentioned this despair. She casually said, "Maybe you are just becoming a Buddhist." Lightning bolts shot through me. Once again I began to study another ancient teaching, to read and practice with fervor. This all felt so familiar. And besides my intense enthusiasm what was also familiar was that I still was not immune from getting angry with my husband, impatient with my children or having thoughts of disappointment in myself. I was caught in the conundrum of believing that I needed to be different, that the way I was right now was not all right, but at the same time not being able to change the way I was with devoted spiritual practice.. Eventually I began to understand that it was this very non-acceptance that was keeping me stuck in my patterns.

With this awareness about self-judgment growing in me, slowly I have noticed that the fruits it has produced are that I have more minutes, and occasionally, hours of ease. I am becoming less quick to judge myself and others. I have learned that compassion is not something I can do, but is instead something that arises spontaneously in me. I have also learned that when I act from the heart of compassion I will help people I will never even meet through the ever-widening circles of compassion that touch person to person. Fundamentally, I now believe this simple truth to be the bedrock of all religions and spiritual teachings: choose kindness to self and others.

I still have a daily practice of asana, pranayama and meditation, and probably will for the rest of my life. But I now view these practices not so much as a means to an end but rather as a celebration of my life and spirit. I practice now not so much with ambition as with gratitude. And I ask myself frequently, "how can I express kindness right now?" whether I am in headstand or washing dishes.

While it might seem strange, what inspires me to practice is my increasing awareness of the fragility and shortness of life itself. More and more often I am acutely aware of the preciousness of this very moment. I am also comforted and reassured when I realize that the strongest force in the Universe, like a steel band that can stretch through time and across any distance, is the force of love. Beyond asana and meditation, beyond teaching and parenting and chopping carrots, is the inevitable, invincible and powerful force we call love. When I remember this, my heart opens and I am alive.

Practice for me has now become simply the deep willingness to be present with this grace, this love. I seem to learn that lesson over and over every day. When I do remember to access this space my suffering lessens just a little and my freedom increases the same amount. Maybe samadhi is given in bite-size pieces after all.

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