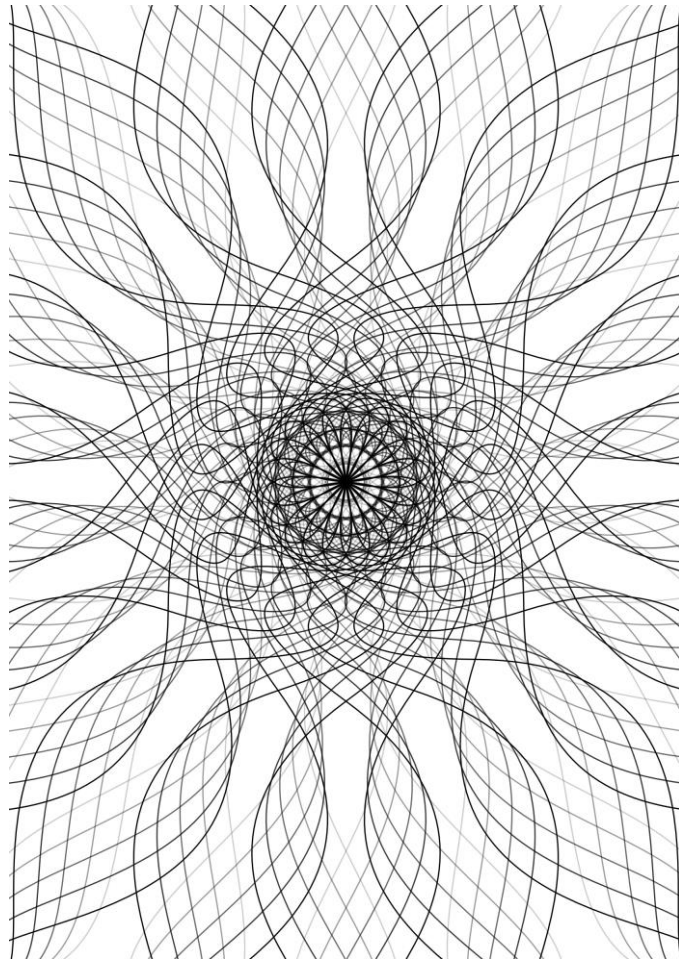


**SOFTENING AND LOOSENING  
TOWARDS TRANSFORMATION**  
*a manual for yin yoga*



Norman Blair

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# THE PAST OF YIN

*Mahabharata*  
14.48

“Some assert the primacy of meditation, other wise men that of sacrifice, and still others that of giving gifts. Some assert the existence of everything, while others deny that anything exists. With so much agreement regarding Dharma leading in so many directions, we become bewildered, O god supreme, unable to reach any certainty.”

*Yoga Sutras*  
2.2

“Great is the matter of birth and death; impermanence surrounds us. Be aware each moment; do not waste your life. Yoga's purpose is to cultivate the experience of equanimity and to unravel the causes of negativity.”

*Shankaracharya*  
8<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher

“Yoga asana is that in which meditation flows spontaneously and ceaselessly, not that which destroys happiness.”

*Tilopa*  
11<sup>th</sup>-century teacher

“Do nothing with the body but relax.”

*Hatha Yoga Pradipika*  
1.66

“Anyone who practices will obtain siddhis but without practice no one can obtain anything. Yoga is not mastered by merely reading books. Success in yoga is not obtained by wearing the dress of the yogi or by talking about them. Practice alone brings success, there is no doubt about that.”

*William James*  
19<sup>th</sup>-century psychologist

“Each of us literally chooses, by his way of attending to things, what sort of universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit”

*Krishnamacharya*

“(Janu Sirsasana)...one can stay with the forehead on the knee for between five minutes and half an hour.”

*Yoga Makaranda* 1935

*Sri K Pattabhi Jois*

“Some say that practitioners should stay in Sirsasana for only two to five minutes; otherwise harm could come to them. It must be stressed, however, that this is not correct, as the following scriptural saying attests: ‘*Yama matram vashe nityam* (we can dwell in sirsasana for three hours).”

*Yoga Mala* 1962

*BKS Iyengar*

“Supta baddhakonasana ... if you feel any strain while getting into the pose, use two bolsters instead of one ... with practice increase the duration to 5-10 minutes.”

*Yoga: The path to holistic health 2001*

*Biff Mithoefer*

“The heart of practice itself is not in the structure or dogma or even in the postures themselves. It is in our experience of the practice.... Yoga is not a system to change us; it is a celebration of who we really are.”

*Sarah Powers*

“Unless you are training the mind, it’s not yoga — yoga is about being free on all levels.”

*Paul Grilley*

“I have had no visions or clairvoyance about the future or discovered if there is a god. My progress is primarily that I enjoy sitting, I enjoy being calm, I can hear the subtle sounds of the inner world. I am no longer as ambitious. I do not think I have arrived at a high spiritual state but it is an improvement from where I was.”

*Moby*

“Yoga has certainly turned the volume down on the more desperate thoughts.”

I first wrote this manual in 2007; since then it has changed a lot. Each subsequent year I have altered and evolved its contents. I first did a downwards dog in 1991 — since then that has changed a lot. What was a great challenge has become much more comfortable. This practice of yoga has many variations and versions — and of course has changed a lot: from dreadlocked mystics sitting in a Himalayan cave, it is now an everyday technique in mainstream health centres and gyms.

As these quotes from the *Mahabharata* to Moby clearly demonstrate, there are different ways to practice yoga. One researcher has stated that “hatha yoga postures were held for a long time” (Mark Singleton). When practitioners were advised by Krishnamacharya to hold janu sirsasana for up to half an hour, he was also suggesting they hold their breath during this time. Paul Grilley talked of “yin is the classic way of practicing yoga”. However, this is debatable as many hatha yoga systems emphasise bandhas and drishti which are not prominent in a yin yoga practice. And it is common for teachers to claim that their system is ‘classical’ as a way of establishing authenticity.

The original postures of modern yin yoga came from Paulie Zink, a martial arts teacher in Los Angeles. Paul Grilley studied with him in 1987 and then taught Sarah Powers who attended his class after her morning dynamic/ashtanga practice. In 1990 Paul first met Dr Hiroshi Motoyama who has subsequently been influential on both his and Sarah’s teachings.

Paul had been calling this ‘Taoist yoga’ which reflected his own background and interests. But when Sarah started teaching this practice in 1996, she called it ‘yin yoga’: this is what it has become popularly known as. In 2002 Paul published his book *Yin Yoga — outline of a quiet practice* and Sarah first taught it at Triyoga in London.

Since then, both have brought out DVDs and taught widely across the world. My first yin yoga class was in November 2001 and it was at that Triyoga workshop in July 2002 that I met Sarah Powers. I began teaching the long yin sessions in February 2003 and attended a training jointly taught by Paul and Sarah in January 2004.

This is some of the background to yin yoga, another thread in the webs that we are weaving. However, it is important to remember the limits on how much yoga can change a person. We are highly dependent on environmental circumstances, such as fulfilling relationships and beneficial living conditions. The failure to address these limits can lead to unrealistic expectations and an assuming that yoga is a magic wand. Yet at the same time yoga has great potential: through its practice, there is an encouraging of embodiment so we are more able to reside in body.

For many of us, there is this missing of our own being. There is a cultural emphasis of cranium, and we are stuck in this head while neglectful of body. By residing more in body experience, there can be a natural curiosity and possibilities for developing skills such as insightfulness, non-judging and kindness. Then we might become more able to connect with what the mythologist Joseph Campbell described as “feel[ing] the rapture of being alive”. And in addition, skilful exercising of body is a way of softening the inevitable trajectory of this tissue to tighten over time.

It has to be emphasised that there are many paths towards this transformation: paths such as psychotherapy, bhakti devotion, different forms of meditating, group therapy. These paths will shift as we get older and become more proficient in practicing. This transforming could be expressed by an Emily Dickinson’s poem: “to live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else.”

# THE DEFINING OF YIN...

*Ken Wilber*

“In addition to learning how to take control and assume responsibility, a person also needs to learn when and how to let go, to surrender, to go with the flow and not resist or fight it. Letting go versus taking control — this is, of course, just another version of being versus doing, that primordial polarity of yin and yang that assumes a thousand different forms and is never exhausted. It’s not yin or yang [that] is right, that being is better than doing — it’s a question of finding the right balance, the natural harmony between yin and yang that the ancient Chinese called the Tao — between doing and being, controlling and allowing, resisting and opening, fighting and surrendering, willing and accepting.”

There are numerous different philosophical and practical systems for explaining this world. A system with its origins in China uses the terms of yin and yang and these terms have become part of western vocabulary. Their essence is that everything has two qualities — yin and yang — and these qualities are always in relationship to each other (so what has been yin can become yang and what has been yang can become yin). We could generalise and describe yang as bright, warm, soft, moving and changing — and yin as dark, cold, hard, solid and unchanging. An example of yang is a warm, bright, open hilltop — and an example of yin is a cool, dark, hidden cave. The sunnier side of a hill is yang, the more shaded side is yin. In body terms, below the navel is the yin part.

When there is a balance, there is health and harmony — when there is imbalance, there is disease and disharmony. Most forms of modern yoga are ‘yang’ in their approach: dynamic and engaged, muscular and repetitive. An irony of this approach is that there can be a marginalising of the meaning of that word ‘asana’: a standard translation of which is “seat” or “to be here”.

This modern yoga partially reflects modern society: achieving, rushing, striving. There are the worryings and the wantings, all these wanderings. We are living in a world that is dominated by yang energies where our behaviour is habitually dictated by the brain’s left hemisphere. We hurry from here to there, trying to get somewhere or grab something or be someone, fuelled by caffeine and chocolate, emotionally consuming soap operas and *Crimewatch*, our commuting dash supported by a diet of fast food.

In this yang world, our flight/fight response is too frequently stimulated; this is the sympathetic nervous system that has been essential for survival as a species but is now being significantly overused. It is this part of body which shouts out “fire!” and reinforces defensiveness. In contrast, the parasympathetic system tends towards generosity and connection — seeing what we share rather than seeking difference and division. It has been termed ‘rest and digest’ or ‘tend and befriend’.

One description of modern society is a “24/7 run from the tiger” — but there are very few actual tigers. A widespread complaint is anxiety and exhaustion, being worn down by it all. In this sympathetic system society, we see many fears and can be dominated by left-brain hemisphere (the place of doing and recalling and judging and planning).

By becoming more balanced, a consequence could be that instead of perceiving a rope as the snake (which often we do), we can see a rope as a rope and on the rare occasion there is a snake — we see it as a snake.

Perhaps an addition of more yin practices — with their calming and cooling, slowing and surrendering — could help in a small way to resolve this modern unease: more at rest in the natural default setting of the parasympathetic nervous system where there can be an attitude of relaxed acceptance and a cultivating of gratitude.

## **YIN AND YANG**

The following may help to explain these concepts of yin and yang.

<b>YIN</b>	<b>YANG</b>
Inner	Outer
Slower	Faster
Cooler	Warmer
Darker	Brighter
Connective tissue	Muscular tissue
Surrendering	Fighting
Intuitive	Reason
Revering	Ruling
Moon	Sun
Midnight	Midday
Water	Fire
Soft	Hard
Sadness	Anger
Female	Male
Beingness	Evolution
Willing acceptance	Inspiration towards improvement
Receptive and allowing	Dynamic and engaging
Autumn/winter	Spring/summer
Paschimtonasana	Purvottanasana
Child's pose	Down dog
Slow and steady	Rhythmical and repetitive
Right brain	Left brain
Parasympathetic	Sympathetic

As Ken Wilber said, it's not that one is better (or worse) — it's about bringing into balance, being in balance. And by being in balance, we can see more clearly: moving from an experience of fragmentation to a place of focus where instead of agitation, there is awareness; rather than confusion, there is clarity. This awareness and clarity can help us to work out what works — what is most beneficial to us in living our lives. We can realise for ourselves that crucial balancing between engagement and ease, appreciating and action.

Of course, there are dangers of yin yoga being just another brand in the market — another piece of skilful marketing. The yoga market has numerous brands: anusara yoga, ashtanga yoga, Bikram yoga, car-crash yoga, core power yoga, dynamic flow yoga, forest yoga, hatha yoga, hot yoga, hot yoga barre, hot yoga by candlelight, iyengar yoga, jivamukti yoga, Jois yoga, Kashmiri yoga, kundalini yoga, power yoga,

quantum yoga, restorative yoga, Scaravelli-inspired yoga, Sivananda yoga, soya yoga, sports yoga, viniyoga, yin yoga, yogafit, yogapilates... (two of those are made up — only two though).

## **PRACTICING AND LIVING**

The boundaries can deepen, the labels becoming stuck, the sects institutionalising: a practice of liberation becomes the dogma of division. As Dr Motoyama has stated: “We need to let go of our sectarian neuroses.” The key is: how can practice help us in living our lives — and what works for one person does not necessarily work for another person and what works at one stage of life does not necessarily work in another stage. Does this practice encourage qualities such as insightfulness and kindness? And if it does not, then we need to either change how we are practicing or change the practice itself. This requires an ability to look at our life without sentimentality, exaggeration or idealism: to have integrity and intelligence.

When practicing yin yoga, phrases that describe this experience are terms such as melting, unfolding, releasing, yielding, centring, easing, internalising, feeling, slowing, surrendering, merging, sinking, allowing, pouring, softening, calming, exploring... What kind of terms describe your experience when practicing yin? Are we able to use this tool as a way of increasing vocabulary of body? Instead of ambitions, can there be an attentiveness? Can we let go of certainties like those caterpillars that said they would never become butterflies? There could be delightfulness of uncertainty and there could be intimacy with immediacy... Could we just breathe and relax and enjoy being just where we are...



# GUIDES TO PRACTICING

One of the joys of yin yoga is its simplicity: you do not need a mat and it is possible to practice relatively soon after eating a meal (though that will influence how you are practicing). There are different ways of practicing the same postures — for example, doing a wall yin practice (the shapes against a wall like dragonfly, eye of the needle and happy baby). Or doing sphinx with lower legs vertical (such as a pressing into a wall). In saddle, if we place a bolster under the lower back it becomes more restorative — whereas if it is under the shoulders, there is greater emphasising of the lumbar area and its associated meridians (such as the stomach and kidney).

There is neither a list of ever more complicated postures (there are about 30 poses) nor beginner/intermediate/advanced practices: you just get on and do it. The entire practice can be succinctly summarised by seven words: “above the knees and below the navel”. Sarah Powers has a lovely description: “unhurried postures unstained by striving”. There is not a list of do’s and don’ts but there are some general guidelines to practicing yin that differentiate the practice from other forms.

A good start is to investigate the location of stretch and the sensation of stretch. The location (place, where) is crucial because what is perhaps acceptable in one part of the body — the hips, the thighs — is unacceptable in another part — the knees, the neck. And then there is the issue of tissue: the actual sensation of the stretch. If the sensation is burning or sharply stabbing or electrical or if it is particularly intense in a small area, then this can indicate overstretching and damaging of tissue. If the sensation is more dull or aching or throbbing, then this normally indicates tissue is being tugged in a healthy method. If a sensation that might be termed ‘tingling’ occurs, that could be a sign of damaging a nerve. Sensations being the voice of this guru within: an approach beautifully expressed by the novelist Tim Parks who discovered meditation could be an answer to his physical discomfort — “awareness has to plunge into the flesh”. There is this raw data of sensations...

In becoming aware of physical sensations, let go of labels such as ‘hurt’ or ‘pain’ — because these automatically increase the mental resistance — and use more neutral phrases such as ‘intensity’. This avoids adding mental resistance to the already existing physical resistance. There is intensity without too much tension: we avoid sensations going beyond the boundaries of being bearable. We are aware of the volume of these sensations: avoid that which is too loud and focus on subtle as well as strong. Can there be an experiencing of sensations just with their patterns of arising/existing/passing away? This situation of skilfully sailing the seas of sensations — so is there a quality of quietness and a sense of stillness in shapes? Is there an experience of sustainability so we can stay without undue straining?

*Jon Kabat-Zinn*      “When you see and feel sensations you are experiencing as sensations, pure and simple, you may see that these thoughts about the sensations are useless to you at that moment and that they can actually make things worse than they need be... We are simply inviting ourselves to interface with this moment in full awareness, with the intention to embody as best we can an orientation of calmness, mindfulness, and equanimity right here and right now.”

The breath is a great guide — breathing as a beautiful barometer for possibilities within body. In yin (as nearly all forms of yoga), the emphasis is on deepening and lengthening the breath and there is also a direction of breathing into places of tightness. The length of breath is more important than the length of hamstrings, the slowness of breathing is more important than the strength of shoulders. This is not a strong ujjayi breath — there is subtlety to the style of breathing so that the only person who can hear the breath is the person practicing. See the chapter ‘On breath and breathing’ for more details.

There is a conscious turning inward — a turning towards our current circumstances. This is an investigation of body as it actually is so we are becoming conscious of content rather than a fixation on form. A guide for the yin yoga experience is being slow and being steady — so there is softness and sustainability. We practice quietly and gently, so present are qualities like patience, kindness and dedicated effort. We stay reasonably still in the shapes without agitation or anxiety. This has been called the Goldilocks approach: she came to the house where there were three beds — one was too hard, one was too soft, one was just right. So neither too hard nor too soft: the middle way where there is an ability to sustain that stillness. In this middle way, there are possibilities of pliancy and becoming more pliable and this helps to develop our resilience.

A writer on food described the art of cooking as practice, patience and presence. The same is true for the art of yoga. To be successful — to experience the potential of softening and loosening — we have to take our place on the mat and get on with it: with practice, with patience, with presence.

## **PRACTICAL GUIDELINES**

- ❖ *Relaxing*: unlike the yang practices, in yin yoga we consciously relax the muscular tissue of the body: disengaging the front thighs, relaxing the feet. This enables us to access the yin aspect of physicality: connective tissue. We access yin tissue through slowness and steadiness rather than rhythm and repetition. Yet in the relaxing of muscular tissue, it’s not that we just fall forwards — for example, in forward bends there is a gentle lift before lowering: neither lengthening nor collapsing, neither over-engaging nor flopping. At the start of a pose, we could focus on stretching the skin between navel and sternum. On occasion, we might need to consciously engage muscular tissue: such as to protect knees in dragonfly or to stabilise the back in sphinx. If we are very mobile in body (this is sometimes called ‘hyperflexible’), there has to be much more emphasis on engaging muscularity. This is a good example of the requirement for individual instructing.
- ❖ *Time*: it is suggested that the postures are held for longer than one minute and less than twenty minutes. Research indicates that there are no further physical benefits to be gained from holding a posture longer than twenty minutes. An average length of time is five minutes — beginners might hold for shorter periods and more experienced students for a longer time. And remember that the ultimate authority is the practitioner — so if you want to change posture before the time is up, then listen to your own experience. Yet be mindful in that listening and avoid rushing out just because you perceive sensations as “too strong”: investigate that perception before acting.

- ❖ *Mindful edge*: each person has their own edge and this edge will be different in different postures and on different days. The edge should be approached slowly and with awareness and then held without fidgeting (so there is a reasonable level of stillness in the shape) or trying to fix (an attitude of acceptance). After some time at this place, perhaps there is a realisation that the edge may have shifted, allowing the posture to become deeper — or a calm recognising that you have to actually ease away from this edge.
- ❖ *Balance*: it is important to balance the forward bends with backbending (and acknowledge there are at least 20 yin poses that are forward flexion in their quality and much fewer that are of back extending).

## **INFORMING GUIDELINES**

- ❖ *Letting go*: letting go of wanting to be better, letting go of wanting to be somewhere else, letting go of planning tomorrow, letting go of that inner dialogue, letting go of tension around the area of sensation, letting go of the shoulders, letting go of what we think we are supposed to do, letting go of impressing and improving, letting go of frowns and forcing, letting go of ambition and aggression, letting go of contrasting and comparing, letting go of holding and trying to control. In this letting go, there can be a loosening of rigid views that are the enemy of intimacy. Much letting go to enable us to be here: as we actually are, in an experience of authenticity — where there is nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to get.
- ❖ *Gentleness*: or this might be called ‘loving-kindness’ — a great challenge for so many of us! To practice with kindness, to be gentle in how we practice, to ensure that we are not forcing beyond our natural limits nor competitively striving.
- ❖ *Patience*: to take our time in this practice, to be liberated from hurrying here and there. Yin is a great practice for emphasising patience simply because we spend so much time in each posture. Becoming patient in an impatient world is a very useful skill. And the practice of patience can arise from our ability to be kind. In the Buddha’s teachings, patience is one of the practices frequently taught.

# THE HUMAN BODY

Even after much research into the human body, most of what happens in it is still a mystery (that is one explanation for the changing fads in diet and exercise). The human body can perhaps be best described as layers within layers, tubes within tubes, nets within nets. There are over 200 bones in the body, about 150 joints, more than 600 muscles (in the face alone there are 43 distinct muscular movements which in combination can make about 3000 facial configurations which appear to have meaning). There is great complexity of body — as well as a diaphragm of abdomen, there are also diaphragms at pelvic floor, throat and brain....

There are pints of blood, dozens of organs, a network of nerves, a total of around 50—100 trillion cells. And an estimated one trillion of these cells are in the human nervous system. It needs to be emphasised that these cells are highly harmonious and work together to a great degree of co-operation: our internal landscape is very much one of co-operating rather than competition. A general view is that there are four kinds of tissue: epithelia (for example, skin); nervous; muscle; and connective tissue which sort of holds it all together.

In terms of resistance to movement (the range of motion), it is indicated by research that skin just causes 2%, tendon causes 10%, muscle and its fascia causes 41% and joint capsule/ligaments cause 47%. But there is not a sharp dividing line between one tissue and the next. As an example, the fascia becomes denser and becomes tendon that becomes bone.

Connective tissue (tendons, ligaments, fascia) holds together the bones, it coats the muscles, it covers the organs. It is the most dominant tissue in the body and the most overlooked. It has been described as “that ubiquitous elastic-plastic, gluey component that invests, supports and separates, connects and divides, wraps and gives cohesion to the rest of the body” (Leon Chaitow). Though there are distinct forms of tissue in the body, there is also significant overlap: for example, fascia can make up 30% of the mass of muscle (this is why muscle is more technically referred to as ‘myofascia’).

It is a misguided impression that the muscles, bones, blood system and nervous system are separate systems within body: everything is interconnected and all the tissues are working together. Through movement we compress, stretch and twist (this is termed compression, tension and shear). By these impacts, the tissue can be rejuvenated, massaged, hydrated — which is of course significantly beneficial to body.

In the womb, connective tissue is formed before the nervous system. Connective tissue is different from muscular tissue in density and has different properties: muscle fibres are made up of living cells whereas connective tissue is non-living tissue that is composed of bundles of protein fibres (in ligaments and tendons, they are arranged in tightly packed parallel bundles and in fascia, they form a network which is wrapping muscles and organs). There is some blood supply and some nerves but not to the extent that exists in muscles — and this is the reason why connective tissue takes longer to repair after injury than muscle.

In anatomy books, muscular tissue is often coloured red while connective tissue is coloured white (as an indicator of its more solid substance). And from our early 20s, the flow of fluids into this tissue diminishes which causes a gradual hardening and a

slow tightening. This means that unless there is movement, it is almost as though the body becomes suffocated in connective tissue. The arc of this life is from fluidity (being yin at birth — like a baby physically unable to hold up their own head) to stiffness (being yang at death — the rigidity of rigor mortis).

In yin yoga, we are allowing the deep connective tissue that surrounds hips and lower back to be gently stretched. Each of the yin yoga postures has a particular influence on the body: for example, butterfly is a gentle flexion of spine, a gentle external rotation of hips and a gentle abduction of thighs (note the word 'gentle' amongst the anatomical explanations). Butterfly can also help regulate menstrual cycles. In happy baby, we need to be sensitive in stretching when there are existing issues in the sacroiliac (SI) area. Conversely, saddle is recommended as beneficial for that area of the body. And in that saddle, it is easier for forward bend/open hip bodies to take knees wider.

Because we spend so much time sitting in chairs, there is a losing of the natural tilt of sacrum (tilting forwards as its top follows lumbar curvature). Often the sacrum begins to tilt backward and this can cause lower back discomfort and flattening of the lumbar. Saddle can be helpful for sacrum tilt and the SI area. And because we live in a world where frequently there are feelings of helplessness and insecurity, this can cause tension to the psoas musculature — postures like constructive rest and dragon could lessen this tension. Heart opening can be helpful for the middle and upper back as well as a way of stretching diaphragm (which assist our breathing) and could relieve headaches. Child's pose benefits the organs of digestion (partly through the action of compressing). Frog can be good for menstrual cramps.

It has been suggested that long holds in stretching may encourage parasympathetic activation partly through an influence on the vagus nerve (this is the major parasympathetic nerve and recent studies have shown that we have an ability to alter its 'tone'). In slowing down, we can realise the many different layers of this being. Through sustained investigation, we can begin to recognise that there are always more layers. There is an old saying from Africa: "the one in a hurry has no blessings".

## **INDIVIDUALITY OF ANATOMY**

A popular perception amongst yoga practitioners is that if only we practice enough, then this or that posture will become available to us. However, as Paul Grilley and other anatomists have demonstrated, the skeletal structure limits stretching. We cannot fundamentally vary the structure of our bones and the shape of our skeleton — though it has to be noted that after six months in space, some astronauts had lost up to 20% of their bone density.

When the restriction on movement is arising from tight muscular tissue, Paul calls this 'tension' and when the restriction arises from the skeletal structure, 'compression'. An example of compression is when we fully straighten the elbow and essentially it is bone impacting on bone. It could be called 'tensile restriction' in muscles and 'compressive restriction' in bones. Each person experiences tension and compression in different places, as there is significant individuality within our physical structures. This is not just a matter of height and weight, it is also a matter of angles and lengths, degrees and depths. Within the practice and teaching of yoga, it is essential that there is a conscious realisation of individuality in terms of human anatomy.

Paul Grilley

“Everyone’s bones are shaped differently — individual bones of the body conflict with the universal laws of alignment... we have to bring to yoga practice open mindedness”.

An example of skeletal limitations is the angle of the femur into the pelvis and the depth of the hip socket. Paul refers to his experience in a natural history store in Berkeley when he compared that angle and the depth: there were substantial differences. A few people can sit comfortably in postures such as padmasana straightaway (because of the significant external rotation in hips) and some people will never be able to sit in such a posture (because of their skeletal structure). But as Sarah Powers says, “in the end, floating on the lotus is more a state of mind than the accomplishment of any pose”. What is important is when attempting the achievement of a pose, we do not punish the extremities (for example, the knees) for what the axis (in this case, the hips) cannot give. This is another reason to focus more on the state of mind than the physical appearance of a posture. The internal processing is of essence, the external appearance is — broadly speaking — irrelevant and unimportant.

Another example of skeletal limitation is the lower spine (lumbar). This is the area from where most of the backbending movement comes. Nearly all of us have five discs here but a few people have either six or seven and for these people, it is likely that bending backwards would be more accessible than for someone with five. For deeper backbending, the spinal discs need to be thicker. If they are not, then the **spinous process** of the lumbar vertebra meet each other and limit extension.

There are *six different movements for spine*: flexion (bending forward), extension (bending backward), rotation to right, rotation to left, lateral flexion to right and lateral flexion to left. There are also six different movements for hips: flexion where the thigh moves towards the chest; extension where the thigh moves away from the chest; abduction where the leg moves away from the midline of body (so right leg moves towards right); adduction where leg moves towards midline (right leg moves towards left); internal rotation (right leg rotates to left); and external rotation (right leg rotates to right).

In terms of *specific postures*, this means:

<i>forward bend</i>	flexion of hips and flexion of spine
<i>dragonfly</i>	flexion of spine and abduction of hips
<i>saddle</i>	extension of spine and extension of hips (and there could also be internal rotating of hips if the heels are outside hips)
<i>spinal twist</i>	rotation of spine and abduction of bent leg
<i>shoelace</i>	some flexion of spine and external rotation and adduction of hips

It is important to acknowledge that there can be significant difference of perspective amongst anatomists — as much as there is individuality of anatomy, there is also certainly individuality of anatomists! One example is that some may suggest pulling flesh away from sit bones to enable forward folding and others state “do not pull the flesh away from the sitting bones, as this will overexpose the hamstring attachments at their most vulnerable place” (Mark Stephens, *Teaching Yoga*). I have heard anatomists recommend avoiding flexion of knees for more than five minutes and doing forward

bends for longer than that time. Personally, I have done postures for significant times in excess of those suggested limits — and so far, so good.

## YIN TISSUE AND YIN TECHNIQUES

When yin yoga became popular, there was criticism because of the emphasis on stretching connective tissue and talk of stretching the joints; some people thought that this would be damaging to the body. There is an opinion that considers muscles as the creators of movement and ligaments as the brakes. The suggestion was that by passively stretching ligaments, there is a wearing down of the brakes and this could make joints unstable. One perspective is that ligaments do not actually stretch. Obviously, there can be concerns but in fact, *all* biological tissues stretch. Ligaments are certainly not stretching as much as muscle but for ligaments to stay healthy, they have to be subjected to stress by a pulling on them. Ligaments do begin to dry and there is a contracting with age. This inevitable degeneration is accelerated by our sedentary lifestyles and the fact of so much time sitting in chairs. Just as a simple example of this, 10% of fluid is lost from the spine in the first two hours of sitting — which is why it can be so important to **try and touch toes first thing in the morning**.

What these criticisms miss is the emphasis on stretching yin tissue (connective tissue) through yin techniques (slow and steady, soft and sustained). There are many long-term practitioners who have followed this path of slow stretching and discovered considerable benefits for the body which are not so readily realisable in more dynamic practices. Again of course there is the importance of individuality (different strokes and different folks).

There is a belief that connective tissue is too inert to be stretched but research shows that tendons and ligaments can be lengthened. While it is certainly true that if a joint is overstressed, it will be damaged, it is equally true that if a joint is not stressed in any way, it can seize up. It is healthy for connective tissue to be stressed — as long as it is stretched with awareness. Stress through skilful stretching can lessen the weakening and wasting away of body where there is a degenerating of tissue. And through stretching there is a re-hydrating of this tissue and the joints.

The three most important factors for flexibility are:

- ❖ genetic structure;
- ❖ what a person was doing before the age of about 20; and
- ❖ how long they have been practicing (and how much they have been practicing).

These three factors determine what is possible in the level of physicality. Seeing as all are outside our control — we are born with our genetics and the other two apply to what has happened previously — we might as well practice without being attached to ‘achieving’ postures or becoming fascinated with flexibility. It is not about how far someone can bend backwards nor about how easily a person can sit in padmasana: it is about exploring possibilities, stretching the body (thereby maintaining a healthy body), stimulating this physicality and using the body as a laboratory — a path to transformation.

# HEART AND MIND

By being aware of the body, we become present. The body is always present, it is the mind that is wandering through memories and fantasies. Simply by being aware of the body, the mind becomes present: this is cultivating the capacity for concentration. Because the postures are held for long periods of time, it could be easier to develop awareness of body through practicing yin yoga. And over time, as we become increasingly aware of the body, we can become aware of thoughts and feelings. But it can be more accessible to be aware of the body than of thoughts because physical sensations are much slower to notice than mental formations. To put it simply, it is easier to centre ourselves in the physical body. And in this we could perhaps be connecting to the understanding of “to pay attention, this is our endless and proper work” (Mary Oliver).

Before we can free the mind, we need to find the mind. And by maintaining a sustained focus on physical sensations, we can observe the fluctuations of the mind, giving us a glimpse of awareness. One transformational system talks of the different applications (this can be called a ‘foundation’) of mindfulness — the third of these is mindfulness of mind. This is like doing a documentary of our own mind so we can actually see what messages we are making about ourselves. A poetic description of what is often happening for many of us is “the mind is more than capable of seeing a stationary blue car and constructing out of it a six act melodrama.”

As we begin to find this mind, we might realise how many of our thoughts are unnecessary (it has been suggested that up to 90% of thoughts could be classified as ‘unnecessary’). We maybe spend 10% of our time thinking about things we really need to think about and then spend the other 90% imagining, fantasising, becoming involved in all sorts of internal stories that have little basis in truth. There is almost always an automatic tensing when we think ahead and the mind is taken away from the moment.

On average, each of us has more than 60,000 thoughts every day and nearly all of these we have thought a thousand times before. It has been suggested that we have about 10 essential thoughts, such as I want, I don’t want, I am scared, I can beat him, and then almost endless variations of these basic patterns of thinking. One teacher claimed that the basic thought pattern was the near endless asking “what’s for dessert?”.

In this constant churning — a kind of computer chatroom located in the brain — we rarely realise that (in the words of Chandrakirti) “attachment to one’s beliefs, aversion for another’s views: all this is thought.” Thoughts that are forever changing and that are never fixed in these busy brains. The Harvard neuroscientist Steven Pinker described mind, as “our mental life is a noisy parliament of competing factions”. The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa talked of “the great collection of things in one’s mind”. Walt Whitman, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century poet, said, “I am vast, I contain multitudes”. This continual contact with content is both challenging and exhausting. Rather than the futurising and these other fluctuations, can we rest more in a presence that itself is not dominated by preferences of like/dislike? And finding and realising this mind allows us to cultivate a healthy appreciation of ourselves rather than feeding those thoughts and mental patterns that are harmful.



## AWARENESS

Through awareness — it can also be termed attention or mindfulness or noticing or observation — what was just a sequence of stretches can become a launching pad for liberation: each moment of genuine attention is a moment of wonder when we powerfully connect to being present. And in this presence there is a possibility to find what the psychologist Rollo May defined as “freedom is the capacity to pause between stimulus and response”. Between relaxation and alertness there can be a stability and growing capacity to just be with what is arising.

*Krishnamacharya*

“To act in a yogic way means we attend to what we are doing with impeccable attention. So attentiveness is the fundamental quality. No need for beliefs, simply be attentive to all actions and witness how we perceive things”.

This practice of awareness arises both from a place of effort and intensity and a place of lightness and relaxing. There is a simultaneous balance between being determined to maintain focus and a genuine ease in this focusing. And as we become aware of the body — being present, a capacity for concentration — this awareness requires an enriching with qualities such as loving-kindness and gentleness. A person can be extremely aware of the body while at the same time loathing this physical experience (for example, anorexics). One way of balancing is to encourage an approach of non-judgment: we are conscious of the body (that ache here, that throb there) without judging the body (why can't I touch my toes, I'm such a bad person because I can't stand on my head, I'm not good enough). The fact is whenever we judge, there is a closing down of possibilities and a cutting off of opportunities.

The more we practice through this non-judging, the more we can relax into our encountering of life so that instead of ceaseless striving, there can be a softening into what is as it is. There is an attitude of impartiality, a willingness to open towards experiences while at the same time lessening the identification with such experiences. When this happens, we can abide with all that arises, there is a spacious opening with which we meet each moment with qualities such as vibrancy and vividness — rather than the all too common dullness, drowsiness, disconnected, delusion, daydreaming. And there is that key quality of curiosity: being interested in what is arising, paying attention to our moment-by-moment experiencing.

*Charlotte Joko Beck*

“Joy has more to do with curiosity. Think of babies, crawling about, encountering all kinds of marvels: one can see the curiosity and wonder on their faces. They're not crawling about in order to absorb information, they're not trying to be better babies who can crawl more efficiently; in fact, they're not crawling for any reason. They are simply crawling for sheer enjoyment and curiosity. We need to regain the capacity to feel curiosity about everything in our life...through our efforts at self-protection, we've lost most of our curiosity about life. We need to approach our state of mind with curiosity and open wonder. That open, curious listening to life is joy — no matter what the mood of our life is. The ultimate reality - not only in our sitting but also in our lives — is joy”.

## ACCEPTANCE

An essential element in this approach is acceptance: accepting ourselves as we are. This doesn't mean being passive; as Ken Wilber wrote: "it helps me to accept the way things are ... but this doesn't lead to passivity since the emphasis is always on right effort while freeing oneself from craving and aversion". And Larry Rosenberg, another meditation teacher, pointed out how much of a link is between acceptance and change: "however practice is going, cherish it just the way it is, we may think that we want it to change but the act of acceptance in itself is a major change".

*Yoga sutras (santosha)* "Contentment brings supreme happiness" (2.42)  
"Contentment comes from mental well-being that moves us to consider the positive in all beings and situations. Often, our frustrations come from regrets, agitation, suffering or comparing ourselves with others. Focusing on what others have — or don't have for that matter — instead of nourishing gratitude leads to everlasting discontent. Contentment is a dynamic and constructive attitude that brings us to look at things in a new way. It calms the mind, bringing a flowering of subtle joy and inner serenity that are independent of all outside influences and perishable things. It is very difficult, however, to sustain contentment. Though it may be easier to be happy when we are successful, only an exceptional soul remains positive in the midst of adverse currents. Contentment means looking at every event with a smile. It helps to have a good sense of humour"  
(Bernard Bouanchaud, 'Essence of Yoga').

Through this awareness (allied with kindness which assists acceptance), there is a greater possibility of fulfilled living — rather than sleepwalking our way through life, we can awake to what is around us, moment by moment. Sounds can be sharper, tastes more acute, conversations can occur in which we actually listen to what is being said (rather than planning how to reply to what is being said).

A meditation teacher who had done several long-term retreats was asked what he remembered most when on retreat: he replied "watching the sun rise". Instead of the demanding and striving mind — where one is perhaps seeking profound insights — there is more a mind of presence where there is an encouraging of insightfulness. And instead of an attitude that might believe life is in the way, there can be an approach that sees our lives as the way.

*Buddhist story* "The Buddha was asked 'What do you and your disciples practice?' and he replied 'We sit, we walk, and we eat'. The questioner continued 'But sir, everyone sits, walks and eats'. The Buddha told him: 'When we sit, we know we are sitting. When we walk, we know we are walking. When we eat, we know we are eating'".

As we become more aware of the body, we can realise how much of what we perceived to be solid is in fact continually shifting: rather than a fixed reality, there is constant fluidity. A stream of shifting sensations that ebbs and flows, focuses and disperses. The self as a fountain: from far away, it appears to be solid and permanent

but close-up, it is clearly just a stream of fast moving particles — who we were 10 years ago is vastly different from who we are right now and who we will be in 10 years' time. But we want to solidify, make rigid what is in this constant flowing and fluxing — this is essentially life-denying as life loves living and living is about changing.

We can note how sensations in the body change from one place to another place; we can note how on one day we go deeper into a posture than on another day; we can note how sensations are stronger in the right thigh whereas a few months ago it was stronger in the left thigh; we can note how there are a few more grey hairs on the head; we can note the increasing number of wrinkles around the eyes. We are much more like a river than a pond. Through a practice of observing (a Latin dictionary gives 'respect' as one of the translations of 'observe') — by the encouragement of this noting, we can realise what in Buddhism is termed 'anicca' (impermanence).

*Sayagyi U Ba Khin*

“Impermanence (anicca) is, of course, the essential fact which must be first experienced and understood by practice... Anicca is the first essential factor for progress in Vipassana meditation, a student must keep knowing anicca as continuously as possible.... Just a look into oneself and there it is: anicca”.

## **PAIN AND SUFFERING**

As Sarah Powers (and others) has said, “pain is inevitable, suffering is optional”. Pain is inevitable because of the nature to this life but suffering is our psychological response to what is happening. There is the inevitability of getting sick, growing old and dying — the more we learn to graciously accept life's inherent difficulties, the less we feel betrayed by circumstances. Instead of the most important thing being what is happening, it is our relationship to what is happening.

Through practicing, we can develop spaciousness in the mind and heart which helps to diminish reactivity (reactions based on what happened in the past) and encourage responsiveness (responses based on what is happening right now). We assume that perception shapes our life but in fact perception is our life — research indicates that 90% of what we see is created by our own nervous system based on past experience: only 10% of what we see is actually there in the moment. Whether it is half empty or half full, a snake or a rope: the key is perception. Yin yoga can assist this process by encouraging observation of sensations and thoughts without becoming too caught up in the storylines and identities that we all carry. Again, coming back to being present: to being aware of all that is arising without being stuck in statements.

By paying attention while maintaining the qualities of loving-kindness and patience, we can encourage equanimity: there is equilibrium in our approach to living. When we can practice yin yoga with this equanimity we grow our ability to deal with the inevitable storms of life. And in dealing with these storms of life — through the practices of observing, mindful listening, staying with whatever arises and encouraging of compassion which strengthens self-esteem and self-love — we have a centre of calmness. While the waves may be raging at the surface of the sea, below there could be deep inner peace.

# THE ENERGETIC BODY

*Dianne Connelly*

“Like the ancient yogis, the Chinese believe in the unity and **integrity of the human person. Each aspect is never** isolated from the individual as she is and experiences life. We are microcosms of the universe so energy that activates the universe is the same for humans. The skin is not separate from the emotions, or the emotions separate from the back, or the back separate from the kidneys, or the kidneys separate from the will and ambition, or the will and ambition separate from the spleen, or the spleen separate from sexual confidence... It is only by Qi that the planets move, the sun shines, the wind blows, the elements exist and human beings live and breathe. It is the cohesion of the bodymindspirit and the integration of the myriad aspects of each individual human being. It is spoken of with reverence because it is the basis of life and when gone awry, the basis of disease.”

As well as the physical body (blood, skin, bones), as well as the heart/mind body (emotions, memories, thoughts), there is an energetic body. We are composed of energy: also known as qi/chi, prana. There are constant flows of energy through the body which have a similarity to currents of electricity. Imagine how a person 200 years ago would have responded when given a description of electrical currents: in all likelihood, with scepticism and disbelief. Or a person just 40 years ago to descriptions of I-phones and I-pads and I-pods, this whole world wide web...

The pathways for these energetic currents is what is termed ‘meridians’ in various Chinese systems. Dr Motoyama believes that these meridians reside within connective tissue and he has proposed that in future, connective tissue will be known as ‘meridian tissue’. The Chinese approach through treatments such as acupuncture aims to stimulate the meridians in order to manipulate the flow of energy through them: increasing what is deficient, reducing what is excessive, moving what has been stagnated, grounding what is flowing. There are five functions of energy in Chinese terms.

- ❖ movement
- ❖ protection
- ❖ transformation
- ❖ retention
- ❖ warming the body

This energy, called ‘chi’, enters the body in three ways: there is prenatal chi (that is from our parental background — slightly similar perhaps to DNA); grain chi (this is from food that we are eating); and natural air chi (which we gather through our breathing). A writer on chi describes an ancient chi gung practice called ‘three focal points’: adjust and regulate the body posture; adjust and regulate the breathing; adjust and regulate consciousness.

By stretching connective tissue, we are influencing the flow of energy through the meridians that pass through the area being stretched. There are four ways to influence this flow: acupuncture, placing appropriate stress on tissue (for example, reflexology

and shiatsu), patterns of breathing and state of mind. The last three ways are accessed through yin yoga. As well as placing pressure (thereby influencing flow), steady stressing of the joints can assist in stimulating hyaluronic acid, a substance that is primarily manufactured within the joint area — and one that has been suggested to be essential in the movement of energy through the body.

Another mirror for understanding this structure of body could be the energetic areas that are called 'chakras'. Most yin yoga postures influence the first three chakras: muladhara (located at base of spine), svadisthana (sacrum and genitals) and manipura (solar plexus). These chakras are related to security and being grounded, to healthy expression of sexuality and confident self-esteem.

## **MERIDIANS**

There are twelve major meridians in the body: six in the upper body and six in the lower body. The upper body meridians are: lung, large intestine, pericardium, triple heater, heart and small intestine. The lower body meridians are: kidney, liver, spleen, stomach, gall bladder and urinary bladder. Each meridian is linked to particular organs and there are associations between the meridians and emotional states, the meridians and elements (such as fire and water) — and much more.

When there is an imbalance in the lung meridian, this can be manifested as stuck sadness or lengthy grief — and when there is balance, this is indicated by the quality of courage. The lung is known as the tenderest organ. For the heart meridian, imbalance manifests as despair and coldness while balance is inner peace and deep happiness. The heart is known as the monarch, the supreme controller; it is the organ of perception. The heart pumps more than 300 litres of blood every hour (about 3 million litres a year) to keep all the cells freshly oxygenated — and that is when we are at rest. During exercise the rate can increase as much as sixfold. And all this blood is travelling through the something like 25,000 miles of blood vessels in the body: that is a lot of pumping.

The element for the lung meridian is metal and it is associated with the throat chakra (visuddha) while the heart meridian element is fire and is associated with the heart chakra (anahata).

In the lower body, when there is imbalance in the liver meridian, this manifests as anger — and balance is compassion, selflessness, altruism. The liver is termed 'the general of the army', indicating its importance in processing for the body. The kidney is home of 'jing' (our essence and potential) — experiencing our true essence can bring us towards a place of kindness and replace fear with wisdom. For the kidney meridian, the imbalance is fearfulness and the balance is wisdom, peace, gentleness. Kidneys are in charge of the water element in the body (and considering that we are 60%-70% water, this is essential to body functioning — an example of their functioning is that every hour, 15 gallons of blood flow through the kidneys to be purified). For the liver meridian, the element is wood and the chakra is stomach (manipura) — and for the kidney meridian, the element is water and the chakra is just below the navel (svadisthana).

This is obviously a simplistic approach to a complex subject but it is important to introduce the idea of energy and illustrate the links between energetic flows and emotional states. As particular poses have more of an influence on particular

meridians, it is possible to construct a practice that is designed to assist relieving certain emotional states (for example, stuck sadness and a practice that emphasises the lung meridian). Sarah Powers has outlined the following sequences.

<i>Kidney meridian</i>	butterfly — saddle — seal — child's pose — dragonfly — forward bend;
<i>Liver meridian</i>	shoelace — sphinx — sleeping swan — child's pose — dragonfly;
<i>Lung and heart meridians</i>	butterfly — reclining spinal twist — seal — child's pose — melting heart — forward bend — snail — hug knees

It is not that one posture affects only one meridian. In most of the postures, we are influencing most of the meridians. By stretching connective tissue in butterfly, we are strongly affecting the kidney meridian and the urinary bladder meridian (the longest meridian in the body) and are also having a lesser impact on the other four lower body meridians. Frog accesses spleen meridian which can open us to our creative potential — and spinal twists primarily stimulate the gall bladder meridian, encouraging courage and helping us to be more reasonable in our decision making. The gall bladder meridian is also influenced by cross leg fold/square. A sign of disharmony in this meridian is disregard for caution. Sphinx could be stimulating for stomach, spleen, kidney and urinary bladder meridians. The stomach is the home for sympathy and compassion and when its meridian is blocked, we might feel nervous or suspicious.

Through mindful stretching of the body, energetic flows are encouraged by diminishing blockages (such as at the site of old injury or a place of stiffness such as the joints) and assisting in the manufacture of energy. This meridian therapy can help us to avoid either crashing (yang dominance) or stagnating (too much yin). Mindful movement can have significant therapeutic implications not only for the body but for the mind and heart as well.

## **STRETCHING AS THERAPY**

One reason for this therapeutic impact is that emotions are stored on a cellular level in the body and the way we hold ourselves can reflect our personality (the origin of personality is from the Latin word 'persona' which means 'mask'). When we stretch the body beyond our habitual patterns of holding, we can release long-held emotions. Again, the approach to this is the same as the approach to physical sensations: that awareness without judging, a mindful listening that encourages a non-identifying from what arises.

*James Oschman*

“Any trauma to the body is recorded as changes in internal structure. The way the body responds to physical trauma applies equally to the response to an emotional mishap or to a chronic psychological state. Psychological attitudes are always represented in body structure. Fear, grief and anger each have a characteristic pose and pattern of movement, sometimes referred to as ‘body language’.... Various practices that intentionally focus one's attention on the area of the heart, while invoking sincere feelings of love and appreciation, lead to a more regular variation in heart rate, a condition that is referred to as coherence.”

Through the stretching and this encouraging of energetic flows, good health can be maintained. A group of people who experience continual damage to their connective tissue are American footballers; their life expectancy is 18 years less than average. There is a similarity with top athletes (another group who experience damage to connective tissue); again, their life expectancy is significantly less than average (8 years less). One researcher has presented data showing that people who frequently use words such as 'I', 'me' and 'mine' have a greater risk of heart attack. In the practice of yin yoga, perhaps we can increase our life expectancy — we can certainly increase our level of being at-ease in the body and in all likelihood strengthen our stability of mind. Yet remember that it is not about how far forwards a person can fold, it is more a matter of encouraging that non-identifying by cultivating equanimity.

*Dr Richard Moss*

“A rigid identification with the personal ‘me’ causes us to overreact to the events in our lives...individuals of expanded consciousness are no longer exclusively concerned with ‘me’ — they perceive issues differently and thus behave differently.”

# PRACTICING AT HOME / TIPS FOR TEACHING

Yin is a great practice for home: its simplicity, its ease, its accessibility. A timer can be useful (to structure the length of time in each posture) but you do not necessarily need a mat. Here are some examples of a yin practice.

- ❖ butterfly — half shoelace — swan/sleeping swan — seal — reclining twist — hug knees
- ❖ butterfly — half butterfly — shoelace — sitting twist — snail — forward bend
- ❖ hug knees — happy baby — dragon — sphinx — wide-knees child — supta b/k

Often a practice starts with butterfly and there is the general rule that backbends (seal, saddle) should be followed with a forward bend or a twist. It can be beneficial when doing asymmetrical shapes to start with the more open side (hip or hamstring) first. Some people listen to dharma talks (such as Richard Freeman's 'Yoga Matrix'), some people listen to music, some people listen to the sound of their own bodies and minds — or alternate from one to the other. It is in these times of silence that we can go deeper; and in the sound of this modern world, we rarely encounter silent moments.

A way to promote this skill of listening is to practice with the eyes closed. By closing the eyes, more of an inward experience is encouraged. But if there is a feeling of tiredness, then keep the eyes open with a point for the gaze (to avoid that tendency of wandering gaze and wandering mind, the spacing out into escapism). When the sensations are particularly strong, the breath can be used as a focus to take the mind away from becoming too stuck in the experience of physical intensity. What can be realised is that if the mind has another focus (such as an anchoring of awareness through breath), the physical sensations can actually subside.

Be aware of how you feel before practicing so that you can use this awareness to influence the structure of your practice. If you are churning and uptight, perhaps emphasise postures that encourage calming inwardness: child's pose, hugging knees, forward bend. If your back feels stiff, then maybe gentle backbending: sphinx, melting heart, half saddle, reclining twist. End a practice with savasana or sitting. And in practicing, maintain a physical integrity: avoid over-stretching (injuries can occur in yin yoga as in all physical practices). Let go of striving to see how far you can stretch and be more interested in exploring the body, encouraging a conscious inhabitation so that instead of performing, this is a practice — a tool for transformation.

To teach yin, there is a need for 'chat': enough vocabulary to describe the same situation in different ways and the ability to 'theme' classes. Because there is limited instructions on alignment and as the postures are held for such long times, there is plenty of space for talk. This is one of the main reasons that drew Sarah Powers to teaching yin: after nine years of teaching dynamic practices, she wanted more opportunity to discuss ideas behind the practice. And teaching yin offers you many such opportunities.

An example of vocabulary describing the same situation is talking a class into savasana.

- ❖ "releasing — releasing tension, releasing tightness — then that enables relaxing — and from this releasing and relaxing, there can be space for resting"



- ❖ “let this savasana be an expression of space: there’s space between the heels, there’s space between the hands and hips, there’s space between the shoulders and ears, there’s space between the teeth — and perhaps there’s some space between the thoughts and maybe there’s space in the heart. Being at ease in this space, relaxing into this spaciousness”
- ❖ “relaxing the body, relaxing the breath, relaxing the mind: just a being here, being on the ground, being in this body — the simplicity of being”
- ❖ “let this savasana be an expression of softness — a softening into stillness, a softening into what is — and a statement of trust — a willingness to be open, the strength to be vulnerable. Savasana: an expression of softness and a statement of trust”
- ❖ “savasana — in this shape there can be space for a deeply quiet absence of longing — instead of the dominant inner chatter, there can be the innocence of inner quietness — a relaxing of the me-ness and a sinking into just being”
- ❖ “in stillness, perhaps there can be a softening of aversions and desires so our lives might become a little less frantic and a bit more spacious”

In terms of themes, some suggestions follow.

- ❖ art of happiness and practice of being present
- ❖ importance of how we practice
- ❖ pause to encourage relaxation which can enable openness: and from there, deep listening and finding our own truth
- ❖ the eight truths of great human beings (from Dogen’s ‘Treasury of the Right Dharma Eye’)
- ❖ preciousness of life, precariousness of life and the parasympathetic nervous system
- ❖ breathe, relax, feel, observe/witness, allow/acceptance
- ❖ setting intentions (like “may I be at peace with whatever arises” — “may I live with ease and kindness”)
- ❖ “do not kill the instinct of the body for the glory of the pose”: attention to individuality of anatomy
- ❖ right brain and left brain
- ❖ tanha, dukkha and sukkha — with the tool of sati (remembering or mindfulness) helping the practices of pratyahara, dharana, dhyana...

#### *Buddhist story*

“After three years of study, the novice monk arrives at the dwelling of his teacher. He enters the room, bursting with ideas about knotty issues of Buddhist metaphysics and well-prepared for the deep questions that await him in his examination. ‘I have but one question,’ his teacher intones. ‘I am ready, master,’ he replies. ‘In the doorway, were the flowers to the left or to the right of the umbrella?’ The novice retires, abashed, for three more years of study.

It is important to be conscious of the language that we use when describing this practice. Hopefully it is obvious that we need to avoid instructions like that famous one from Bikram: “push until it hurts like hell”. I have also heard teachers use phrases like “the joints are left unprotected” which I would personally avoid because of their lack of clarity. A way to support students into awareness can be individual contact (I encourage people to ask for specific advice by raising their hand so we can then have

a one-to-one conversation). And when assisting a person in a posture, I might say “better worse same”, giving them the freedom to decide what is best for their body in this moment.

## **ALLOWING SPACE**

But as important as that is, there needs to be an ability to allow space: it is often in the gaps that we have chance to grow. It is fine that there is silence (I teach classes in silence twice a month, just demonstrating the postures with everyone following me). For the last phase in a posture (the final minute or so), I encourage people to be aware of their own experience rather than listening to my voice. This helps to cultivate the quality of watching — the practitioner is watching what is arising. So whether a person is in desperation or respiration, irritation or elation, there is still this watching: a calmness, a steadiness, a coolness. This assists the shift from resisting experience to relaxing into experience. Part of this process is sharing stories that undermine the popular projection that everyone else is having an easier time. That common cry of “everyone else is so much more at ease in these postures than I am”.

As a teacher, you need to be aware of the time (especially for asymmetrical postures — ensure that you do the same time each side). Some people use timers but an issue with this can be noise from resetting. Others rely on memories and watches. As has been said earlier, there is not a strict rule for how long people have to be in postures. Be aware of who is in the class and their level (just as with other forms of yoga). On occasion, I have taught classes where the postures have been held for ten minutes: that can be an interesting experience, a lot of opportunity to look at the fidgeting mind!

The role of teacher is creating room for relaxation and reflection, a safe space where we can let go of some of our stories and experience a greater naturalness of being. This establishing of safer space is very important — and encouraging an atmosphere where rather than a contest, the context is about soften, open, surrender.

*Gregory Kramer*

“How would we treat other people if we recognised their kinship with us, seeing the sad sameness of the hurts in our hearts? We are always tender and sometimes raw ... even those with tough exteriors began life with sensitive nervous systems and in complete vulnerability.... Each of us is a casserole of hunger and love, bubbling and complex.... At the bottom we are all biological creatures, born into a fleshy body with a tender underbelly and overactive mind.... Time and again we are humbled by our conditioning. We relax, drop back and let go. Always we rest in kindness to ourselves. When we slow down, when we relate with mindfulness and care, we evoke similar behavior from others. When we are able to be calm, others begin to calm down. Qualities like serenity, wisdom and kindness are contagious”

## **BLANKETS, BLOCKS, BOLSTERS, BRICKS**

The answer to the word “props” is “yes, please”; their use (blankets, blocks, bolsters, bricks) can support this practice, especially if a practitioner is relatively restricted in their movement. If a person cannot fold forwards, they need to ensure they are not

straining their back: so sitting on blocks or bending their knees or taking their legs up against the wall (remember that practice of wall yin). There needs to be at least a pelvic tilt forwards to ensure safe stretching of the lower back. They can support the head and shoulders when coming forwards (some people feel strain in that area of the body when postures are held for long periods). And in postures such as sleeping swan, if the front leg hip/thigh is off the ground, then it is important to place padding underneath that area. Do not be shy of using support to ensure sustainability.

Remember that there are numerous modifications. For example, instead of square, a person can cross their legs or do half shoelace or eye of the needle. But it is necessary to keep a distinction between yin yoga and restorative yoga. In yin, there is more activity at the edge than in restorative yoga; it is not about stopping before that place and then using supports to stay. You have to look out for hyperflexible people; often such individuals require backing off from their full extension. When someone is already very open in their body, maybe what they need to develop more is inner strength and mental focus. It could be argued that it is not too much of an issue to stretch to full potential (as long as there is not weight bearing); it is more about what is best for that particular person's body.

Pregnant women have to be careful that they are kept away from overstretching because of the hormonal changes in their bodies — and these hormonal changes continue while they are breastfeeding. Many women have safely practiced yin yoga through pregnancy by avoiding certain postures (like placing pressure on the abdomen in sphinx), making the appropriate modifications and using many props.

It can be positive to refer to the many possibilities of practicing yin: from the physical stretching (so becoming more flexible in the body) to the enhancement of our energetic patterns (so becoming more alive) via the stabilising of the mind (so becoming more able to stay with what is as it is). These can then enable a practitioner to approach the prospect of sitting with much more openness. As one of the reasons for Paul Grilley's investigation of yin, the practice of sitting — meditation — can be greatly supported by yin yoga. When I am teaching a yin yoga class, the structure nearly always has at least several minutes of meditation — and sometimes longer.

## POSSIBILITIES OF YIN YOGA

Far too often we are looking for a lion when what we are actually seeing is a mouse. But because it is a mouse, we marginalise the experience: we disregard our own perception because it fails to fit our expectations. It is almost like we are all going into an old room and turning on the light. In this light, we are beginning to see everything — it is this light that is the mouse. We might have already softened and loosened the rules and the rigidity of personal identification.

*Carl Jung*

“See’ Ochwiay Biano (of the Pueblo Indians) said ‘How cruel the whites look. Their lips are thin, their noses are sharp, their faces furrowed and distorted by folds. Their eyes have a staring expression; they are always seeking something. What are they seeking? The whites always want something; they are always uneasy and restless. We do not know what they want. We do not understand them. We think that they are mad.’ I fell into a long meditation. For the first time in my life, so it seemed to me, someone had drawn for me a picture of the real white man...”

Through practicing yin, we can influence the four areas of the physical, energetic, emotional and mental. It can be a practice for feeling and a practice for freedom. Because of its simplicity, there is more chance that this becomes practice than performance — that rather than fixating on the what, we are paying attention to the how and the now. Instead of external shapes, this is internal processing. Then we can be in the state of yoga: you — opening — growing — into awareness.

*Charlotte Joko Beck*

“Practice is just hearing, just seeing, just feeling. Practice is about the wonder. If you want to check your own practice, the next time something comes up in your life that you can't stand, ask yourself ‘where's the wonder here?’ Wonder is that which is happening. The job of the student is to look, experience, be aware. The point of our lives is to be openness itself, which is joy.”

This is about attempting to have present-moment awareness — and our attempts arising from the ground of what was described 2600 years ago as “gradual training, gradual practice, gradual progress”. We are living in this time when connections often appear to be commodities and there is a casual inauthenticity about much of our online interactions. There is a deep requirement for different ways of relating both to others and ourselves.

We become sacred technicians: artists of body and breath. We are placing drops of water into this bucket of being. Slowly, the mindfulness and clarity can grow. Instead of so often living from the neck up, we fully inhabit the body. There is a feeling of lightness and love in each and every one of our cells, there is a growing of gentleness and a lessening of judgement. And as we awaken this intrinsic intelligence, we are making music with what we have got. Through practice, there can be a lessening of nervous tension, a diminishing of mental stress, a greater knowing of habitual patterns, a learning to be at ease with ambiguity. Perhaps we become more ‘eccentric’ — more who we actually are. Other signs of deepening practice include a capacity to be more

forgiving, carrying less resentment, the ability to take ourselves less personally, an increase in generosity: a softening and loosening towards transformation.

So there is a developing appreciation for this moment, a cultivating of compassion and connection: the open heart that goes 'ah' with clearer seeing. This is far from the final word — rather it gives a flavour and an understanding, a signpost on path, part of an on-going project. Hopefully, this has been helpful with understanding the philosophy, the practice, the principles and also, of course, the postures of yin yoga.

We start with this outward quest (physical ease, physical integrity), then develop the inward quest (mental and emotional stability) to ultimately realise the innermost quest: beauty of being, benevolence of spirit, being at ease in our essential nature.

*I want to thank everyone who has been part of this path and aided the evolving of my practice and my teaching over the years: those who have come to classes and workshops — and particularly (in no particular order) Sarah Powers, Alaric Newcombe, Judith Lasater, Paul Grilley, Dina Cohen, Biff Mithoefer, Melanie Cooper, Amanda Wright, Richard Freeman, Padmadarshini, Maitripushpa, Georgina Evans, Magdalena Macweld, Hamish Hendry — and great thanks to my first teacher: Oz — for her patience and her persistence with this somewhat rough raw material of myself.*

November 2013

# THE POSTURES OF YIN

Constructive rest	lying down with knees raised
Butterfly	similar to baddhakonasana
Deer	internal and external rotation
Half butterfly	like janu sirsasana
Knees to chest	lying on back
Happy baby/Dead bug	lying on back, draw knees towards floor
Dragonfly — over leg and twist	similar to upavishta konasana
Shoelace — lateral shoelace	like gomukhasana
Sitting twist	similar to ardha matsyendrasana
Square — eye of the needle — crossing legs — half square	
Swan — sleeping swan	like pigeon
Dragon	lunge with foot forwards/back knee down
Melting heart	kneel: stretch one arm out in front of you
Heart opening	going back over lift like a bolster
Sphinx/seal	lying on front back bend
Saddle (also supta virasana)	sitting on heels, bend backwards
Child's pose	
Wide knee child — frog — with twist	
Snail — knees to ears	like halasana — like karnapidasana
Fallen leaf/bananarasana	reclining twist
Forward	like paschimottanasana
Yin inversion/legs up wall	with sacrum on brick/bolster and legs up
Twist on bolster	
Opening upper back	lying down with bolster below shoulders
Squat	feet wide (could use block): squatting down
Supta baddhakonasana	on two bolsters or without support
Bridge on brick	place brick under sacrum

# RESOURCES FOR YIN YOGA

[www.sarahpowers.com](http://www.sarahpowers.com)

[www.paulgrilleyyoga.com](http://www.paulgrilleyyoga.com)

[www.yinyoga.com](http://www.yinyoga.com)

[www.pauliezink.com](http://www.pauliezink.com)

Bernie Clark	<i>The complete guide to Yin Yoga</i>
Paul Grilley	<i>Yin Yoga: Outline of a quiet practice</i>
Paul Grilley	<i>Anatomy for yoga</i> (DVD)
Biff Mithoefer	<i>The Yin Yoga kit</i>
Sarah Powers	<i>Insight Yoga</i> (DVD)
Sarah Powers	<i>Insight Yoga</i> (book)

## Books on mindfulness and meditation

Charlotte Joko Beck	<i>Everyday Zen</i>
Tara Brach	<i>Radical acceptance</i>
Mark Epstein	<i>Thoughts without a thinker</i>
Vicki MacKenzie	<i>Cave in the snow</i>
Jeffery Paine	<i>Re-enchantment</i>
Tim Parks	
Larry Rosenberg	<i>Breath by breath</i>
John Tarrant	<i>The light inside the dark</i>
John Welwood	<i>Toward a psychology of awakening</i>

## Books on yoga

Stephen Cope	<i>Yoga and the quest for the true self</i>
Donna Farhi	<i>Teaching yoga</i>
BKS Iyengar	<i>Light on life</i>
Judith Lasater	<i>Living your yoga</i>
Gregor Maehle	<i>Ashtanga yoga practice and philosophy</i>
Philip Self	<i>Yogi bare</i>

## Books on anatomy and meridians

Dianne Connelly	<i>Traditional acupuncture</i>
David Coulter	<i>Anatomy of hatha yoga</i>
Leslie Kaminoff	
Ted Kaptchuk	<i>The web that has no weaver</i>
Judith Lasater	
Thomas Myers	<i>Anatomy trains</i>
James Oschman	<i>Energy medicine</i>

Yinyoga poster — available from [www.sebastianpucelle.com](http://www.sebastianpucelle.com)

Forum for practitioners at [www.yinyoga.com/forums/index.php](http://www.yinyoga.com/forums/index.php)

Thanks to 'elephant' ([www.mindfullife.com](http://www.mindfullife.com)) for the following two articles:

Interview with Sarah Powers: 'On the Mat, on the Cushion'

A talk by Reggie Ray: 'Busyness is Laziness'

For meditation retreats, go to [www.gaiahouse.co.uk](http://www.gaiahouse.co.uk) or [www.goingonretreat.com](http://www.goingonretreat.com).

# ON THE MAT, ON THE CUSHION

*Interview with Sarah Powers in elephant magazine, winter 2004*

Waylon H. Lewis, for *elephant*: Were you Buddhist first, yogi first..?

*Sarah Powers*: I was introduced to the tenets and psychology of Buddhism in my Masters program. I read a lot and was looking at the nature of reality through different lenses. When I found yoga, I found a place to root those practices in my body. I tried to meditate in my early 20's, (but) it just wasn't available to me because of my strong creative, restless nature. It took a number of years of yoga for me to calm down enough so that I could utilize the incredible tools of the Buddhist practices. So, I came back around to what I'd been reading long before I'd started yoga practice, but couldn't root in my own experience until there was a level of ease to the nervous system that yoga provided for me.

I wanted to go further than just doing the postures. I'd heard a lot about meditation in my yoga courses and trainings, but we only practiced it for short periods. I'd heard that if you really wanted to (meditate), the Buddhists were really practicing. There would be no way around getting to know your own mind. You couldn't get up in 15 minutes and be done for the day. You would actually look, and look again, all day on retreats. 10 years into my yoga practice, I felt ready to find teachers who could re-educate me into getting to know my own psychological world where there were some essential elements that I hadn't become acquainted with.

Many of my yoga teachers were meditators, so I was used to sitting for 15—20 minutes after my practice, when the inner environment is naturally conducive to being spacious and at peace. But I didn't know how to cultivate that place without coming directly out of my yoga practice. There was a pitfall in needing my yoga practice to feel at peace instead of seeing yoga as a tool to cleanse restlessness and fatigue so that I could actually be with myself and others in any circumstance, and recognize that what I called my 'self' was simply layers of conditioning. By looking at the nature of mind I saw how many places there was discontent or an inability to connect with my immediate experience.

There's a stream of fear-based living from ego identification in all of us, until there's the pointing-out of the nature of mind (a preliminary Buddhist teaching) and we learn to recognize it within ourselves. Working with these conditioned patterns is an ongoing process, but I no longer feel like they are the essence of who I am. They're aspects of experience—and they become doorways. So, yoga practice in and of itself readies us because of the way it elicits heightened, yet smoothed-out energy. But if we don't channel that energy into recognizing what the obstacles to presence are, then we are left with the potential to cultivate more a sense of egocentrism and more of a sense of 'me and my wonderfully-enhanced, strong body.'

So who did I want to model my practice after? Those who had less attachment to asana, without giving it up, and more understanding of love and compassion and insight into wisdom. When I viewed the Buddhist community and went to some talks, there were so many people who were not necessarily liberated, but were living from a place of authentic inquiry, humbleness and true insight in their ability to translate what



they had learned personally into those teachings. So I thought, “Okay...here are some great mentors.”

*ele:* At the time there weren't well-known crossover teachers, though it's always been done in a grassroots way: Richard Freeman (Yoga Rockies' Autumn) was talking about how folks have been going 'under the wall' between these traditions forever. And that more of that needs to continue to happen. Yogis might seek meditation instruction within Buddhism or other traditions, and — as Jeff Waltcher, director of Shambhala Mountain put it, many Buddhists have long been “closet yogis.” This 'closetness' has remained, until the past few years, when the practices of Richard, Tias Little, other widely-respected yogis became better known. Coming from a Buddhist tradition, for years, I wouldn't even think about doing yoga, mostly because of the scene. It was partly just my projection, but people seemed trippy.

*Sarah:* Right. The messenger kills the message.

*ele:* And so what caused you to go beyond such hesitation or projection and explore this 'weird religion': Buddhism?

*Sarah:* I'm interested in any wisdom tradition that looks at the nature of suffering and waking up from that — and I have been influenced by my husband, Ty, who I met at 18. So, it's not a closed idea of 'I was a yogi and now I'm a Buddhist.' I often tell people this when I teach, so that they don't feel like they are looking through a particular lens, which if they don't adopt themselves, we're not going to be able to relate. It's not the -ism of Buddhism that I'm interested in — the description of 'Buddhism' in relation to other religions is really quite new. It was always called the buddhadharma, the path of the truth. So, for me, I'm not interested in labels, because they become shackles. And most of the teachers I've gravitated toward have used the lens of Buddhism to go beyond any idea of religion. Because a liberated being is not a Buddhist, they're simply liberated. You know, the Buddha didn't call himself a Buddhist, he called himself awake.

*ele:* But to get there...

*Sarah:* ...to get there we need to use a vehicle...

*ele:* ...to follow a particular path.

*Sarah:* Exactly. Feeling confident in a particular path, taking refuge (a preliminary Buddhist vow) — which I've done — and giving my appreciation to the Three Jewels (teacher, teachings, students) on a regular basis. These paths are worth pursuing without making them separate. In some of the historical writings the Buddha's wife, [Yashodhara], was thought to have done yoga often. She herself became a Dharma teacher and taught what they called temple exercises. Maybe through the way (Dharma) spread, it was hard to create an environment where one could practice the teachings and postures when so many followers were travelling together. But to ignore our Buddha body and seek to transcend it? That's what the yoga path has to offer the Buddhist. It's a remarriage of what is truly never separate. And in the other direction, what the Buddhist path has to offer the yogi — they both look at the nature of moksha, liberation, and the nature of dukkha, suffering — but the Buddhist path puts a microscopic lens on how we suffer. In his incredible ability to transmit his

understanding, the Buddha was able to peel away the psychological realms and then create a door in for us, so many years later. A lot of yogis were transcending and not coming back and sharing those teachings, even though they may have reached similar places of liberation through the ages.

*ele*: Like the great Buddhist teachers called forest yogis. Once they attained liberation they just roamed around in the forest and almost had to be caught by disciples in order to receive teachings. But, going back: at college you were excited by what you were reading about, but couldn't quite get it on some level.

*Sarah*: It connected on a conceptual level, which is a doorway. We have to have an intellectual understanding of what the path is and where we're going. I was involved in psychotherapy and processes of looking at where my blockages were. Many the therapists had a natural transcendent quality. The program I was in, at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, blended Eastern traditions with Western psychology. We read Ken Wilber, Jack Kornfield, Roger Walsh, Francis Vaughn and many people who were steeped in Buddhist tradition and viewing it through a psychological lens. I was becoming a psychotherapist, like them, when I got to one of the courses where we were asked to train in how to root these teachings in your body. People chose Tai chi and Chi Gong. I had done a little yoga (my brother had done yoga from a young age and given me a book), so I thought, "let me go back and try some of this again." I dove into what was then a burgeoning yoga community in L.A. There was so much to study and uncover, I knew that this was going to be something that I wanted to devote a lot of time and energy to. I just put everything else aside and dove into the yoga world and taught full-time for 10 years before I found a meditation teacher.

*ele*: That's how you got beyond or beneath that conceptual level.

*Sarah*: When I got to the (meditation) cushion it was, "I know this body, where there's blockage and how to be with pain, somewhat." Meditation felt like advanced yoga. And I felt so sorry for people who hadn't done any yoga. I thought, "How can they be here? How difficult." Many of them left my first 10-day retreat. And those I spoke to at the end were dealing with so much pain and the acknowledgement of having a body that they weren't familiar with. They didn't get to drop below that physical hindrance. Had I not been so familiar and respectful with my body, it would have been hard for me to just stay seated and deal with things through mind.

*ele*: It would be helpful if more of that understanding is shared with meditators. Things are still very much the way you described in Buddhist communities.

*Sarah*: And rightfully so. That's the pitfall that's so common in yoga — which you were saying that you saw. Tsoknyi Rinpoche and I had a dialogue here at Shambhala Mountain, when I first became his student. I asked him, "What do you think of doing hatha yoga as a preliminary practice? (In Tibetan Buddhism, one begins with four set practices) I have a 10- year (yoga) practice that takes two hours and if I'm going to adopt the Buddhist preliminary practices and learn the teachings on the nature of mind and do *dzogchen* [advanced meditation] practice and have a family...well I don't see where that's all going to fit in. And my yoga is accelerating understanding within." Rinpoche said, "one of the pitfalls when hatha yogis use the body solely is arrogance. People start identifying with and then clinging to the body — a transitory composite,

impermanent — and so end up suffering in the aging process and having to let go of attachment to a body that they spent so much time cultivating.”

Often because someone can do third series (advanced yoga) people start revering them in class when they walk in. If flexibility is a sign of liberation we should just go bow to the 10-year-old Chinese acrobats. Then we’re going to miss a lot of wisdom from people who have bodies that aren’t able to perform in this way. And yet, (with) whatever body we happen to have — treating it with care and respect, getting more range of motion and experience of chi flow — will enable us to take the next step.

The second thing Tsoknyi Rinpoche said was, “sincerely take a look at any practice, and notice within yourself if compassion, faith and wisdom are developing from it. If they are, then stay with it. If they’re not, take a look and either change the way you experience the practice or change the practice itself.” It helped me look at how I was practicing from the will instead of devotion, from ambition instead of acceptance. And so I didn’t need to get rid of the practice — but I started looking at how to do the practice in a different way, so that there could be a continuum into the skills of (meditation).

*e/e*: Patanjali (the ancient sage who first set teachings of classical yoga to paper) defined yoga as something like “the path upon which one works to calm thoughts”.

*Sarah*: The second sutra: “yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of consciousness”.

*e/e*: So it would seem that this would be the proper motivation for yoga practice.

*Sarah*: I would like the Buddhist path to be tenfold and re-add asana and pranayama to the other eight limbs. When we do certain courses, we’ll do eight weeks of the eightfold path and blend it with yoga. Each morning we go through asana and look at how we are in our life and body. A book’s title is apropos: ‘The Way You Do Anything Is The Way You Do Everything’. After watching people do asana in front of me for 18 years, you get to energetically see how they are in everything that they do just by the way that they move across the mat. It’s a reflection of how they are with themselves, their world, the different kleshas (extreme emotions) and dealing with being in this life. I feel immensely blessed that these teachings on the mat and on the cushion are available in this Western life.

*e/e*: How did your study of the Dharma then reflect back on your teaching of yoga?

*Sarah*: It’s a good point you brought up, like you were saying about the yogis you’d met. I remember thinking that Buddhists seemed disconnected from their bodies and dispassionate about other people. I didn’t want to adopt a path that didn’t stay intimately connected and involved with all kinds of people, and with the body. But I realized that that was just a few people’s translation of what the Buddhist teachings were. We are attracted to what our nature may already be like. We don’t necessarily quickly transform and adopt the teachings of compassion. When people tell me that Buddhism is too intellectual or dry or joyless, when they come off a retreat and they’ve been silent and they just feel like singing or dancing, I say, the people that I know that actually live from the most playfulness and the most joy are those who have done the most inner silence retreats. There’s a natural quality of ease and friendliness.

So, when I started to (present) the Buddhist teachings to people practicing yoga, I made sure to couch it in the terms of whether — whether it's Sufism, Buddhism or mystical Christianity, if it expands and accelerates our understanding of liberation we can utilize it as a vehicle. Whether or not you adopt the full teachings of the Buddha is irrelevant in my class. But still a lot of people fell away. So I had to have a willingness to stay with what I felt was important and let go of those factors that became superfluous. If I'm just going to teach an active practice, I'm only going to have time to talk about structure, alignment and details of breath, energy and focus and then give a little talk as we go into savasana (the restful final pose in most yoga sessions). And then class is over.

So when I learned the yin practice, about the same time I was going on Buddhist retreats, I realized that not only was this a practice that would help me sit with more ease, deep at the core of my body — its long-held poses were meant to help you enjoy sitting more easily — it was also a vehicle where I didn't have to talk about alignment every 10 breaths. I had five-minute intervals where I could talk about philosophical components from the buddhadharma and how they related to the yoga path. How to be ready to understand the inner terrain of mindfulness so that by the time we were done with class we could do a half-hour sit — they had heard some of the teachings and tools to do that. And it re-inspired me.

I was planning to leave the teaching field at that point and go back into transpersonal psychology. I was done with telling people where to put their feet. And when I came back to being able to share in this way I was completely enthusiastic about telling them where to put their feet and how to do asana because it wasn't all I was teaching any more. It was part of a larger picture.

*ele:* That does seem to be missing in yoga classes. There's no meditation and not much yoga philosophy.

*Sarah:* A lot of the teachers do have it in them. It's a time constraint and not having the vehicle to do it. When I first started doing some talks, the yogis in the room were restless, unable to sit and listen, unused to a system that gives intellectual understanding first and then the practice. In the Buddhist, this system is mandatory: you understand the method before you go and try to do it. But in the yoga world it came through the athletic lens, not our monastic communities where it originated. People were thinking that the physical practice will actually teach you where you need to go as far as changing your mind. But there's a famous Upanishad about yoga that says:

'understanding without practice is better than practice without understanding; practice with understanding is better than understanding without practice; and resting in your authentic nature is better than any understanding and any practice.'

I use those three lines to encourage the community I teach to settle, listen and recognize that this will actually stream into a skilful practice, not just coming from ambition to change your body. I live and teach at my home, which is a zendo space. The community has become a nice blend of people who come to yoga from a Buddhist perspective and people coming to Buddhism from a yoga perspective. If we're truly to transform this American culture, we're going to need to find out more about where our

common ground is and less about where our divisions are. Because on a world scale that is obviously what we are doing: us and them, the nature of dualistic thinking.

*ele:* We were having the same conversation yesterday with Richard Freeman. Coming from mostly Ashtanga practice, staying in one pose forever sounds painful.

*Sarah:* I've been doing Ashtanga for 18 years and love it. Ha-tha yoga means sun-moon, or surya and Chandra blend. Ashtanga is a surya practice: it's heat producing, transformative and helps the energies accelerate toward the higher regions of the body through inner heat, agni, blending with prana. The yin practice stimulates particular meridians and allows us to work with those parts of our nature that are more contemplative, more about surrender. We need to address both sides of our nature. Yoga is a complete system that can do that.

If we have an imbalance it will eventually show up as an aggressive, restless quality. And so just doing Ashtanga, you're not usually in a place to then sit and meditate all day. So, balance it with that yin — inward-minded and contemplative. Ashtanga, the yang, promotes creative, energetic vigor that makes you want to go and do. Otherwise you get too sleepy in your meditation. These practices go hand-in-hand. All yin would create a lack of strength and stability, all yang would create too much energy and momentum to act on the world, instead of [to] actually *be* and respond to the world.

*ele:* Since I am, as Richard calls it, “blessed with stiffness,” yin — to be in one pose for five minutes — sounds painful.

*Sarah:* Certainly, but isn't meditation after 30 or 40 minutes? Yin is a skilful way of digesting difficult sensations by making a pressure cooker — knowing that for these five minutes I'm not in my comfort zone, now how do I relate to that? And when the mind drops resisting, just like in meditation, you can inhabit the body without any attachment to comfort. That lets pockets of resistance, of living less consciously, fall away.

*ele:* But, if I don't let go, if I freaked out or tightened...

*Sarah:* Then, try three minutes. I give talks during the five minutes, so that they're engaged on a physical, cellular level and a psychological, mental level. They're not just sitting with their pain and dying. I suggest people do other styles for a year before they attempt to come in and sit through poses for five minutes at a time. Then I encourage people to go and do it by themselves. My job is done when they no longer need a teacher — they have their own practice.

# BUSYNESS IS LAZINESS

*An adapted talk from Reggie Ray given at the meditating with the body retreat in 2005.*

Life emerges out of the silence of our inner being. The life that we have in our mind, the life that is a reflection of our planning, the life that has been constructed out bits and pieces in our environment—external conditioning, things we have observed in other people, things that influential people have told us—is actually not who we are. That pre-planned life is rigid. It's artificial. It's unresponsive. It doesn't reflect the life that we were born to live.

As a student of mine observed, obstacles—which are always with us—are not really obstacles when you work with them in the right way. And we have to work with them. Many, many people tell me “I'm having a lot of problems doing this (meditation) practice because I am so busy. I'm really busy. I have a full life. It's busy and I run from morning 'til night.” People actually say that.

Now think about that for a minute. What kind of *life* is that? Is that a life worth living? Some people feel it is. America is probably the most extreme example of a speed-driven culture—and this is not my particular personal discovery, but something that has been said to me by many people from other traditional cultures. The first time this was said to me was when I was 19 and I went to Japan. Western people are running from themselves and they use the *busy-ness* of their lives as an excuse to *avoid having to actually live their own life*. We are terrified of who we actually are, terrified of the inner space that is the basis of the human experience.

## Incapable of Being Alone

We are actually incapable of being alone—of any work that requires genuine solitude, without entertainment, that requires making a connection with the silence of the inner being. The American family engineers a life in which there is never any time alone, where we never have to actually talk to each other. Even dinnertime is around the TV, at best—or we're just grabbing something at McDonalds.

But it's not the larger culture. It's actually *us*. It's *me* and it's *you*. We load our life up to the point where it's about to snap. And when you ask someone to sit down and be with themselves they go, “I can't. I don't have time for that.” Now you and I may realize that there actually is a problem. Most people don't think there is a problem.

We run our kids in the same way—and it's destroying them. The soccer practice and the music lesson and three hours of TV and homework—it goes on from the minute they get up until they go to sleep. They never have an opportunity to experience silence. Psychological development requires periods of solitude. Anthropological psychology — studying other cultures, as well as our own —shows that when children do not have completely unstructured time, when there are no parental expectations looming over them, they actually can't develop normally.

We see this at higher levels of education, too. Even the unusual and gifted students at Naropa University. These people are disabled, in many cases, because they have

lived a busy life, fulfilling all expectations that middle and upper middle class parents lay on their children because of their fear. The underlying thing is fear of space.

We all have it. I have it in a major way. I am busy. I have all these things that I like to do. When one thing ends, the next thing starts. It's all important and I have to do it and I don't sleep enough. So we all have to take another look. The problem with being busy is that it is based on *ignorance* — not realizing that by keeping your mind occupied constantly you are actually not giving yourself a chance. We even put an activity in our life, called meditation, where you practice not being busy. Think about it. It's actually genius. You have added *another* thing on top of everything else you do, but you are pulling the plug for a period of time every day — so it actually has a reverse effect of opening up and creating space. So you are just going to be more busy now!

But this is good, especially in Western culture. People put meditation on their *To Do* lists. This is something I tell my students: “If you don't put meditation on the top of your To Do list, it will be at the bottom, and it won't happen.” I find that if meditation is not the first priority of my day it won't happen. You know if I am foolish enough to say, “Well, I have to make this phone call, check my email...,” then it's over. Finished. “I'll do it later.” It never happens. Look at your life and ask, “Am I being honest with myself? Is it really true that I don't have time?”

## **FILLING THE SPACE**

When I was in graduate school I worked with a Jungian analyst, June Singer. She used to say, “Work expands to fill all of the available space.” The problem is not the amount of things you have in your life, it's the attitude. It's your fear of space. Busy-ness in the Tibetan tradition is considered the most extreme form of laziness. Because when you are busy you can turn your brain off. You're on the treadmill. The only intelligence comes in the morning when you make your To Do list and you get rid of all the possible space that could happen in your day. There is intelligence in that: I fill up all the space so I don't have to actually relate to myself! Once you have made that list, it's over. There is no more fundamental intelligence operating. So the basic ignorance is not realizing what we are doing by being busy. What we are doing to ourselves, what we are doing to our families, what we are doing to our friends.

When my daughter Catherine, who is now 24, was a newborn baby my wife Lee and I went home to my mother's house. My father had already died. I grew up in Darien, Connecticut—the ultimate suburbia. Everyone works in New York and they are all busy.

My best friend from high school came over with his wife, who was also a close friend of mine, and my godfather came over. This succession of people all came in...and Lee picked up on it right away, because she is from Alberta and out there, there is a lot of space!

These people...we loved each other. We were so close. But it was always the same: after 10 minutes they said, “Well, we got to run!” Every single one did the same thing. And Lee said to me, “What are they so afraid of?” Not one of them was actually present. It made me realize why I left the East Coast and went to India. “How far away can I get?” But these patterns are deeply ingrained in us, and running away is not going to solve the problem. It's *in* us.

People on campus always say to me, “Gee, you must be really busy.” I could be standing there looking at an autumn tree. I say “No, I’m not busy, I have all the time in the world.” Now, I may not really *feel* that way—but somehow we have to stop this mentality. It’s sick. *Literally*. So I never say to my wife “I’m busy.” Ever. I used to do it, but it didn’t evoke a good reaction.

## **SELF-DECEPTION**

“I’m too busy.” I am sorry. I don’t buy it. It’s self-deception: “I am too busy to relate to myself.” I don’t care if you have four children and three jobs — we have one human life. And if you can’t make the time, 15 minutes to relate to yourself, everyone else in your life is going to suffer. You have to realise that you are harming other people by making up excuses and not working on yourself. This is serious.

I *do* understand that things happen in life, and in the course of a week there are going to be times when you can’t practice if you have a job, a family. But to say that over a period of three months I can’t practice because I am too busy? That is the very problem that you came here to solve. I implore you. My wife has developed some techniques to help with this problem. I am going to give them to you, and then I’ll ask her permission when I go home for lunch. (Laughter)

Being busy is tricky. We set up our life so we are busy. I do this to myself; this is one of my biggest obstacles. I get excited about things and agree to do things three months from now. But when the time comes I realize it is not a good idea because I can’t do it properly, because I have so much else going on. But I have no choice. I have to go through with it. “God, you idiot, how could you do that!” But getting angry doesn’t help, because there I am and I’ve got a 16-hour day I have to get through.

Unless you viciously carve out time to work on yourself it’s not going to happen. You have to be brutal about it, actually. If your mind is always busy then you have no sense of the world you live in. Because there is no communication, there is no space within which to see what we are doing. We will end up destroying our lives and you may not realise what you have given up until you are on your deathbed. By being busy you are basically giving away your human existence. One of the things about being busy is that it is a un-examined behaviour. It’s habitual.

So when something comes up and you think “I need to do this,” the first question to ask is, “Why do I need to do this? What am I expecting to get out of this particular activity? What is the benefit going to be?” A lot of times we actually don’t even think what we are going to get out of it, or what it’s going to accomplish. Amazing. Say I need to call so-and-so right away. Okay: “Why?” You’d be surprised. You think “Well, it’s obvious.” It isn’t. We have not thought through most of the things that we do *at all*. We haven’t looked at what the desired consequence is.

I may think I am likely to get something, and sometimes I do. But what is the likelihood that something is not going to happen? How sure am I that what I think I am going to get, will happen? What is the percentage of possibility?

## **CONSEQUENCES**

This is the big one for me. Does this action have unforeseen karmic consequences? For example: I want to call up somebody and check on something. A lot of times they start telling me some terrible thing that has just happened. I’d allowed five minutes for



this conversation, and 45 minutes later I am still on the phone. We do this all the time. We don't look at the consequences of a particular action.

It's like somebody who goes into a café, and there is this huge cheesecake right there. You could buy a slice, but you get a cappuccino and sit down with the entire cheesecake and start eating. Now, from a certain point of view this sounds like bliss. And maybe for a short period of time you are going to forget all the pain of the human condition. I mean, that is the great thing about cheesecake. (Laughter) It boosts your endorphins for 5 or 10 minutes. You feel great! But then, having eaten the entire cheesecake, you feel sick for the next three days.

Strangely enough, this is how we live our lives. We jump on things. Someone asks me, "Why don't you come to Switzerland, teach for a few days and then hang out in the wonderful Alps?" By the time I get off the phone I am ready to pack. Then I talk to my wife. (Laughter) And she asks me, "Have you considered what a 17-hour trip is going to do to your bad back? Have you thought about that?" And then I get back on the phone. (Laughter)

But, because of our ambitions of all kinds, we are ready to fill our life up to the point where, even if I'm in Switzerland, nothing is different. This is one of the great discoveries: wherever I go it's still lousy. (Laughter) It's just me and my mind and *I don't feel good and I have got this work to do and I don't have the energy*. It's the same story, no matter where I go or what I'm doing.

## **MEDITATING**

Except when I sit down and meditate. Then, I feel like I am creating an inner space so I can actually relate to the fact of what my life is, rather than just being in an out-of-control mode. So sit down and ask yourself, "What is important in my life, and what's less important?" Almost on a daily basis, we have to look closely at the things that remain on our To Do list to see whether they are actually realistic.

Ten years ago, after I'd taught a Dathün — a month long meditation — some of the students said to me, "We feel bonded to each other and to you. We'd really like to keep going" And I said, "Well, we could start a meditation group." And 10 years later I am trapped with a community of 200 people, called *Dhyana Sangha*. Now don't get me wrong, it's wonderful. But I got into it in a blind way. And there are many other things that I do not love in the same way that I get into blindly. We all do that all the time—and we wind up with a life that doesn't work and isn't helpful to others.

My ambition to accomplish things is going to be one of the last things to go. I can't help it; it's just the way that I am. I see a pile of leaves that need to be raked up and I start salivating. I love to *do* things. I love to be active. And you can say, "Well, that's great." But there's neurosis in that. It's a way of shutting out space. This is another thing my wife has taught me: when there's no space *nothing really happens*.

I had a wonderful quotation by Chögyam Trungpa up on my wall during my (meditation) retreat. It goes something like, "If there isn't a complete sense of openness and space, then communication between two people can not happen. Period. It's that simple." The communication we have with each other is often based on *agendas*: negotiating with other people to get what we want. That's not *communication*.

My wife taught me that. Insistently. It's to the point where that *busy mind* is just not acceptable in our house anymore. It doesn't matter what's going on in my life. If she comes into my study, I have to be completely there. And that's fabulous, because I'm never able to get invested in that neurosis. If I do, she'll let me have it.

## **GIVING UP**

Giving up this state of busy-ness doesn't mean that we aren't going to be active, creative people. We're giving up the mentality where you can't actually relate to what's in front of you because you have this mental speed going on. Let it go. I'm saying it to you. This is an issue that we are going to have to address if we want to be any good to anyone.

You'll notice when you work in this way over a period of years — and this is something that I have discovered accidentally — *the more you practice, the more you get done*. If you sit for 2 hours in the morning, which is a lot for people, you will find that your day is 30 hours long. When you establish sitting, somehow, in your life—when you sit in the morning—your day takes care of itself. Things happen as they need to. There is a sense of auspicious coincidence throughout the day.

And when you don't sit, things go to hell. (Laughter) Everything runs into everything. You say, "I don't have time to sit 'cause I have to do this email." You run to your computer, turn it on and spend the next 4 hours trying to get your computer to work. This is just how things work.

Magic is actually very down to earth. It's a part of our lives. It's going on all the time, we just don't see it. But when you actually take care of yourself, work with yourself and create openness in your life, life will respond by cooperating. And when you are unwilling to relate with yourself at the beginning of your day, your life is going to give you a hard time.

I got stuck on my first book, *Buddhist Saints In India*. If I wrote another book like that it would kill me. It was an unbelievable labour. I got stuck in the middle. So I started practicing more, I started doing long retreats. And the book started flowing. The more I practiced, the more the book happened. In a sense, when I meditated I was getting something good done.

I realized that the way you accomplish things in life—whether with family or going to work — is through practice. One hour of work with the practice behind you is worth two days when the practice isn't there. Things just don't work well—there's too much neurosis in it. When I don't feel busy, things I have to do fall into place. Going through my day with a sense of relaxation, I connect with people. I appreciate the outdoors when I walk to my car. *I see the sky*.

## **PLENTY OF TIME TO PRACTICE**

I encourage you to take a chance: put practice at the top of the list. Don't make that call if it isn't something that actually needs to happen—so many of the things we do is to make people like us. "I have to make this call or so-and-so is going to be upset." I have a pretty good idea that if you do that you will find that there is plenty of time to practice, no matter how busy you are. Busy people will look at your life and go, "I don't see how you can do it!"

Here's a teaching that Chögyam Trungpa gave that has changed the way a lot of people look at their work lives: *learn how to invite space into your worklife*. The space itself will actually accomplish most of what you need to do. In the form of helpful people turning up, auspicious coincidences... And in so doing, you are not only opening up your self, you are opening up the world. It becomes a dance. It's no longer your job to sit there for 10 hours doing your thing, it's to respond to the way the world wants things to happen. It's de-centralized.

In Buddhism, this is one of the *paramitas*: exertion. *Exertion* is tuning into the natural energy of the world. And when you tune in, you don't get tired. You become joyful. That you are part of a huge cosmic dance that is unfolding, moment by moment. And you have to change your ideas of what you thought should happen. It requires flexibility on our part!

Busy-ness. It's the most commonly mentioned obstacle that everyone faces, and I know for me it's #1. So I thought it would be worthwhile spending a little time with it. I invite you to take a fresh look at your life. Relate to the fear that comes up when we are not busy. Am I still worthy? It's that Calvinist thing, underlying our culture. But try letting go and lo and behold it's a better human life, and much more beneficial for other people.

I hope I didn't upset anybody by saying these things, but I can't beat around the bush with you. I need to just lay things out as they come up.

*The above is adapted from a talk Dr. Reggie Ray gave as part of his Meditating with the Body retreat. For more on Dr. Ray's Dathüns and other programs: [dharmaocean.org](http://dharmaocean.org)*

# THE SIX STAGES OF PRACTICE

*From Charlotte Joko Beck, Nothing Special: Living Zen*

The path of practice is clear and simple. When we don't understand it, however, it can seem confusing and pointless. It's a bit like learning to play the piano. Early in my piano training a teacher told me that to become a better pianist, I should practice the sequence of C, E, G over and over again, five thousand times. I wasn't given any reason; I was just told to do it.

Since I was a good girl when I was young, I probably did this without understanding why it was necessary. But we're not all good girls and boys. So I want to present the "why" of practice, by going through the steps of the path we have to take — why all the tedious, repetitive work is necessary. All of my talks are about aspects of this path; this is an overview, to put things into perspective in an orderly way.

Most persons who have not engaged in any sort of practice (many people are practicing their own way, whether or not they are students of Zen) are in what I call the prepath. That was certainly true of me before I began to practice. To be in the prepath means to be wholly caught up in our emotional reactions to life, in the view that life is happening *to us*. We feel out of control, stuck in what seems a bewildering mess. This may often be true for those who practice as well. Most of us revert at times into this painful confusion. The Ox-herding Pictures (the Ox-herding Pictures: a traditional series of drawings depicting the progress of practice from delusion to enlightenment, cast in the form of a man progressively taming a wild ox) illustrate this point: we may work through the later stages and then under stress still jump back to an earlier stage. Sometimes we jump way back to the prepath, where we're totally caught in our reactions. This reversion is neither good nor bad, just something that we do.

To be caught wholly in the prepath, however, is to have no inkling that there is any other way to see life. We step onto the path or practice when we begin to recognize our emotional reactions — for example, that we are getting angry and beginning to create chaos. We begin to discover how much fear we have or how often we have mean or jealous thoughts.

## **BECOMING AWARE**

The first stage of practice is this process of becoming aware of our feelings and internal reactions. Labelling our thoughts helps us to do this. It's important to be consistent, however; otherwise, we will miss much of what goes on in our thoughts and feelings. We need to observe it *all*. The first six months or year of practice can be quite painful because we begin to see ourselves more clearly and recognize what we're really doing. We label such thoughts, such as "I wish he'd just disappear!" and "I can't stand the way she fixes her pillows!" In an intensive retreat, such thoughts are likely to multiply as we become tired and irritable. In the first six months to a year, opening up to ourselves can be a major shock. Though this is the first stage of practice, elements of it continue into ten or fifteen years of practice, as we continue to see more and more of ourselves.

In the second stage, which typically begins from two to five years into practice, we are beginning to break down the emotional states into their physical and mental components. As we continue to label and as we begin to know what it means to

experience ourselves, our bodies, and what we call the external world, the emotional states slowly begin to break down. They never entirely disappear. At any point we can — and often do — dive right back to the previous stage. Still we're beginning the next stage. The demarcation between stages is never precise, of course; each flows into the next. It's a matter of emphasis.

Stage one is beginning to recognize what's going on and the harm it does. In stage two, we're motivated to break down the emotional reactions. In stage three, we begin to encounter some moments of pure experiencing without self-centred thought: just pure experience itself. In some Zen centres, such states are sometimes called enlightenment experiences.

In stage four, we slowly move more consistently into a non-dual state of living where the basis is experiential, instead of being dominated by false thinking. It's important to remember in all of these stages.

In stage five, eighty to ninety percent of one's life is lived from an experiential base. Life is quite different than it used to be. We can say that such a life is one of no-self, because the little self, the emotional stuff that we've been seeing though and breaking down is largely gone. Prepath living, being caught in everything and stuck in one's emotional reactions, is now impossible. Even if one wanted to revert from stage five to a prepath state, one couldn't do it. In stage five, compassion and appreciation for life and for other people are much stronger. At stage five, it's possible to be a teacher, helping others along the path. Those who have reached stage five are probably already teachers in one way or another. Sentences such as "I am nothing" (and "therefore I am everything") are no longer meaningless phrases from some book, but things one knows intuitively. Such knowledge is nothing special or strange.

Theoretically, there is a sixth stage, that of buddhahood, where purely experiential living is one hundred percent. I don't know about that, and I doubt that anybody fully achieves this stage.

## **EMOTIONAL REACTIONS AND BODY TENSION**

By far the most difficult jump to make is from stage one to stage two. We must first become aware of our emotional reactions and our body tension, how we carry on about everything in our lives, even if we conceal our reactions. We have to move into clear awareness through labelling our thoughts and beginning to feel the tension in the body. We resist doing this work because it begins to tear apart who we think we are. At this stage it helps to be aware of our basic temperament, our strategy for coping with pressure in our lives. Therapy can also be useful at this stage, if it's intelligent therapy. Good therapy helps us to increase our awareness. Unfortunately, truly good therapists are somewhat rare; much of therapy is not intelligent and even encourages blaming others.

On this battle ground of struggle from stage one to stage two, we begin to realise that we have a choice. What is that choice? One is to refuse to practice: "I'm not going to label these thoughts; it's boring. I'm going to just sit here and dream about something pleasant." The choice is to stay stuck and continue to suffer (which unfortunately means that we will make others suffer also) — or to find the courage to change. Where do we get the courage? The courage increases as our practice continues and we begin to be aware of our own suffering and (if we're really persistent) the suffering

we're causing other people. We begin to see that if we refuse to do battle here, we do harm to life. We have to make a choice between living a dramatic but self-centred life and a life that is based upon practice. To move with any degree of solidity from stage one to stage two means that our drama slowly has to come to an end. From the standpoint of the little self, that's a tremendous sacrifice.

When we struggle between stages one and two, we make emotional judgements: "He really makes me angry!" "I feel rejected." "I feel hurt." "I feel annoyed and resentful." "I feel vengeful." Such sentences come shooting out of our emotions. It's all very juicy and even seductive: we get a first-rate drama going about our victimisation in life, what's happened to us, how bad it all is. Despite our misery, we really love being the centre of it all: "I feel depressed." "I feel bored." "I feel irritable." "I feel excited." This is our personal drama. We all have our versions of a personal drama, and it takes years of practice before we're willing seriously to consider moving away from them. People move at different speeds because of differences in background, in strength, and in determination. Still, if we're persistent, we will begin to shift from stage one to stage two.

As we move increasingly into second stage, there begin to be more and periods when we find ourselves saying "Oh, it's okay. I don't know why I thought that was such a problem." We find that we see everything with increasing compassion.

## **INCREASING APPRECIATION**

That process is never complete or final; at any point we can dive back into stage one. Still, on the whole, our appreciation increases, and we find that we can enjoy people whom formerly we couldn't stand. In a good practice there is almost inexorable movement, but we must be willing to spend as long as it takes at each step. The process cannot be rushed.

So long as we insist upon the emotional judgments I mentioned above (and there are endless variations), we can be sure we haven't moved firmly into stage two. If we still believe that another person makes us angry, for example, we need to recognise exactly where our work is. Our ego is very powerful and insistent.

As we move next into stage three, we're slowly moving out of a dualistic stage of judging — having thoughts, emotions, and opinions about ourselves and others, and about everything else in the world as well — toward a more nondual and satisfying life. Husbands and wives fight less with one another; we begin to let our kids alone a bit more; problems that we're facing ease as we readily sense what is the appropriate thing to do. Something is really changing. How long does all this take? Five years? Ten years? It depends on the person.

The continuum of practice could be divided in different ways. We could simplify the analysis with an analogy: first there is the soil, which is whatever we are at this moment in time. The soil may be clay or sand, rich with loam and compost. It may attract practically no worms or many worms, depending on its richness. The soil is neither good nor bad; it's what we are given to work with. We have practically no control over what parents gave us in the way of heredity and conditioning. We can't be anything else that what we are, right at this moment. We have things to learn of course; but at any given point, we are who we are. To think we should be anything else is ridiculous. We simply practice with what we are. That's the soil.

Working with the soil-cultivation covers what I have called stages two through four. We work with what the ground is — the seeds, the compost, the worms — weeding, pruning, using natural methods to produce a good crop.

## **THE HARVEST**

From the soil and its cultivation comes the harvest, which begins to be strongly evident in stage four and increases there-after. The harvest is joy and peace. People complain to me, “There’s no joy in my practice yet,” as if I should give it to them. Who gives us that joy? We give it to ourselves, through our unrelenting practice. It’s not something we can expect or demand. It shows up when it shows up. A life of joy doesn’t mean that we’re always happy, happy, happy. It means simply that life is rich and interesting. We may even hate certain aspects of living, but it’s more and more satisfying to live on the whole. We no longer fight life.

To summarize: the first stage is becoming aware of what we are emotionally, including our desire to control. The second stage is breaking down the emotions into their physical and mental components. When this process becomes a bit more advanced, in the third stage we begin to have some moments of pure experiencing. The first stage is now quite remote. In the fourth stage, we move more fully from the effort of practice into experiential living. In the fifth stage, the experiential life is now strongly established. One’s life is eighty to ninety percent experiential. Prepath living — being caught in our emotions and taking them out on others, thinking that others are to blame for our troubles — is impossible in this stage. From stage two on, compassion and appreciation begin to grow.

# POETRY AND POEMS

## ***The Summer Day***

by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean —  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down —  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

## ***Evolution***

by Rebecca Elson

We are survivors of immeasurable events,  
Flung upon some reach of land,  
Small wet miracles without instructions,  
Only the imperative of change.

## ***The precious human body***

by Tsongkhapa

The human body, at peace with itself, is more precious than the rarest gem.  
Cherish your body, it is yours this one time only.  
The human form is won with difficulty, it is easy to lose.  
All worldly things are brief, like lightning in the sky;  
This life you must know as the tiny splash of a raindrop;  
A thing of beauty that disappears even as it comes into being.  
Therefore set your goal, make use of every day and night to achieve it.



## ***Three tame ducks***

by Unknown

There are three tame ducks in our backyard  
Dabbling in mud and trying hard  
To get their share and maybe more  
Of the overflowing barnyard store,  
Satisfied with the task they're at  
Of eating and sleeping and getting fat  
But whenever the free wild ducks go by  
in a long line streaming down the sky,  
They cock a quizzical puzzled eye  
And flap their wings and try to fly.

I think my soul is a tame old duck  
Dabbling around in barnyard muck,  
Fat and lazy with useless wings.  
But sometimes when the north wind sings  
And the wild ones hurtle overhead,  
It remembers something lost and dead,  
And cocks a wary, bewildered eye  
And makes a feeble attempt to fly.  
It's fairly content with the state it's in,  
But it isn't the duck it might have been.

## ***Ten thousand flowers***

by Wu Men

Ten thousand flowers in spring, the moon in autumn  
A cool breeze in summer, snow in winter  
If your mind is not clouded by unnecessary things  
This is the best season of your life

## **Yes**

by William Stafford

It could happen any time, tornado,  
earthquake, Armageddon. It could happen.  
Or sunshine, love, salvation.

It could you know. That's why we wake  
and look out--no guarantees  
in this life.

But some bonuses, like morning,  
like right now, like noon,  
**like evening.**

***Mindful***  
**by Mary Oliver**

Every day  
I see or hear  
something  
that more or less

kills me  
with delight,  
that leaves me  
like a needle

in the haystack  
of light.  
It was what I was born for—  
to look, to listen,

to lose myself  
inside this soft world—  
to instruct myself  
over and over

in joy,  
and acclamation.  
Nor am I talking  
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,  
the very extravagant—  
but of the ordinary,  
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.  
Oh, good scholar,  
I say to myself,  
how can you help

but grow wise  
with such teachings  
as these—  
the untrimmable light

of the world,  
the ocean's shine,  
the prayers that are made  
out of grass?

## ***Mystery***

by Ken Kesey

The answer is never the answer. What's really interesting is the mystery. If you seek the mystery instead of the answer, you'll always be seeking. I've never seen anybody really find the answer. They think they have, so they stop thinking. But the job is to seek mystery, evoke mystery, plant a garden in which strange plants grow and mysteries bloom. The need for mystery is greater than the need for an answer.

## ***Happy Lucky Idiot***

by Nanao Sakaki

If you have time to chatter,  
Read books.

If you have time to read,  
Walk into mountain, desert and ocean.

If you have time to walk,  
Sing songs and dance.

If you have time to dance,  
Sit quietly, you happy, lucky idiot.

## ***Forget about enlightenment***

by John Welwood

Forget about enlightenment.  
Sit down wherever you are  
And listen to the wind singing in your veins.  
Feel the love, the longing, the fear in your bones.  
Open your heart to who you are, right now,  
Not who you'd like to be,  
Not the saint you're striving to become,  
But the being right here before you, inside you, around you.  
All of you is holy.  
You're already more and less  
Than whatever you can know.  
Breathe out,  
Touch in,  
Let go.

## ***The Dog Poem***

by Jack Kornfield

If you can sit quietly after difficult news  
If in financial downtimes you can remain perfectly calm  
If you can love unconditionally and see your neighbours travel to fantastic places  
without a twinge of jealousy  
If you can happily eat whatever is put on your plate  
And if you can fall asleep after a day of running around without a drink or a pill  
If you can always find contentment wherever you are  
You are probably....a dog

## ***The Art of Disappearing***

by Naomi Shihab Nye

When they say Don't I know you?  
say no.

When they invite you to the party  
remember what parties are like  
before answering.  
Someone telling you in a loud voice  
they once wrote a poem.  
Greasy sausage balls on a paper plate.  
Then reply.

If they say We should get together  
say why?

It's not that you don't love them anymore.  
You're trying to remember something  
too important to forget.  
Trees. The monastery bell at twilight.  
Tell them you have a new project.  
It will never be finished.

When someone recognizes you in a grocery store  
nod briefly and become a cabbage.  
When someone you haven't seen in ten years  
appears at the door,  
don't start singing him all your new songs.  
You will never catch up.

Walk around feeling like a leaf.  
Know you could tumble any second.  
Then decide what to do with your time.

## ***Too many names***

by Pablo Neruda

Mondays are meshed with Tuesdays  
and the whole week with the whole year.  
Time cannot be cut  
with your exhausted scissors,  
and all the names of the day  
are washed out by the waters of night.

No one can claim the name of Pedro,  
nobody is Rosa or Maria,  
all of us are dust or sand,  
all of us are rain under rain.  
They have spoken to me of Venezuelas,  
of Chiles and Paraguays;  
I have no idea what they are saying.  
I know only the skin of the earth  
and I know it has no name.

When I lived amongst the roots  
they pleased me more than flowers did,  
and when I spoke to a stone  
it rang like a bell.

It is so long, the spring  
which goes on all winter.  
Time lost its shoes.  
A year lasts four centuries.

When I sleep every night,  
what am I called or not called?  
And when I wake, who am I  
if I was not I while I slept?

This means to say that scarcely  
have we landed into this life  
than we come as if new-born;  
let us not fill our mouths  
with so many faltering names,  
with so many sad formalities,  
with so many pompous letters,  
with so much of yours and mine,  
with so much signing of papers.

I have a mind to confuse things,  
unite them, make them new-born,  
mix them up, undress them,  
until all light in the world  
has the oneness of the ocean,  
a generous, vast wholeness,  
a crackling, living fragrance.

***Some lines***  
**by William Blake**

Man is made for joy and woe  
And when that you rightly know  
Then through life you safely go...

He who binds to a joy  
Does the winged life destroy  
But he kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in eternity's sunrise

The most sublime act is to set another before you

# BEING HEALTHY — BEING HAPPY PRACTICING YOGA...

Well, we all know that yoga is (by and large) good for us — that's what keeps us coming to the mat week after week. We know this from our own personal experience but here's another thirty eight ways how yoga can improve your health.

1. flexibility — quite simply regular practice improves flexibility — which can diminish aches, pains and poor posture.
2. strength — strong muscles protect us from conditions such as back pain and arthritis.
3. standing tall — letting the head be at the top of the spine (rather than forwards or backwards) is one of the great benefits of yoga.
4. joints — by taking joints through their range of movement, it ensures that they stay open and healthy.
5. spinal discs — like joints, they need movement to stay healthy — and yoga provides the movement that they crave.
6. bones — weight-bearing exercises strengthen bones and helps ward off conditions such as osteoporosis.
7. blood flow — yoga gets the blood flowing, which improves circulation and gets oxygen to your cells.
8. lymph lesson — by contracting and stretching muscles, the drainage of the lymphatic system is increased.
9. heart start — by regularly getting your heart into the aerobic range, this lowers risk of heart attack and can relieve depression.
10. pressure drop — studies indicate that practice of yoga (particularly savasana) can relieve high blood pressure.
11. brain tendencies — as yoga lowers cortisol levels in the body, this protects the immune system, improves the memory and can diminish craving behaviour.
12. happy hour — one study found that consistent yoga practice improved depression and led to a significant increase in serotonin levels.
13. weight matters — move more, eat less: yoga is movement and it can encourage you to address eating and weight problems on a deeper level.
14. low show — yoga has been found to lower blood sugar levels and boost HDL ('good') cholesterol.
15. brain waves — studies have found that regular practice improves co-ordination, reaction time, memory and even IQ scores.
16. nerve centre — yoga shifts the balance from the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight response) to the parasympathetic system (calming and restorative).
17. space place — regularly practicing increases proprioception (ability to feel what the body is doing and where it is) and improves balance.
18. control centre — some advanced yogis can induce unusual heart rhythms, generate specific brain wave patterns and raise temperature of their hands by 15 degrees F.
19. loose limbs — by relaxing the body (shoulders, hands, eyeballs...) we can diminish chronic tension, muscle fatigue, soreness in joints and stress levels (which can decrease number of bad moods).
20. chill pill — yoga can provide relief from the hustle and bustle of modern life, giving a break for the nervous system and improving sleep quality.

21. immune boom — physical practice probably improves immune function but the strongest evidence is for meditation in terms of supporting the immune system.
22. breathing room — people who practice yoga tend to take fewer breaths of greater volume that is both calming and more efficient — and lung functioning is improved.
23. poop scoop — yoga can ease constipation and twisting poses may be beneficial in getting waste to move through the system.
24. peace of mind — yoga quells the fluctuations of the mind according to Patanjali's Yoga Sutra: slowing down the mental loops of regret, anger, fear, and desire.
25. divine sign — yoga can help us to glimpse that we are worthwhile: and a foundation of worth leads to feelings of gratitude, empathy and forgiveness as well as a sense that we're part of something bigger.
26. pain drain — yoga can ease levels of pain according to studies and when pain is relieved, mood is improved and there is less need for medication.
27. getting disciplined — yoga can help to make changes in life: through the discipline of regular practice, we can become more disciplined in other areas of life.
28. drug free — studies have shown that people with, for example, asthma take lower dosages of medication when they practice yoga, so reducing bills and minimising side effects.
29. anger attack — yoga and meditation build awareness that makes it easier to break free of emotions such as anger and hostility and increases ability to remain steady.
30. good relations — a regular yoga practice helps develop friendliness, compassion and greater equanimity and this has a beneficial impact on our relationships.
31. sound system — practices such as chanting prolong the exhalation that shifts the balance towards the parasympathetic nervous system (meaning more calmness).
32. vision quest — contemplating an image in the mind develops the ability to guide imagery that can effect changes in the body.
33. clean machine — from breathing exercises to gentle sluicing of nasal passages with salt water, yogic practices are cleansing for the inner body.
34. karma yoga — serving others can give meaning to your life and your problems may not seem so daunting when you see what other people are dealing with.
35. healing hope — unlike much conventional medicine, in yoga it's what you do for yourself that matters: involvement gives you the power to effect change and seeing that you can affect change gives you hope.
36. connective tissue — one of the great lessons of yoga: everything is connected, all is intensely interwoven, from hipbone to anklebone to community to world.
37. placebo power — just believing you will get better can make you better, so if something facilitates healing (even if it's so-called 'placebo') why not do it?
38. the pleasure principle — because it can be so enjoyable: not always, but most times, taking our place and moving through postures and experiencing the body and maintaining focus can be enormously enjoyable.

This information has been taken from 'Count on yoga' by Timothy McCall (*Yoga Journal* January 2005).



# 108 THINGS THAT I LEARNT FROM A WEEK AT GAIA HOUSE

- That toilet rolls can be recycled
- The beauty of potted house plants and how well they can grow
- That the slower I eat, the less food I need to be filled
- In the removal of stimulation, how we turn to other items for stimulating: never was so much tea drunk by so few
- In the silence what weight do words carry
- The chatter of mind: like a barrage of radio stations all switched on at the same time
- How this chattering can become quieter — and the deep relief at quietening
- The strangeness of storylines: I had a daydream that the teacher was talking to my mum (she's dead) — and that's not the strangest of all...
- The skill of a particular teacher — Christina Feldman — in explaining ideas and dealing with individuals
- That I can survive for a week without chocolate, caffeine or puddings (I've done that before but it's interesting to know that I can still do it...)
- That underneath the energy can be exhaustion
- The beauty of birdsong — just the same as the sound of a car: a sound arising, existing, passing away
- Being surprised by how much this body hurt: hips, hamstrings, back (not to mention the generalised numbness in legs)
- Realising that I prefer the combining of a sit/walk/sit practice
- Learning a new way of verbally phrasing metta (“may I be safe and protected — may I be peaceful — may I live with ease and with kindness”)
- How green the grass is — the magnificence of the trees — colour of flowers
- After the ecstasy (such relief at arriving away from the stress of busyness), the tiredness (full-on nodding dog syndrome for at least first two days: a practice of falling asleep meditation)
- The joy of porridge: a bowl at breakfast with honey and half a banana
- How distracted the mind is: trying to tame the almost untameable
- How long forty five minutes (the length of each sit) felt like — curiously it felt much longer than when I sit for thirty minutes at home
- The delightful taste of soup — a bowl in the evening with a rice cake
- That mindfulness is easy to describe and extremely challenging to do
- How much there can be a diminishing of nervousness over the days enclosed in this sealed environment
- How strong my ego is as I resisted the an invited opportunity to stand during meditation if feeling drowsy — though on day four the I mustered enough courage to stand and it was a real relief from drowsiness
- How quickly my right thumbnail healed after being bloodily torn on the day before retreating — six days later fully healed
- Fewer fluctuations allowing a greater depth and nuance of perception (colours, sights, sounds, tastes, emotional waves)
- The joy of going to bed at 9.45pm night after night after night
- How hard it all can be
- How the work period (forty five minutes each day) encouraged a participation and enabled an integration of practicing into daily lives
- The joy of spontaneous well-wishing towards strangers (a fruit of metta)

- Learning some new ways of saying the same old things
- In the silence, a realising that I use too many words
- How to walk slowly — so slowly — not more than a tenth of a mile an hour at most: and in the slowness of walking, an awareness of the texture of walk
- A growing over the days of appreciation, friendliness and gratitude
- Moments of calm becoming pools of stillness: so much efforting (in a non-effort way) to be in such places yet a radical change of normal life
- Saying with metta: a realising of how much more is to be known and the potentials of deeper practice (the initial construct was “a realising of how little I knew and how shallow is my practice” — but then came the metta)
- That it’s all about love, peace and freedom
- That the high standards I set for myself — and thereby other people — are destinies for failing
- That there is a literal softening over the days: agendas, edges, personalities
- That there is neither a self nor a non-self: it depends on the circumstances
- How distracting making lists like this are from the actual practice
- That I am who I am — and from this I am who I am, there is a realising of how much the I is changing and an understanding that this I has abilities which can polish the diamond within.....

Norman Blair  
September 2008

PS [www.gaiahouse.co.uk](http://www.gaiahouse.co.uk) for more details.