

## why we practice | Yoga promises freedom from suffering; from life's everyday ups and downs to the most difficult of life's experiences.

**WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME** why I became a yoga teacher, I tell them it's because I was lucky enough to have been hit by a motorcycle while studying social work in southern India 22 years ago—but that is only part of the story.

It is true that after the accident, my teacher, friend, and mentor, Mary Louise Skelton, who was a longtime student of yoga master T. Krishnamacharya, took me to see his son, T.K.V. Desikachar to help me recover. Not only did I recover from my injuries, but my chronic insomnia and headaches also disappeared. But what really inspired me to teach yoga to those who are sick and suffering and make these tools accessible to others through my work at Healing Yoga Foundation, was spending the last three weeks of Mary Louise's life with her three-and-a-half years later. It was then, sitting with her each day as she was dying from metastatic breast cancer, that I really "got it." I had understood how yoga helped me heal after my accident and how it could help others with physical issues and injuries. I knew that yoga could help one become stronger and more flexible, sleep better, and feel more relaxed. But what astounded me as I sat with Mary Lou each day was how yoga was such a positive support for her, even in the process of dying. Here was a woman in her early sixties who had a loving husband and family, grandchildren, devoted students, and much she still wanted to see and do in the world. She certainly did not want to die. She was also in considerable pain. And yet, knowing her death was imminent, she was not suffering.

We had many talks those days—about life, yoga, how delicious butterscotch was, all the important stuff. In these



## living yoga

conversations, she was so clear, so calm, so present. It was clear to me how much her yoga practice was supporting her, even in the dying process, and that this was the result of her years of dedicated practice.

### BEYOND THE BODY

#### *Tada drastuh svarupe avasthanam*

As a result of yoga or sustained, focused attention, the Self or Seer is firmly established in its own form, and we act from a place from our own true, authentic Self. YOGA SUTRA 1.3

How is it that yoga can be such a powerful support, even when the body is not able to do asana practice or even to sit to do certain breathing practices? First and foremost, yoga is for the mind, not the body (though asana and other practices involving the body can be a useful way to influence and refine the mind, and the body can most certainly benefit). Yoga Sutra 1.3 says that as a result of yoga or sustained, focused attention, the Self or Seer (*drastuh*) is established (*avasthanam*) in its own form (*svarupe*). In other words, by focusing and refining the mind through the practice of yoga, you gain clearer perception, learn to discern the mind, body, and emotions from your true essence or Self, come to know that Self and act from that place of the Self, thus reducing your experience of suffering.

#### *Tatah pratyakcetanaadhighamah api antarayahavasca*

Then, the inner conscious is revealed, we come to know the true Self, and our obstacles are reduced. YOGA SUTRA 1.29

In sutra 1.29, Patanjali tells us that as a result of yoga practice (*tatah*), and specifically the surrender to a higher power (*isvara pranidhana*), our inner conscious (*pratyakcetana*) is revealed (*adhighamah*), and we experience a reduction (*abhava*) in the obstacles (*antaraya*) we may face. Patanjali lists nine potential obstacles in the next sutra, beginning with illness

or disease (*vyadhi*), but tells us that they need be obstacles for us only if the mind is disturbed. If we can connect with the Self, we are less likely to be disturbed and will therefore suffer less.

If it sounds simple, it isn't. It's one thing to understand Patanjali's logic and promise of *kaivalyam*, or independence from suffering. It's entirely another to practice consistently enough to actually experience it. But this is why we practice.

The tools Patanjali offers throughout the Yoga Sutra are designed to help quiet all the distractions of the mind, including patterns and ways of thinking that may be dragging you down. As you go through this process, you begin to know the difference between your fluctuating and impermanent mind, body, and emotions, and something else deep within you. When you recognize the impermanent parts of you as distinct and separate from that steady, quiet, knowing place of your true Self (which Patanjali describes as pure, unchanging, and permanent), you begin to cultivate a greater connection with that authentic Self. From this place of connection, you can observe your emotions and reactions and recognize them as separate from your true nature, valid and painful though they may be. This is the promise of yoga. And while the process of getting there may not be simple, the end result is easy to understand: We feel better.

### YOGA IN ACTION

For the last several years, I have taught yoga as part of the Commonweal Cancer Help Program in Bolinas, California. I work with many people with cancer on these retreats, and I work one-on-one with people with cancer and other life-threatening illness almost every day in my work at Healing Yoga Foundation.

At the start of each retreat, I sit with the participants to give them an orientation to yoga and what we will be practicing together. It is always a diverse group in terms of gender, ages, types of cancers, and stages of disease. Many have done some form of yoga, and all have some idea of what yoga is. Some are concerned they will not be able to "do" the postures. Many are dealing with pain, side-effects from

treatment, anxiety, and fear. Often their bodies have changed drastically, assaulted by disease, surgery and treatment, and they cannot do what they used to. "How can I do yoga when I am in pain?" "What is the point?" and many other questions arise along these lines.

What I tell them is that while I am trained to adapt the practice we do as a group to each of their individual needs, and will make sure they are safe and comfortable; and while I surely hope to help increase their comfort and reduce their pain and other physical, mental and emotional symptoms, the real point of what we are doing together each morning is something very different. My real goal, I tell them, is to help empower them with tools and practices they can do anywhere, anytime, in any circumstance—waiting in the doctor's office, getting a scan, receiving a chemo infusion, on the bus—to help quiet the distractions of the mind and help them connect to that quiet, deep place within, that resource of wisdom and inner-knowing, great resilience and strength, of deep joy and peace, and the shining light of your own, true authentic Self. Yes, I tell them, the many practices of yoga, including stretching, movement, deep breathing, and meditation can be wonderful in and of themselves, but each is just one of many tools offered by Patanjali to help us reach the real goal of Yoga: discern between the mind and the Self, connect with and act from that place of the Self, and, as a result, suffer less.

I also tell them the story of Mary Lou, of sitting with her each day, of her incredible grace and clarity and calm, and of seeing yoga work in a way that changed my life forever. No matter what your physical challenges or your time of life, yoga's tools can help you connect with the Self and face even the most difficult challenges with peace and equanimity. As my teacher, T.K.V. Desikachar, used to tell me his father, T. Krishnamacharya, would say, "As long as there is breath, we can do yoga." ❖

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