



October 2012 Contemplation Theme

The Tough Stuff

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You may have started yoga because life was pushing you too hard. It was a good decision because yoga excels at getting you through the tough spots. But what do you do when your yoga is pushing you into tough stuff? In yoga, the tough stuff can show up in three different ways: in your body, in your thoughts or emotions, or in your life. It's actually the same three ways that tough stuff shows up for anybody, but yogis do it differently.

Many begin yoga when their body needs help. Different people go "tilt" at different levels. Some come in when they feel that their body is tight, while others wait until they are limping. It's fairly easy to fix what ails you, as long as it isn't a medical problem, since most of your aches, pains and problems originate in spinal tension. Core opening works!

After your initial stages of improvement, then comes the bliss. More than mere relaxation, Shavasana begins to open up inner dimensions that are deeply nourishing and profoundly satisfying. When the pain is gone, it's the bliss that brings you back.

Many new yogis begin because of their mind and emotions. Fortunately yoga excels at this as well. Complaining of stress, you may not have had words to describe the speed of your thoughts or the roller coaster of emotions you can no longer endure. Yoga slows you down so you can find your Self in the midst of the frenzy. Everything changes after that!

After your initial stages of improvement, then comes the bliss. More than Shavasana, you next may be ready to learn to meditate, so you can explore the open inner dimensions of your own Being that are so richly fulfilling. When the inner crazies are gone, it's the bliss that brings you back.

When life gets tough, a lot people simply crawl into a hole and try to pull it in after them. A few start yoga. New students have told me, "My company is downsizing and I might be laid off. I really need yoga!"

What does yoga offer them? Everything I described above. The uncertainty of their situation, or their grief, anger or regret creates physical tensions as well as mental and emotional reactions. Yet it is yoga's deep inner immersion that gives them what they need, akin to pushing a reset button on a machine.

When I say, "Do more yoga," I don't mean you should do more poses (though you probably should); I mean you need more of the inner nourishment that you get from your own Self. Yoga gives you YOU.

So far it sounds idyllic. The honeymoon never ends. You start doing yoga and your body, mind and emotions get better and better, plus you are able to take the ups and downs of life in stride. While this is true, it can take a while to reach that point. It's called a process for a good reason. Along the way, your yoga will bring up hidden stuff. Yoga will bring up the tough stuff that you may have been trying to avoid seeing.

The good news is that it would have all come up anyway. Well, perhaps that is not actually good news. The good news is that you're bringing it up early, before it has festered and gotten worse. However hard it can be to face your own resistances, fears, self-sabotage, unrecognized reactions and unresolved karma, it's harder when it's had a chance to ferment.

I've seen yogis quit when they find the deeper layers of tension in their body. They say, "I thought I was getting better, but now I'm worse." In fact, their body is getting better. They are not worse. It is so obvious! They move easily into poses that used to be a struggle. They breathe more deeply. Their eyes are more open. They have deeper experiences in Shavasana, but now they are conscious at that inner depth so it doesn't feel like a nap any more.

What's happening is that they and you are more aware, so it's easy to identify the underlying tensions. You are able to feel into the interior of your body, where it used to be dense and numb. One yogi recently described that her doctor was surprised to find, during a routine medical exam, that the yogi's internal organs were so soft and malleable that the doctor could palpate her spine and aorta. By contrast, I've had new students tell me that their doctor was concerned because their internal organs were so hard that the doctor couldn't feel what was going on in there. Can you tell what's going on in there, inside your body?

It can be tough when you find the deeper levels of mental and emotional stuff as well. Especially once you have become used to "yoga-brain," a state of peace and clarity that overflows to affect those you share your life with. When you see that your mind has undercurrents, and that your emotions have the power to run away with you like a racehorse, it can be quite a shock. But it's really nothing new - well, the new part is your awareness. Instead of being lost in those thoughts and feelings, you see what they have been doing to you.

Life throws curve balls, even screwballs and spitballs. Even yogis can be surprised by the unfolding of events — in their relationships, in their work, in their home and even in their yoga studio or yoga organization. Having served as the founding president of the national Yoga Alliance, and having served yoga organizations full time for the last 36 years, I've seen a lot of surprises. The question a yogi asks is not, "WHY is this happening to me?" A yogi, who is used to living with a yoga-brain doesn't ask, "What is going to happen to ME?" The question a yogi asks is, "What can I do?"

When you roll up your sleeves and pitch in, you become part of the solution. While popular wisdom says if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem, yoga says something different. From 5,000 years ago, a great being's words echo through the ages, "Yoga is skillful action." [Yogah karmasu kaushalam. — Bhagavadgita 2.50]

Your clarity makes you able to see what must be done. Your peace makes you able to do it without being exhausted by it. Your yoga gives you the inner reservoir that sources your words and actions, so you are sharing Consciousness in every moment, even when there are no plaid blankets in sight. You are doing more yoga.

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