

Yoga and Our Relationship to Reality by Pavithra Mehta

In August 2015, my husband was unexpectedly diagnosed with a one in a million potentially fatal condition whose causes are largely unknown and that western medicine has no dependable cure for. Just days earlier he'd carried a wheelchair-bound friend up the stairs to our home. He'd tossed a Frisbee, climbed a steep hill, given a high-level presentation at work. To say we did not see this coming is an understatement. We explored alternative options, and met remarkable practitioners of Ayurveda, acupuncture, and more. We entered a period that in retrospect felt like an open-ended meditation retreat. My husband's bone marrow suppression resulted in acutely low immunity, It required seclusion, a pristine environment, a highly specialized diet, and deep rest. Time slowed down. Minute details mattered. We lived with heightened awareness of the present moment and its preciousness. A year later, partially recovered, he was able to return full-time to work full-time while maintaining various protocols, including physical distancing, no airplane travel, no large gatherings. Now, nearly five years later his recovery is still in process, and as COVID-19 has engulfed the world we've watched our peculiar lifestyle become the global norm almost overnight. In some ways, it feels like we were in a multi-year 'training' for this precise moment.

Two days after that fateful visit to the emergency room, I woke up enveloped in a feeling of peace. The last two days had been a whirling blur, indistinct, surreal. Now it was just the two of us, here in our familiar room. The quiet air, and the strength of long-time love between us. A sense of certainty bloomed inside me like a flower in the desert: Everything is going to be fine. My husband opened his eyes. I leaned over and repeated these words. Everything is going to be fine. He smiled, his eyes crinkled at the corners. "Everything is going to be fine. And everything is fine," he said, his voice still fuzzy with sleep. And then after the space of a heartbeat he added gently, "Pavi, you have to expand your definition of fine."

That moment is forever engraved in my heart. As human beings we are hardwired to search for stability, security, certainty and a sense of control in our lives. And yet, life by definition is perpetually in flux, it is famously unpredictable, riddled with uncertainty and fundamentally uncontrollable. These realities are the ground on which we practice. And practicing on this ground invites us into the heart of paradox. The paradox of finding joy in the midst of relentless change, the paradox of discovering balance in the midst of uncertainty and of finding our true agency in the midst of a surrender.

'Sthira sukha asanam' wrote Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras. Three words that encapsulate a whole way of being. To practice yoga demands cultivating firmness of intention, clarity of mind, poise of spirit. Sthira. And to learn to meet whatever arises with inward ease, graciousness and fluidity. Sukha. That is asana.

Here are three high-level approaches that we can use to practice towards this kind of poise and ease: Release. Receive. Rejoice. These three approaches involve countless techniques, and the intent of this post, is not to be exhaustive, but to offer up some thoughts on why these approaches can be valuable, and how they connect to our relationship with reality.

Stress & Our Patterns of Contraction

According to a 2017 Gallup poll 79% of Americans report feeling stressed on a daily basis. That's pretty much 8 out of 10 people. So on a physical level what does this mean?

When confronted with sudden change, danger, performance pressure or deep uncertainty, do our bodies typically tend to open up or close down? One of the instinctual responses of the body to stress is to contract. We curl into fetal position, we clench our fingers into fists. We crouch forward prepared to fight or flee. When we experience an event that triggers anger, fear or grief -- there is typically a clamping down in the muscles of our face, neck and torso --- we tighten our jaws, the muscles of our throat constrict, our stomach tightens.

These patterns of contraction will last until the body is convinced that the threat has passed and it is safe enough to release them. Now it's important to remember here that stress isn't inherently negative. In a healthy body, the stress response is actually what helps us stay alert, motivated, and focused on what we're doing. But the trouble starts when our nervous system experiences stress for too long, or too often, and does not have the opportunity to reset. This is when stress can ripple into imbalances that affect our musculature, our organ systems and our overall well-being and resilience.

So if we want to move towards sukha -- our practice has to include creating conditions of ease so that our body feels safe enough to release any unnecessary tension its holding.

Months after my husband was diagnosed, we had settled into a new kind of stability. At a conscious level I felt my sense of balance returning. But the interesting thing was, I was still waking up in the morning with clenched fists and a torso that was curled into itself. The degree of physical tension I was carrying confused me. My mind felt a level of calm and safety, but my body wasn't on the same page yet. We'll get into the neuroscience of this a little later. But for now, I want to emphasize that all mind-body techniques are working simultaneously on multiple layers of our being. And it is this multi-layered conversation with our neurology, physiology, psychology, and biology that fuels both our healing and our evolution.

Particular styles of mind-body movement like for example restorative yoga, yoga nidra, tai chi, qi gong and specific meditation and pranayama practices etc are particularly effective in addressing subconscious tension patterns and resetting our systems. Embedded within pretty much any yoga class you'll find poses that work along these lines. Forward bends for instance, have the characteristic of turning us inward, they automatically deepen our exhales, and trigger the parasympathetic nervous system. At the end of many yoga classes students are invited to place their hands in prayer position at their foreheads, lips and hearts. These simple gestures encourage a shift in focus and energy. All these subtle things play a significant role. Shavasana—or 'corpse pose', the final resting position in yoga is perhaps the crown jewel pose of release. And there are several other traditions around the world that facilitate similar relaxation.

Jin Shin Jyutsu is an ancient Japanese technique of balancing the body through gentle touch. The groundbreaking work of Peter Levine and others highlight it as simple yet effective approach for easing tension and trauma from the body. Here are two simple Jin Shin Jyutsu exercises that can be used to create experiences of safety for ourselves. These are useful for when you are physically and mentally feeling the effects of stress.

Self-Hug: Place your right hand under the left arm close to the heart. Clasp your upper right arm with your left hand. Almost like you are giving yourself a hug. If you feel comfortable doing so, close your eyes, and settle in to this position. Tune in, to the feeling of your hands, tune into the feeling of what is happening within your body. Notice where your attention goes.

Hand on Forehead: In this second exercise rest your right hand on your heart, and your left hand on your forehead. Gently close your eyes and place your attention on where your right hand and body meet. Pay attention to the area under inside your body directly under your right hand. How does it feel now that there is a hand touching it?

Now pay attention to the sensation of your right hand. How does it feel now that it's touching your body? Shift your awareness to the other hand. Notice the area inside the body under your left hand. How does it feel? Notice your left hand -- how does it feel as it touches your body?

Now for a couple of minutes focus on whichever hand you feel drawn to, at your own pace. Feel what is going on between the hands and the body.

When we're stressed, our thoughts and emotions take on a swirling quality that can feel disorienting. According to Levine, this pose that we just did gently calms the nervous system by giving us tactile awareness of the body as a container. Our sensations and feelings aren't literally sloshing all over the place --- they are contained in the body. Having a physical, felt sense of this eases the nervous system. The arm/hand positioning in these exercises helps the nervous system relax and re-establish energy flow between the upper and lower body segments. They help us release out of a habitual stress pattern and develop a form of self-regulation. In the second part of this exercise you take the hand that was resting on your forehead and shift it to your abdomen, and repeat the same process.

Sometimes people feel an energy flow or a change in temperature or they register a shift in breathing or feeling...basically you keep the hands there until you register a shift. Sometimes you may have to wait for quite a long time, and that's perfectly fine.

Our Body's In-Built Release Systems

Now the thing is, our amazing nervous systems are masterfully designed to organically release excess tension and energy through different built in modalities -- it could be a crying fit, a bout of uncontrollable laughter, falling into deep sleep, or and this is particularly significant -- through involuntary tremors. In the natural world, when an animal has passed through a threatening experience, it's extremely common for them to do a whole-body tremor, or quiver for a brief or extended period. This happens with horses, dogs, deer, rabbits, horses, birds.

This shaking serves an incredibly vital purpose. It turns down the central nervous system's hyper-aroused fight-flight-or-freeze response, by creating a vibration of

rapid contraction and relaxation that can manifest as everything from small vibrations all the way to extreme quivering, shaking or even swaying and undulating. These movements discharge the excess fright/flight/fight energy that was trapped in the muscles. It is sending a signal to our central processing unit to say - 'Hey, I'm out of danger now. Let's reset.'

The interesting thing is, that apart from relaxing deep tension, these types of releases have helped people release fascia and realign musculo-skeletal asymmetries, it's even being used across the world as a technique to release psychological trauma. David Berceli is a trauma interventionist who has worked with communities in multiple war-torn countries. Drawing on practices from Eastern traditions like qi gong he created a system called TRE -- Tension and Trauma Release Exercises. This is a set of 7 short and fairly straightforward exercises that are designed to fatigue the large muscles of the legs through calf raises, forward bends, and an extended wall sit, all leading up to a version of reclined butterfly pose, *supta baddhakonasana*, in which for most people, tremors of varying degrees set in, and wash through the body in waves. The key to TRE exercises is that they evoke shaking from the center of gravity of the body which is located in the pelvis, when the shaking originates from here it reverberates through the entire body involuntarily seeking out areas of deep chronic tension in its path and slowly discharging them. While this approach is not necessarily a fit for everyone, and requires a deeper introduction to be practiced responsibly, it points to an important fact-- release is a natural process that many of us have unconsciously conditioned our bodies against-- a conditioning that we now have an opportunity to unlearn.

The Psoas Muscle: The Body's Messenger

While we are on the subject of releasing tension from the pelvic core -- an important muscle to mention here is the psoas muscle. It is considered the fight/flight muscles in humans, because it creates the flexion response that pulls our body into fetal position during stressful events, and prepares our legs for action. It's also in an area where the largest number of sympathetic nerves are found in the body. So the psoas functions as a primal messenger of the central nervous system. Because it is involved in such basic physical and emotional reactions, a chronically tightened psoas continually signals your body that you're in danger, and can be implicated in everything from lower back pain, digestion issues, impaired breathing, a depleted immune system and more. On the flip side when it is released and vibrant the psoas fosters and communicates a global feeling of well-being and safety in the body. A relaxed psoas is a fearless psoas. If you'd like to experiment, here are a couple of simple and profound exercises that can help soothe the psoas.

Training for Resilience

From a neuroscience perspective, it's well understood that stress is not an inherent property of events themselves -- it is a function of how individual bodies label events and react to them. This is part of the reason why two people can go through the exact same circumstances and have wildly differing experiences. Each of us possess a nervous system that has been wired and conditioned in a unique way. This is why traumatic reactions should never be judged as a weakness or as an inability to cope. A traumatic reaction is simply the basic emergency response of a person being activated for survival. But no matter who we are and where we are starting from, we can train our system to become more resilient.

These realities are the basis for empathy and transformation. When you get a glimpse of the laws that govern our personalities and reactions, then you begin to understand two things. First: that everyone is doing their best with the cards reality has dealt them, and second, everyone has the capacity to grow. Or to paraphrase Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi: "We're all perfect just the way we are. And we could all use a little improvement."

The layers of chronic tension in our bodies and minds have likely been built up over many years. Dissolving them in a sustainable way requires time and dedication. The tools of release are plentiful. Yoga, massage, meditation, sound healing, nature therapy, art therapy, aromatherapy, dance therapy-- and countless other modalities. Pick a path or any combination of paths. But regardless of method, it's important to remember that *sthira* and *sukha* -- ultimate poise and ultimate ease, come only through knowing our real nature. At the heart of our ultimate release is realizing the self. It's about piercing the veil of this thing we call I.

And it's our practice that gets us there. A quote by Archilochus a Greek philosopher comes to mind: "When we are challenged we do not rise to our expectations. We fall to our level of practice."

Arun Dada is an 86-year-old from India (dada means grandfather in Hindi.) His life embodies the Gandhian principle of *ahimsa* [non-violence] in ways that are hard to fathom. Post-independence he walked the length and breadth of India multiple times, serving the poorest communities wherever he went. This is a man who, when attacked in the middle of the night by a drunk stranger, uttered a blessing. When he was held at gun-point by a child soldier in a war zone his response was to lay a hand on the boy's shoulder and smile. He's touched thousands of lives anonymously with his unconditional love. When asked recently for his definition of fearlessness he said, "People tell me fearlessness is about not being afraid. To me that's incomplete. True fearlessness is when there is not a cell in your body that can be moved to intend harm." True fearlessness is when your being has dissolved every last trace of violence within it and you reside in your true nature.

Think about the level of practice it takes to eradicate the roots of aggression in our being. It's a task of monumental proportions and yet -- the beautiful thing is, every moment of our lives has the potential to be part of that task.

In his book 'The Heart of Yoga', yoga teacher TVK Desikachar includes a chapter titled, "Things that Darken the Heart." What are these things? According to the Yoga Sutras: *Asmita*, *raga*, *dvesa*, *abhinivesa* -- ego, craving, aversion, and fear. When our practice includes releasing these energies, releasing our mental conditionings, releasing our illusory notions of self--- that's when our contracted notion of 'I' begins to slowly shift from something rigid and static towards something infinitely more dynamic and open to receiving reality.

At a practical level how do we practice receiving reality?

Working with the Present Moment

A basic model for this as the meditation teacher Shinzen Young articulates it, is we take any present moment experience and infuse it with a high degree of concentration, sensory clarity, and equanimity. Concentration means we are consciously choosing how we direct our awareness. Sensory clarity is about getting more and more subtle and

precise about the sensations that constitute our experience. And equanimity means that we give permission for these different sensations to expand, to contract, or to be still -- in other words, permission to do whatever they naturally would do.

Why is sensory clarity important? Why, in yoga for instance are we invited to become more and more aware of our breath, the feeling quality within our body, the various sensations and feedback we are receiving in each moment? What does this have to do with transformation? Because through this we understand experientially that: All of our experiences are transient - and responsive. Every sensation we experience is transient. Meaning, it will arise, stay for awhile and then pass away. And our experience is responsive. It is affected by body position, by movement of breath, even by where we focus our attention. When we witness these fundamental truths of experience -- transience and dynamic responsiveness, our body and mind's resistance to reality begins to change. And we begin to rewire our patterns of subconscious reactivity,

This awareness of subtle sensory body-based feelings is called interoception and its important because from the mind-body standpoint it is the basis for transformation

We all know how thought and feeling particularly in moments of intensity can mesh together and create a hot mess of experience that is hard to get a handle on. It's through the tangling of unskillful thought and feeling that our illusory sense of self arises, and it's from this dynamic that crystallized patterns of reactivity (sometimes referred to as samskaras) are created in the subconscious.

When we start to bring concentration, sensory clarity and equanimity into the equation, we are untangling this compounded mess, reducing our resistance to reality, dissolving these patterns. The result is insight and transformation. This is where a quiet kind of rejoicing begins. Shinzen Young's formula for this process is as follows:

Concentration + Sensory Clarity + Equanimity + Time = Insight and Transformation

So, ultimately you can take any type of experience and attempt to be focused, precise and allowing with it. When we receive experience in this way we are playing gracious host to the totality of our experience. Denying nothing, suppressing nothing, simply allowing our experience to be what it is. As it is. In this way we begin to learn the site of our true agency.

Rumi called it being a guesthouse.

This Being Human Is A Guesthouse

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

When we release our unskillful resistance, and when we receive our experience in totality, then we open ourselves to rejoicing in our true nature, and in the gifts, possibilities, and creative potential of each moment.

When we relax our patterns of contraction we create the conditions for greater flow and emergence. We dismantle the barriers we had erected against evolution's invitations. As we step into the unknown without our habitual tensions, and with all our senses and our hearts open-- we receive teachings, support, and encouragement from unexpected places. Each blade of grass starts to sing. Each sunrise summons us into the privilege of being here and now. And even under clouded skies, gratefulness breaks into blossom. As inevitably as a magnolia bud in early Spring.

In these times of upheaval and uncertainty may we each practice living in a way that takes refuge in universal laws and restores us to our greatest work and our greatest power. May we lean in the direction of compassion and transformation.

May we each begin to expand our definition of fine.

Additional Resources

Websites/Online Articles:

Peter Levine on Freedom from Pain

David Berceci/TRE website with free online classes

Liz Koch's website Core Awareness

Kelly McGonigal on How to Transform Stress into Courage and Connection

S.N Goenka on The Art of Living and Vipassana Meditation

Shinzen Young on Compassion, Equanimity and Impermanence

Matt Walker: Sleeping Enough to Be Truly Awake

Gert van Leeuwen: Learning to Move from Strength Instead of Strain

Critical Alignment Yoga & Therapy Online School

Books:

In An Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness, by Peter

Levine

The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma, by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk

Tension and Trauma Releasing Exercises, by David Berzeli

The Psoas Book, by Liz Koch

The Science of Enlightenment, by Shinzen Young

The Art of Listening: Yoga in the Kashmir Tradition, by Billy Doyle