

Yoga as Spiritual Practice (by Donna Martin)

Last week I watched a video of Rodney Yee (Yoga for Energy) and followed along with the first part, a series of asanas that he performed giving little or no verbal instruction. I knew them all, had learned them before, and was used to doing many of them as part of my own asana practice. But on this morning, by following along with Rodney, I was powerfully reminded of a quality of practice that's like prayer, where the body moves so quietly and reverently through the movements that the whole feeling of it is one of a sacred offering. I have experienced this many times before, but can sometimes become so focused on the physical experience of the poses that the asana-as-prayer experience, which is probably the ultimate point of asana practice, can be forgotten. I remember my teacher, the amazing Rama Jyoti, declaring passionately in the midst of a group of us practicing the bridge pose... "offer your pubis up to the Divine!". For her, the asana practice was always a prayer.

Yoga practice as prayer is one way that this ancient body-mind art is, for me, a spiritual practice. Especially if I can take the experience of moving as a prayer from my asana practice into my other daily movements and activities. I want to bring the essential qualities I experience in my yoga practice – of joyful surrender, of gratitude and appreciation, of oneness and wholeness – into my whole life. This makes my yoga a spiritual practice. I'd wonder about the value of any so-called spiritual practice that didn't provide for a more open-hearted and peaceful way of being in the world. I read once that Swami Premanada told people that the meaning of life is to see God in everyone and everything. When asked how to do this, his answer was "in the silence". What silence? (most of us would wonder)...

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras explain yoga as "citta vritti nirodhah": yoga is the inhibition (or containment) of the movements and fluctuations of the mind". Buddhists say that citta refers to both the thinking mind and the heart, the emotions. Yoga practice cultivates a kind of spaciousness around one's experience which brings freedom. There is a way that our yoga practice invites us into a quietness of mind and body that allows for a whole different way of experiencing life, and with it, the possibility of seeing the divine everywhere. My teacher, Rama Jyoti, used to say that the Sanskrit word asana means "an attitude of mind expressed through the body". It is clear to me that every posture and gesture I make with my body is associated with a state of mind, and when my body and mind are congruent, this state of mind becomes a state of being.

Exploring consciously the vast, perhaps infinite, landscape of beingness that we have

as human beings will take us inevitably into the territory of the spirit. Our actions, our doing, our living, become in-spired by consciousness. Perhaps yoga as spiritual practice is one of remembering our own bodymindspirit wholeness and of recognizing wholeness everywhere. As such, the practice is one of cultivating more conscious awareness and love.

What is a spiritual practice anyway? For me, those moments in life which are imbued with consciousness and intentionality become a spiritual practice when the intention is this: Remembering Wholeness. The ancient teachings of yoga talk about oneness, unity of body, mind and spirit. It seems clear to me (after thirty-seven years of yoga practice) that wholeness is intrinsic. There is a way to perceive myself, others, and life from this perspective: the only separation between anything and wholeness exists in ignorance, or unconsciousness. As a practice grounded in meditation, yoga expands consciousness, and therefore reminds us that every moment and every experience is – holographically – an opportunity to experience wholeness. Yoga as a spiritual practice helps me remember that my mind is my body, that my body is my spirit, that my spirit is your spirit, and that my life is an expression and celebration of spirit, as is yours.

One of my favourite symbols of yoga as spiritual practice is the greeting "Namaste". This word implies recognition of another as a reflection of the same divine light. The Namaste gesture (palms together in front of the heart, prayer-like) brings together the left and right sides of the body, mind, and breath, and connects inner and outer to express a universally recognizable attitude of spiritual respect, appreciation, and peacefulness. May I offer a simple experiment that you could do with a willing partner? Stand facing each other, hands and arms hanging at your sides. Close your eyes for a moment and simply and quietly notice your experience. Open your eyes when you're ready and look at your partner for a moment. Close your eyes again and notice what's happening for you. What bodymind experience are you having? When you're ready, place your hands palm together in the Namaste gesture. Slowly open your eyes once more and look at your partner. Simply notice anything that seems to happen differently within your bodymind experience. Close your eyes for a moment longer to stay with your experience and then talk about it together. You may wish to begin and end your yoga practice in this way, using mindfulness as the base.