



Tias Little reflects
on posture &
meditation in yoga
& buddhism

a contemplative body

In the parable of the Water Snake, the Buddha describes the teachings as difficult to grasp and says that one must have the "right grasp" so as not to be bitten. He outlines the method to skillfully hold the snake of the teachings at the neck. The threat of a poisonous injection (the result of the snake bite, or inaccurate understanding of the teachings) and subsequent toxicity is a familiar obstacle forewarned in the scriptures.

The question at hand is how to handle the slippery (and fast, I might add) teachings. A yoga practice is primarily a contemplative practice. However, in light of the racy proliferation of yoga today, it is more difficult to grasp the real import of the teachings. With the explosion of yoga into the marketplace of North America, there is even greater calling and challenge for the practice to be medita-

tive. Akin to the time of the Buddha when practitioners were preoccupied with the outer form/dressing of the practice, today the threat of the yoga boom is that we lose the contemplative thread of the practice. For this reason, there is even greater calling for our yoga practice to be infused with deep care, attention and sensitivity.

In my experience after twenty years of practice, I have made pilgrimage further and further into the recesses of my inner psyche and subtle body. I began with a practice that was driven by achievement in the postures, drawn by the look of the outer pose. Over time I started looking inward, away from attempts at mastering the pose and toward unveiling the mystery of each pose. At one point in my training, I would do 150 postures in one session, whereas now I practise more like 20 poses. Today, I do fewer postures and

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my intention is toward greater attunement within the pose. I have found that with the deepening of *asana* practice there is a natural evolution toward prolonged holds for cultivating meditative awareness. This is the transition in the eight limbs of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras from *asana* to *dharana*, or concentration practice. Ultimately, seated meditation will cultivate a still and steady mind while observing the subtle movements of breath, bone and the flutter of thought. Today, half of my practice is devoted to seated meditation, rehearsing the "right grasp" on awareness, a grasp that in the Zen tradition is thought to be no grasp at all.

Postures as Vehicles for Change

In yoga practice, we use the body as the vehicle to move toward greater reflective awareness. The myriad *asana* forms are gateways into greater opening. Physiological releases that come as a result of practising postures support an open awareness, unencumbered by fixated thinking. The postures are beautiful, creative, joyous and challenging means to cultivate a clearer, more reflective mind. They are what the Buddha called "expedient means," that is, tools for gaining insight into the nature of the

mind/body connection.

The postures are just that – postures – and a posture always suggests something other than itself. I like to say in class that the postures are nothing special – and it is when we start to think that our postures are something special that we are in trouble. Postures are not ends in themselves, but rather vehicles toward open awareness; they are passages whose winding and arduous climbs lead to an inner felt sense of expansiveness – an expansiveness that is sometimes clear, sometimes cloudy – beyond any preoccupation with our own small selves. This expansiveness includes everything. It is unlimited.

When the form (*asana*) is flexible and open, it suggests something beyond itself, it gives way to the formless. In order to cultivate the felt sense of the formless, there are multiple *asanas*. It is said that there are as many postures as there are different types of species on the planet. All the endless variations on form lead more or less to one *asana*, the sitting posture, a position that lends itself to culling a relaxed and still mind.

In order to sit in meditation long enough for the mind waves to subside their relentless pitching from high to

low, from peak to trough, one must have open hips, firm back and little pain. Pain in the physical body is like a weight on the mind. It would be like a sailing vessel setting sail with its anchor dropped. The drag of weight would make any skillful negotiation of the waves very difficult. So the practice of postures serves to clear out the cobwebs of pain and restriction in the body – to unleash the potential of a restricted joint, to organize any distortion in the soft tissues and to align the vertebral column. Upon sitting pain-free, one is able to better sail the mind waves looking out for strong mental currents, restraining eddies of memory, expectations or exaggerated thoughts.

Thawing the Body

The practice to release pain in the body is the process of thawing. Thaw is a strange word, and the process of "thawing out" can feel equally strange. It is common that parts of the body go numb and frozen and feel isolated from the vital flushing within the circulatory system. This freezing is what Thomas Hanna called "sensory-motor amnesia," when a part of the body loses touch with itself and loses touch with the whole. The process of thawing out feels peculiar – perhaps you can recall

a time when your fingers became frosted by the cold, and during the slow process of reviving them, coming back, you felt a mixture of dullness, needling sensation and pulsating pain.

In meditation, one experiences a similar "coming back to," wherein the mind that is routinely preoccupied by events of the past or future regains the ability to witness, to take in and be present with what is currently happening. One must endure varying states of mental discomfort – torpor, swollen memory, agitation, exaggerated perspective, prickly self-loathing – en route to relaxing the mind and establishing open awareness. Meditation practice is a process of loosening the mind from the vise-grip of the self-referential tendency. I am always taken by this short saying from David Ignatow: "I should be content to look at a mountain for what it is and not as a comment on my life."

Bringing sensation back into areas that have been frozen – either a tightened jaw or compacted hamstrings or a tensed gut – is the aim of *asana* practice. Some yoga traditions stoke the room temperature to accelerate the melting of constricted connective tissue and muscle. In a posture such as *Paschimottasana* (Seated Forward Bend), sensation is renewed in the low back, hamstrings, calves and feet. Due to lack of mobility, fibres in the muscle coagulate together, like pasta that is not boiled long enough, resulting in limited blood flow and sensation. Through careful and steady articulation of the feet and knees, the forward bend

is ignited and sensory-motor loops in the nervous system are hooked up again. This "waking-up" process can be painful as dulled areas come to life.

In seated meditation, as in the yoga postures, the process of waking is to reduce the tendency toward fixation and restriction. Meditation serves to dissolve obsessive mental tendencies (marked by judgement, anxiety or fantasy) so that the mind rests at ease, accompanied by the support of a lifted spine, an open back and relaxed belly.

Just as there is range of motion in the body, there is a potential "range of emotion" in our feeling states. The range of both depend upon our capacity for sensitivity, openness and connection. Cultivating sensitivity leads to greater openness and tolerance, especially in light of the vast complexity we encounter in the world today. In the Buddhist tradition, the *bodhisattva* or sentient being is aware with full sensitivity. The *bodhisattva* is the embodiment of feeling and compassion for all beings who suffer (in lives that are inherently uncertain). "Contemplate to capacity all the pain of the human condition," Lama Mipham wrote. This must include contemplating our own pain, a pain that stems from the strong identifications we make with our limitations.

From Gross to Subtle

In the practice of yoga *asana*, we use the very limitation of the pose as the object of meditation. I say in class, "It is when you start to feel that you want to come out of the pose that the pose begins." At the

threshold of change (that is, at the barrier of the hamstring or the hip rotators), there is the possibility for change. In yoga practice we use the posture skillfully, without causing injury to the body or agitation to the mind, to transform from a state of dullness, frigidity or locked tension into a state of enlivened awareness. We break through the veil of amnesia at the tissue level, increasing the circulation of blood and lymph and increasing the sensory-motor hookup.

Through years of practice in *asana*, one moves from gross to subtle, from states of dense compaction and armouring in the outer body to states of greater sensitivity. Upon deconstructing the body armour through a long-time practice of yoga postures, we are left to sit and follow the inner tides of subtle sensation and the pitter-patter of mind.

In my meditation practice, I observe the very slight expansion of soft tissue at the back of my throat, around my tongue and at the roof of my mouth. When sitting, we observe the subtlest of sensation until movement is barely perceptible. A wonderful rendering of the spirit of this interior experience comes from the *Upanishads*: "Subtler than the subtle, greater than the great is the Self that is set in the cave of the heart of all beings." In meditation, at the cusp of the imperceptible, the mind practice must grow very sharp and clear! We begin to make the transition between meditating on the perceptible – that which we can still feel and identify with – and meditating on the imperceptible, or that which is beyond recognition.

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Opening to Vastness

The Buddha was a yogi who invested considerable time in the sitting posture en route to dissolving his anxieties and the tendencies toward psychological projection that plagued him. The classical rendering of this internal odyssey into the inner recess of the psyche is that of the Buddha seated under the bodhi tree (a fig tree) for forty-nine days. Here the Buddha was subject to a terrific onslaught of inner cravings and fears that threatened to unseat him. While bombarded by demonic forces he was given refuge under the hood of an awesome cobra.

The symbol of the rising serpent is revered throughout the classical yoga tradition as the enlivening of the inner life force or the Kundalini. In the throes of the threatening display of his unconscious mind, the Buddha experienced an awakening of the limbic brain, or reptilian brain. The limbic brain is the intuitive mind, what the Zen tradition sometimes refers to as No-Mind, whose capacity is endless. The power to expand awareness that the cobra suggests is similar to the opening to vastness that yoga practice cultivates.

In meditation, the cranium should lift in back, just as the hood of the cobra rises and spreads. In this expansiveness, the mind has the time to settle into careful observation of the movement of connective tissue, the slight changes in respiratory rhythms and the shifting patterns of mind. This process brings a quality of wakefulness to all the cells of the body, a wakefulness that is imbued with patience and ease, while staying on the threshold of continuous change.

Right Intention

The experience of spaciousness and ease comes with time. It must be put into practice, just as we would practise stretching the hamstring or reciting a mantra. Each posture is an invitation to discover this spaciousness in both the connective tissue and in the mind field. If the intention of a yoga practice is to cultivate greater awareness and sensitivity, then the seeds of meditation will be firmly planted. This intention is a calling to dive further and further inward toward the recesses of the body-mind connection and toward the vast unobstructed spirit within. This is identified as "right intention" within the Eightfold Path of Buddhism – to practise not for

gain or fame, but to dissolve the habitual mind states that constrain.

In light of the rapid commercialization of this practice today, whereupon the mind is coaxed outward toward the images that represent yoga, there is a need to establish a more contemplative practice. An intention to be more mindful and connected leads the practitioner away from ideal images of what the pose should look like and more toward a felt-sense of what is really going on within. Through careful attunement to inner sensation and by listening to our postures rather than merely doing them, we cultivate the wakefulness of an open attention. ☸

Tias Little brings to his teaching a wonderful play of metaphor and imagination. He is trained in Iyengar and Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, and his perspective clearly reflects the Buddha's teachings. He is a licensed massage therapist and has studied extensively in cranial-sacral therapy and Rolling. Tias earned a Master's degree in eastern philosophy from St. John's College. He currently co-directs *Yogasource* in Santa Fe, New Mexico with his wife Sueya, and leads yoga intensives both nationally and internationally. Tias will be leading a course entitled "Buddha and the Body" with Rishi Joan Halifax at the Upaya Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, April 24-27, 2003. www.yogasource-santafe.com