

## DEEPENING YOGA PRACTICE writings by Jess Howarth

### **In what ways has yoga transformed your relationship to life?**

When I am immersed in yoga practice I find that I fully inhabit my body; my awareness is alive, my body is alive and I am alive. I feel connected to my physicality, emotions, others and my environment. It's amazing how that feeling of joy and vitality arises from within - I'm not having to use effort to bring about a change, rather I can rest back into my body and the opening and receptivity naturally arises.

My yoga practice is one of the few places in life when I can be how I actually am without the need to try and be a certain way. It's a rare and sacred space where I can find acceptance.

When practicing yoga - I am here, present. I can step out of my thinking mind, feel my solidity and strength. A feeling of simplicity and ease can arise.

The attitude that this yoga cultivates for me is an attitude of non-striving, pausing, feeling. In a culture where these values are near non-existent I find that yoga gives me the space to just be me, however I am. I don't need to do this, do that, be this, and be that. I can simply be. Wow! How special - where else in life can I have the space, time and support to just be?

To feel some containment and connection in the body helps me psychologically feel safer and more secure. Whereas trauma is that which overwhelms one physically and psychologically - there feels like there are no boundaries, holding and containment. By contrast in yoga I can feel that I am here, contained by my body; the solidity of my body is a resource.

### **How has yoga changed the way you understand and inhabit your body?**

This is still very much a process for me. Despite my yoga practice I still feel that the way I inhabit my body is determined by my old habits of tension/holding and collapse.

Only when I am practicing a lot of yoga do I notice how the way I inhabit my body is different. So, for example on retreat I noticed a difference: I felt the outsides of my body more strongly - the outsides of my feet, the big toes and up the inner side of the leg going into the core muscles. I could feel lighter and more expansive in my upper body and my feet more grounded and rooted. There was more freedom of movement in my body.

## **What is Yoga when it is not a method?**

A way of being, an attitude, a way of living. Dynamic, alive, changeable, elusive. Connection, aliveness, vitality.

## **How would you describe Scaravelli yoga to somebody new to this practice and what images might help you convey your own understanding?**

An eagle soaring. A practice that feels expansive and freeing. The wings (arms) know where they belong so they can touch the expansiveness of the world.

The spreading of the trunk of a tree as it meets the ground. Wide, secure, and rooted. The feet can feel more in contact with the ground as if gravity is drawing them into the earth. The weight from the body can cascade down through the body and out of the feet into the ground. Rather than holding ourselves up, we can let ourselves feel held by the support of the ground.

The paws of a tiger as it prowls. Our wide paws touch the ground in a soft, sensitive and moveable way, and then we feel the springy arches of our feet connect with our leg and body and gently lift the foot as we walk in a way that feels the ground as we move.

## **Gravity**

Surrender to gravity rather than resist it and try and be self-supporting. Feel the feet sink into the ground, the tail bone drop towards the ground. If lying down the support of gravity rising up to meet us and hold our weight. Feel our embeddedness rather than trying to reach away from the world, other and ourselves.

## **What do you find interesting about the spine and your spine?**

I'm not quite sure how to answer this question because it seems so vast and I don't feel that I have given enough time to explore the spine. However if I were to write off the top of my head I would say that the spine is beautiful – the way that it naturally curves, it can move, how it is the centre piece of the body that connects it all up. I find it interesting how much of the spine there is! How much potential there is to move through the spine and feel each vertebra. I find it interesting how some parts of the spine are easier to move through than other parts. I feel that in my lower spine (tailbone and sacrum) there is a lot of holding whereas in my mid/upper spine there is greater potential for movement and feeling. I love the feel of the spine when I feel my tail bone dropping towards the ground and when I can

feel the connection from my feet to my head through the spine in backbend. I am intrigued by the spine and would love to understand it more – as a set of bones and experientially in my body.

**Choose a part of the body to inhabit more fully and experience through practice, and describe insights and discoveries.**

I chose the foot to inhabit more fully. I regularly massaged my feet to try and create more feeling and receptivity. I also tried to become more aware of my feet in daily life – can I give more of my weight to my feet and the ground? How do my feet move? What are the blocks to me inhabiting my feet more fully?

I found that if I focus on strengthening the outside of my feet then my knees were more supported and didn't collapse inward so much.

I found that I habitually tense my sacrum and hold it up, away from the ground. In doing so this prevented the weight of my body going down into my feet. Also I found that I habitually tense my knees, which again, act as a block from my weight reaching the ground. Instead my weight gets held and stuck in my knees which create a tremendous amount of stress on them.

I found that through feeling how the ankle connects the foot, the foot can become connected to the leg, trunk and head – there is a line of connection all the way from the foot to the head.

I found that engaging the big toe and the inner side of the foot can help connect us up through the inner leg and support our pelvis

The heel bone can sink further in the ground and the toes can lengthen and widen – helping to create a wider area of the body in contact with the ground and to help spread our weight into the floor. Also through moving the heels closer to our toes, helps us to feel the springiness of the instep and the upward force from the ground into our body

Babies and young children naturally move their feet constantly and thus maintain their innate flexibility of the foot

**When you are practicing, how do you experience your hands and your feet?**

My hands are like my feet – like the paws of the tiger. They can touch the ground without becoming fixed. They can feel their strength and contact with the ground but without becoming ridged. There can still be a lightness and springiness to them.

The hands can unfurl by knowing their connection back in to the body. We can put on our 'evening gloves!' and feel how our hands connect to the wrists, to the arms and back into the heart of the body.

Like all of the body the hands have the potential to soften and to touch the world in a more gently and receptive way.

## **Embodiment**

To feel. To sense. To inhabit. Presence and connection. To feel life inside oneself and from that sense of aliveness to connect to others/the world.

## **What to you is meditation?**

Awareness imbued with an attitude of curiosity kindness and love. It is a practice which enables us to see more clearly - for example - what is happening inside of me? What is the texture of this leaf? When we see more clearly there are less obstacles clouding our minds and actions - we can see when we are driven by wanting and rejecting - and we can have compassion for this and choose not to keep feeding these desires and aversions.

Meditation is being able to look yourself and others in the eye and not turn away for fear, hate, anger, nor to lust after, but to see directly into the being with an open heart

Meditation is the part that stays when everything else runs;

Compassion is my friend who sits beside me  
He stays close to me no matter what I'm feeling  
I flee from myself but my friend compassion stays close by  
Compassion lets me be however I am  
I can be shaken to my core and compassion allows me to feel the shaking  
I run. Compassion stays  
Compassion doesn't need to do or say anything, he simply is  
He rests the warm hand of reassurance over my heart.  
I run. He stays.

**Vanda sometimes claimed that 'There are neither teachers nor students. We are all teachers and students at the same time.' How does that reflection speak to you?**

I can understand this quote - as we are all exploring different aspects of our aliveness from different perspectives and in different ways. We can learn from the discoveries and difficulties of each other. What you may share with me might speak to my body and teach it something new and equally by seeing how I inhabit my body may bring something new into your awareness. We are learning from one another, with an attitude of humbleness and curiosity. Your way is not the right way, not the way, but if I am receptive I can learn something from your being.

Besides, there is not real destination; I don't see this practice as a linear practice. It is alive - it moves in spirals and in both direction - in this sense no one is above or better than anyone else rather we are all exploring what this dynamism feels like to ourselves and witnessing it in others

**What is your relationship to simplicity and stillness?**

I love simplicity, quietude and stillness. I feel most supported when with others in this environment. I can feel deeply connected to other people and with myself and the world without having to talk and make effort. I can rest in the fact that I can just be with people and that in itself is enough - nothing more is needed from me or from them. Our presence in itself is enough. What a relief! I can come in to my own being more, and become more receptive to the world. A different quality of meeting the world comes about - meeting the world without the pursuing, going out and looking for, grasping.

It has always appealed to me to live a life of a nun or in a monastic or simple setting - to have the space and time to explore the depths of life. To have the support and guidance of spiritual teachers. I find modern life in this culture too full of pressures and strains taking you outside of yourself, making you busy, achieving and constantly running. I need the pause, the space, the holiness of life to create meaning and enrichment. I feel that if you don't take the time to pause, to look, to be still then life runs over you, it's easy to become driven by tasks, and the mind. Simplicity and stillness gives the space for all the thousands of things going on in life to run their course and eventually be heard and settle - they can find their peace and you can find your peace.

**Choose one or some of Patanjali's yoga sutras to reflect upon and describe how you connect with their wisdom.**

'The goal of yoga is not to control, restrain, or confine the mind but to calm the *vṛttis*—the mind's roving, revolving tendency. Gaining mastery over the mind entails overcoming the mind's tendency to roam aimlessly from one object to another' I like this quote from the sutra because I find that when I practice yoga this is what naturally happens – my mind is focused and isn't roaming aimlessly. I enjoy having a break from my mind controlling the 'show' my actions and my life and enjoy the absorption of focus/attention that yoga brings

'Ultimately *yoga* means "union." The ultimate union is between the individual and the supreme, and the mind is the essential tool for bringing this union about.' For me this isn't the focus of my yoga practice. Maybe because I am not embedded in the philosophical background from which yoga arose. I don't know if I believe in 'the supreme' and that yoga facilitates connection with the supreme. However when I do practice yoga I often feel a sense of balance/harmony in my body/mind/being.

I enjoy the way that yoga as Caroline teaches it is intertwined with the dharma. I love the focus on mindfulness of the body, and a compassionate and caring attitude. I find yoga a meditative / mindfulness based practice and love the way that our yoga classes supports the connection between yoga and dharma. I also love how chanting is sometimes brought into yoga practice.

**What do you discover when you surrender your awareness back to body and breath?**

A sense of coming home and resting. I can connect with a space which is always there to connect to regardless of what else is going on in life. When I surrender my awareness to body and breath there is a simplicity to life.

**Describe ways in which yoga has deepened your intimacy with the breath.**

The breath is part of my practice which I feel has remained a bit neglected. I find that when my attention is with the body, my breath is natural and at ease. Also when we chant as part of our practice the breath is felt more throughout the body and has a depth and clarity about it. However when we do specific breathing practices which direct our awareness to the breath, I find that my breath becomes shallow and strained.

At other times I notice that when I come to my own yoga practice often I get stuck in my breath – my breath feels frozen and stuck in my throat. This feels as if it acts as a barrier to me entering into the realm of my body and practice. There is always more to explore!