

Deepening into Practice

By Kim Roberts

Somewhere between the extremes of effort and surrender lies the harmonious equilibrium called yoga. If what we mean by yoga is “union”, then we could say that it is this union of opposites that makes the asana practice such a valuable tool. Each set of opposites meets somewhere in the middle, where the mind holds both extremes at the same time, essentially short-circuiting the traditional understanding of our learned, and thus limited, belief systems. I think of asana practice as the physical counterpart to koan practice, that Zen tradition of using impossible questions to stop the mind in its tracks. In any posture it is possible to find these opposites and play on them. From this perspective, what does it mean to deepen our practice?

A balance of opposites creates stability and harmony in the postures. These same qualities will also eventually be reflected in the larger context of your life. It is very difficult to find this balance without a formal discipline to practice. Not to show others how perfect our form is, but to learn the most effortless, graceful, delicious way to hold the form. Balance is about taking what life throws at you and using that energy constructively, so as not to be thrown or deterred. This is where deepening occurs. Not in striving or resisting, but in accepting and allowing.

Practice is like a map: it can help us find our way, but unless we know our location on the map, it won't be much help. We need reference points. When we practice, we learn our individual tendencies and habits: our particular styles of chaos. When we acknowledge where we are to begin with, we will then know how to proceed.

By concentrating our practice to a precise formula, we keep the mind happy by giving it something to pay attention to...a project. Eventually, we realize that the project is transparent; that it is just a tool to help us see how the mind works. Mind is a process of impermanent content. So we begin to focus more on the process than the content. We take a posture; it disappears. While we do it, it is the most important thing, it takes all of our attention and we do our best to create the best posture we know how. Then we let it go and proceed with the next phase of our practice, with our life.

Obstacles are part of the practice. The edges of our experience show us where we can grow. They are gifts reminding us to pay attention. This does not mean that we let our obstacles take control. But unless we first accept our obstacles and give them the stage for a moment, we will have no understanding with which

to develop new approaches. Our task is to find out where we are too tight and where we are too loose, and compensate accordingly.

We all have obstacles: we make mistakes, have limitations or tendencies we wish we didn't. But whatever form it takes, an obstacle provides a structure from which we may view ourselves and go deeper. Obstacles are just reference points. Therefore obstacles are our teachers. How we handle them determines whether we deepen into our practice or use practice as another one of ego's masks. Our greatest strength is to be found in our most annoying weakness.

Yoga practice teaches us how to relax into intensity. It shows us how to make our way into a challenging situation (indeed seek them out) and learn to breath there, without immediately looking for the escape route. Some of us will be able to complete even difficult postures with ease right from the start. Some of us will never get beyond the simplest postures. Accept your situation, obstacles and all, and you will often find the key to change. It helps to understand that getting what we want does not necessarily make us any happier. Depth occurs through tolerating the phases when we don't get what we want.

People seem to be in such a hurry to advance. Being a beginner is humbling. But humility can be a profound teaching, if we are brave enough to face it. Especially in a system such as Ashtanga Vinyasa where there is a linear path to the "advanced" practice, being stuck at the beginning feels like punishment. The truth is, it makes no difference what the practice is if the intent is wrong. I have had students with gorgeous asana practices who have bad attitudes. I have had students with "bad" asana practices and gorgeous attitudes. I find the latter to be the more advanced student and much better company. A healthy sense of humour is infinitely more important than whether or not we can touch our toes. Will it really matter on our deathbed how limber we are?

What determines the depth of practice is the quality of awareness. It is remaining open to learning, being curious, having a childlike attitude of wonder. Asking, "What is this all about?" instead of, "How can I get it right?" It is so adult-like to want to do things right. Awareness does not make distinctions. If something is lovely or horrible, awareness stays present. Judgment is a sure sign that awareness is lacking: an unwillingness to engage directly and personally. Judgment is a refusal to take responsibility for one's own experience.

Experience is the stuff of life. If we let it go by judged or unnoticed we are missing our lives. Why do we practice, if not to connect more fully and authentically with our lives? Meditation and yoga practice give us tools to tune into our personal experience, without judgment. As someone so wisely put it, "God is in the details." Until we learn to be aware of our experience, we remain prisoners of our belief systems, with the key just in front of our eyes.

A deep practice means the ability to be there for yourself, no matter what the weather may bring. If it means saying, "NO!" to the dismay of others, then so be it. It may mean reaching out for help when you like to think of yourself as strong and independent. Depth means being fully present, whatever the situation. Above all it means being able to smile in the face of life's continual changes, and to be kind.