

## So You Think You Want To Be Flexible?

By Kim Roberts

Eighteen thousand feet up, my neighbor in seat 32F wants to know what I do. "I teach yoga," I inform him. "I've tried yoga," he replies. "I stopped because I'm not flexible enough."

Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't the point of going to a yoga class to learn yoga? Should I stop taking tennis lessons because I can't hit the ball? Come to think of it, I'm not taking tennis lessons, but if I was truly inspired to learn tennis, I would be out on that court missing balls from dawn to dusk.

Inevitably, when discussing yoga, the topic of flexibility comes up. People seem to think of it as a magic potion capable of curing everything from back pain to social anxiety disorder. Whether they have it or not, it is clearly the central issue. As if there is some inherent benefit in touching your toes.

Flexibility, though, is just one aspect of a multi-dimensional situation. It's no more or less important than strength, balance, or endurance. Rather than focusing on what is wrong or lacking, why not seek to discover what is right in your practice? This is why we call it practice, and not performance.

At a workshop years ago, a teacher dubbed me as Gumby. I'm still trying to work out the implications of being referred to as a two dimensional green plastic man and why this would be desirable. It doesn't fit on a resume, doesn't earn friends, happiness, or millions of dollars, and in fact, being flexible turned out to be my biggest obstacle. So, if you have any illusions about flexibility magically transforming your life into ultimate joy and bliss, let me now shatter those for you.

Without regard for the other dimensions of a harmonious practice (ie life), being excessively flexible is just as much of an obstacle as being too tight. Flexibility provides openness, which has its benefits, but without a base - a ground to come back to and a way to structure the experience of openness - it's just a set-up for disaster. Feelings that occur at the core are intense, and unless you have developed the strength to handle them, they are useless at best, and more often destructive.

Being flexible means, above all, the ability to say Yes. The problem with saying Yes all the time is that you don't say No. And when you don't say No, you end up doing things that you don't necessarily want to do. You don't commit to one thing because you're always saying Yes to the next thing that comes along. Would you like to know how many careers I've had? How many times I've moved?

Relationships? You get the picture. Sometimes I get so overwhelmed by all the options that I must lay on my couch for days. I'm constantly searching for No.

All Yes (prana) and no No (apana) is just another way of saying spread too thin. I can spread myself all over the map, but it doesn't necessarily mean that I have the integrity to manage things once I'm there. I'll go into an extreme posture and feel fine, and then have a nervous breakdown for the next week, or the next 3 years. Or, I can actually get stuck in a posture that hurts and not know how to get out. It's terrifying.

Hyperflexibility attracts extremes. In the past this meant hanging out with hoodlums (they were called that then) and shady types and finding myself in strange and dangerous situations. It was fascinating, but not very, shall we say, helpful. I am still drawn toward dark characters, although these days from a more artistic point of view.

Here's what a typical conversation might have looked like:

Me: Do you think I should invite Charlie over?

Stiff Person: You mean the psychopath who just got out of prison?

Me: Um, yeah.

Too much flexibility can mean no discrimination. It's so ready to please, to show that any posture is possible, that it neglects the fact that some postures are possible, but *undesireable*. Pranic activity can lead you into situations, but apana is what you need to maneuver wisely once inside. Apana offers discrimination and the strength to act on judgments. Prana says everything is fine. Apana says look again.

Prana without apana is a dangerous mix. In order to keep from blowing a fuse, act like water and head for earth. I knew of a family whose house was not grounded electrically. One day their home was struck by lightening. Since the current had nowhere to land, it ricocheted around the house, blowing out every single fuse and outlet, along with every appliance, until it finally burned out. I used to feel like this sometimes. Having invited powerful energy into my "home," I would discover that it was too much for my circuitry, usually when it was too late.

Essentially, a strong practice means a balanced practice. Tightness creates a natural boundary - a wisdom that you may not be prepared for what may come by entering a particular posture. It is the body's wisdom saying, stop, go slowly through this and consider some things before you go there. Listen to these limitations; they are wise. Our greatest strength is to be found in our most annoying weakness.

Limitations ensure that once you do go, you will have the strength to remain there with integrity. Discipline helps. So does kindness. Looking at my obstacles with gentleness is, I find, the key to disengaging their power over me. It is precisely in looking that I find the foundations for growth. Trying to bust beyond them without acknowledging them, without listening to what they have to tell me, will only lead me back to myself - that is, self with a small "s". The goal, if there is one, is to go deeper. Appreciate your tight spots, and then proceed.

From the other side of the fence, other people's obstacles are bound to look easier, more exotic, better. And sure, if I had tight hamstrings I'd want a different obstacle. It's always easier to want someone else's problem, because from the outside, it doesn't necessarily look like one. But after the initial novelty wears off...it doesn't matter what the obstacle is..it's just obstacle, and we all have them. No matter what label it takes, however we conceptualize it, it provides the same experience: a structure from which we may view ourselves and go deeper. It's just a reference point, and a constantly shifting one.

Next time your circumstances say No, take a moment to listen, gently. No can be very useful - imagine life without it. Limits ground us more firmly into experience so that when we are ready to fly into the ether we know how to make our way back to earth.

Just before we land, I say to my seat-mate," so being flexible is not what it's all about."

"What's it about then?" he wants to know.

"It's about a smooth landing," I tell him.