

Find Peace in Your Yoga

Learn to balance power and peace
through the three pillars of yoga.

By: Max Strom

What is it that drives countless urban practitioners' to work so hard in their yoga practice? Even as droves of people turn to yoga for health and healing, American students are often attracted to extremely physical, athletic styles of yoga, forcing their bodies into their imagined idea of a "yoga Olympian" and wrestling themselves into a wet, sweating heap. It's as if the person's mind gets into a Greco-Roman wrestling match with its own body. So, even as we reach for peace, many attempt to use the same aggressive tools we've learned in the business and sports world:

- Endure
- Force
- Intimidate
- Dominate
- "Win"

Since these methods are taught in business and sports, it is understandable that many people try and use the same mindset in their yoga practice—but is it working? Our bodies are changing but are we any *happier*?

The Dilemma

What the philosophy of yoga suggests is that a constant state of pushing, grasping, and goal setting is not only counterproductive in yoga, but ultimately damaging to our very spirit. Using these aggressive tools for every aspect of our life is like using a hammer on every job including brushing our teeth.

Even when our body tries to tell us we've pushed it too far, we justify our frequent colds, flues, and headaches as acceptable side effects of our sacrifice for our career. The unspoken Faustian deal we make with ourselves, is that by sacrificing health, sleep, and happiness *today*, we believe we gain something much more significant *tomorrow*; power, respect, money, and position. We convince ourselves that once we achieve these goals, then we can take that long overdue vacation, then we can sleep, then we can slow down and spend more time with our family, then we can be happy. The problem is that our children don't wait for us; they continue to grow up while we work late day after day. Our health deteriorates often manifesting itself in strange symptoms such as digestive problems, severe PMS, or skin rashes that we try and make "go away" with medications. And the danger that we all secretly fear is that by the time we get to the top of the ladder, our children will be grown and barely know us, our neglected partners will no longer be interested in us, our health will be ruined, and most terrifyingly, that our ladder may be leaning on the wrong wall.

Because of this syndrome, many of us are locked-up and holding tension in our bodies and nervous systems on the level of combat veterans. This is why we grind our jaws in the night. This is why we awaken at three in the morning unable to fall back to sleep. Is working hard bad? On the contrary, the yoga sages tell us that hard work is a virtue, as long as it is part of our transformation and not the avoidance of it.

Learning Balance

There's a wonderful metaphor from the yoga tradition that vividly depicts the plight of the average person and points the way to a more meaningful life. It's the carriage allegory. The carriage represents the body, the horses pulling the carriage represent the emotions, the driver is the mind, and the passenger is the soul (Atman). The story goes that the state of the average person is as follows; the carriage is in terrible disrepair, the horses are half-wild, the driver is unfocused and drunk, and the passenger is asleep. The passenger, a king or queen, is asleep, dreaming he/she is a peasant. Yoga, it is said, repairs the carriage (body), tames the horses (emotions), sobers and focuses the driver (mind), and ultimately - reawakens the passenger (soul). The soul then remembers his or her true purpose and instructs the driver on which route to take to their ultimate destination. This is the purpose of yoga, anything less is simply exercise.

So, then why would we take this obsessive drive into a yoga class and hope to obtain new results utilizing the same old dysfunctional system? The answer is *we can't*. We cannot use the same methods that make us tense and anxious, in order to learn to relax and become non-obsessive. And that is the dilemma.

THE SOLUTION

Solving the dilemma is a process of reprioritizing our goals. If we acknowledge that what we want foremost is to be fulfilled and happy, we must be willing to transform more than mere muscle tissue. Yoga *appears* to be primarily physical, but what makes it radically different from western "workouts," is that yoga is the harmonizing of:

- The MIND. Intention; mental focus, self-inquiry. Learning to discriminate between pure awareness and the objects of awareness.
- The SPIRIT. Breathing and emotional focus. Involving concentration of feeling, and relationship with one's higher Self, or surrender to God, in whatever form you understand it.
- The BODY. Involving a physical regime including movement or postures that infuse our life force and intention throughout our entire being.

Transformation comes when we make the effort simultaneously in all three pillars: body, mind, and breath (or spirit). As all three harmonize, we begin to experience ourselves more deeply, and we also happen to become stronger, more flexible, and calm. We even sleep peacefully through the night.

The 3 Pillars of Yoga

Here is a guideline of how to begin achieving a more meaningful practice and peaceful life:

Intention

The first thing to do is close your eyes and focus on your intention. In other words, aim at something. Dedicate your practice to a meaningful transition you wish to have in your life. An example here might be Peace, Forgiveness, or Patience. There is an old saying that if you aim at nothing you're sure to hit it. But when you direct your mind and heart in one direction, it gives your actions great power.

Your spirituality, however you define it, can be infused into your body so your body radiates who you are from your soul – and what you stand for in this world.

Breath

Face it, one reason we are afraid to breathe deeply is because we know deep down that breath is connected to our emotions. If we are feeling stressed out and not paying much attention to our feelings, breathing deeply may be terrifying. So, we keep our breath small and shallow and erratic, no matter how many times our yoga teacher says, "Breathe deeply." This can create two kinds of catastrophes. One is disease; unexpressed grief over decades can create diseases like cancer. Two, we can destroy our relationships; we tend to hurt the people we love the most because we are carrying our own emotional wounds that are invisible to the untrained eye.

Imagine trying to embrace someone who has open wounds under his clothes that you aren't aware of. His reaction would be like a wounded animal lashing out. So, when we consciously utilize yoga breathing to heal, we heal these hidden wounds. In this way, breathing practices can change our life because it changes our behavior, and that affects all of our relationships.

Asana

Practice your asanas (postures) with focus on your breath. Breathe into your heart center, breathe in light – filling the lungs completely, breathe out the past, that which you no longer need. If you have a spiritual practice, use your own visual image of God or name for God. Inhale as if you were inhaling the energy of God; exhale all that is not useful. Breathe into your entire body while in a posture, as you move, or as you hold in stillness.

When you begin to feel overwhelmed or fatigued, rather than push, rest a few moments. (Even machines need to rest.) Allow yourself to move into child's pose at least four times in an hour and half practice. Learn the difference between an all-out state and a rest state. Many overachievers know only the concept of "all or nothing." Explore the space between zero and ten. Try practicing at level seven, not ten. This will develop sensitivity, patience, and kindness.

Move your focus off your outer body and on to your inner body.

So, to really change how we practice, we need to first stop comparing and competing with ourselves and others, and start moving beyond thoughts of how our body looks. Many of us believe that if we were just a little more thin, a little more beautiful or handsome, our problems would be over.

Unfortunately, when we become obsessed and goal oriented with our appearance, we trade in one set of problems for another. We may "achieve" our physical goals but move even further away from joy and contentment. The obsessive drive seems to be getting us everything we want *except* happiness, and this is perhaps why two of the largest selling drugs in America are anti-depressants and anti-ulcer drugs.

One of the magical gifts of yoga is that whatever you apply yourself to and improve on in your practice, will be applicable to the outside world as well. So, as you learn to focus your mind in yoga – your focus will improve at work. As you become more patient with yourself and others in yoga, you will be more patient at home. As you become more joyful in yoga, you will be more joyful wherever you go. Imagine becoming a better person, and getting a healthier body as a side effect.

Remember, if mastering yoga postures were enough to transform us into spiritual masters, then people would be flocking to the athletes in Cirque Du Soleil to seek spiritual advice. The physical asanas alone do not necessarily make us happier, more spiritual, or more content human beings. But when one is inspired by an *intent to transform*, and from this intention we breathe, then the mind quiets and the energetic heart center begins to open. When this happens □ grace happens - change happens. The yoga postures and breath are tools to rebuild ourselves. The goal is not to tie ourselves in knots - we're clearly already tied in knots. The aim is to untie the knots in our heart. The aim is to unite with the ultimate, loving, and peaceful power in the universe.

- Namaste -