February 2016

Reluctantly Flexible

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2016/iss3/11

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Smith uses a braille watch to tell time without needing sight.

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My thoughts exactly.

Why do yoga if I can burn more calories, sweat more and work out my stress on a nice, long run? Yoga is calm — and you have to relinquish some degree of control to do it well. During my middle school volleyball career, I spent most of my time on the bench because I couldn't serve correctly or block anything, despite my unusual height. I hated every minute.

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IN WHICH A HIGH-STRUNG PERFECTIONIST GIVES YOGA A TRY AND LEARNS TO TAKE A BREATH (KIND OF)
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Despite my fears, I made plans to attend a morning class at a nearby gym and subconsciously challenged myself to not just go, but to find a way to be good at it. Hey, the “Go big or go home!”s of countless coaches are hard to untangle from your mind after 20-plus years.

At my first class, I was proud of how flexible I already was. My instructor remarked that I could almost get into a full bind with one of my arms. Whatever that meant, her tone said it was impressive. I could make it halfway into a difficult balancing pose. I went home with a tidy little ego boost coiling around my chest. I was a champ at yoga without even trying, evidently.

The need to be flexible, it turns out, is the biggest misconception about yoga, says yoga instructor Claire Kruesel. “People will try to do hard classes right away, when establishing a regular practice is more important,” she said.Oops, I thought. She went on to explain that yoga is about embracing your natural self and working with it — a concept I diligently worked against at first, forcing my injury-prone back into far more severe bends than my body was prepared to attempt.

I was knocked down a few pegs in the next couple sessions, when my instructors lectured on the importance of breath and had us practice its connection to our bodies. I’m going to let you in on a secret: breathing is hard. Really. My body wanted nothing more than to hold my breath through a series of difficult plank poses and core work, but I’m convinced that yoga instructors see everything. My determination to hold the pose without the coached breaths earned me a pointed look and gentle, “Remember your breathing,” from instructor June Burns.

All the confidence I’d gained from my easy transition into the physical side of yoga had disappeared by the end of my first power yoga class. Unlike the gentler classes I had been attending that focused on flexibility only, this class focused on strength — and it moved fast. Within ten minutes, I was breathing heavy, and, to my great shame, I found myself in child’s pose — fetal position, practically — waiting for my heart rate to come down. The next morning, I was nearly as sore as I was after my most difficult cardio circuit workout. Success, I guess?

Wracking my brain as I rubbed my sore muscles, I realized that my mind had become my biggest challenge to overcome in my yoga practice. I’m strong and naturally athletic, but muscle wasn’t going to improve how I practiced yoga.

When I’d mention this experience, yoga advice popped up everywhere. Kelly Schiro, who drives with me to work multiple times a week, listened to me complain about my soreness and mentioned that she’s done yoga for years.

“If I know I can’t, I won’t,” she said, regarding the more ambitious poses. It helped to know that she didn’t consider backing down a failure, but I wanted to hear more. I reached out to an instructor for any advice she’d give a high-strung perfectionist. As it turned out, my instincts were on the right path.

Burns, the instructor whose classes I attend most often, is encouraging and accessible. She also knows most of her students and their situations by name, and gave me tips on how to modify poses for my long limbs. Burns suggested, because I’m so predisposed to order and planning, that I physically write yoga into my schedule to give it more structure.
SMELLING MY WAY TO SUCCESS

Once, Burns brought an essential oil diffuser — a small white rectangle that plugged into the wall and lit up like a night-light — to class to help improve our focus. I wasn’t sure about it, but I was open to the idea of a scent improving my day in the yoga studio, so I opened my mind and breathed deep.

Essential oils are something I’ve stayed away from in the past — I’m never sure of how to use them. I love earthy and herb-inspired scents in perfumes and candles, but aromatherapy seemed like a different language.

I don’t know if it was due to the oil or the fact that I had settled into a regular yoga routine, but that class did go better for me. Meridyth Moore, a coworker of my mom’s and devoted user of essential oils for everything from cleaning to mood improvement, put it nicely, “It could all be a placebo, but I don’t care, if it works.”

I scavenged around until I found some inexpensive oils. The lavender, sandalwood, ylang ylang and lemongrass blend I had stumbled upon boasted “improved mood and vitality,” so I applied it to my pulse points like a perfume. When schoolwork became stressful, I did as Moore instructed and applied some to my palms and breathed in, hands cupped close to my face. The act itself fostered calmness, and soon I began to associate the scents kept in my desk drawer with a lowered heart rate and focused mind. I’m not sure I’d place money on aromatherapy’s scientific soundness, but it has worked for me.

“A PRACTICE, NOT A PERFORMANCE”

I spoke about my natural bend toward competition with Moore after learning that she had dealt with the same sort of anxiety — both a cause and symptom of my personality type — that I experience on a regular basis. A mother and wife, she leads a holistic lifestyle and practices yoga to remain calm and balanced. She’s always been a competitive athlete, so she understood my tendency to treat yoga like a 5K race.

“This is a practice, not a performance,” she reminded me. She told me that any pose that forced me to lose control over my breath would have to be worked up to, slowly.

“Don’t let your posture define your breath, let your breath define your posture,” she explained.

As a former cross-country athlete, I am very familiar with the concept that fitness is not just a physical concept, but a mental one. My coaches would — contradictorily — shout and yell at me during races to “Relax your frame!” As a nervous little freshman, I had no idea how to do that, so I’d ball my fists and will myself to run harder. By the final race of my senior season, I heard this from the side of the course and kept my eyes on the painted line in the grass. I willed my body to relax, and like a switch being turned off, my shoulders dropped, my jaw slackened and my hands uncurled.

Since my competitive running days, I’ve become somewhat mentally lazy when it comes to workouts. Without someone to keep me accountable, I lift the same weights and run the same routes I’ve completed for months. I’ve developed an affinity for group fitness classes because it’s so much easier to have someone else telling you that you can’t be done with squats quite yet. I quickly realized that yoga wasn’t like my other classes — if my mind wandered to dinner or the show I was currently binging, I wouldn’t just miss a pose. I’d find myself falling over, muscles tightening back up. In order to get better, I’d need to dust off my old “mental toughness” and do a bit of tuning up.
In my quest to solve my yoga problems, I found myself trying out guided meditation. I hoped it would help me practice the type of mental stillness I would need to improve my yoga practice. After a few disastrous sessions that actually made me more anxious than usual, I reached out again for help. Joel Geske, a professor at the Greenlee School and yoga instructor at Ames Racquet and Fitness practices meditation regularly. Meditating for even five minutes could be a huge challenge, he explained. I was trying to get something out of the session—rest, relaxation, inspiration—and not letting it do its job, it seemed. “There is not really such a thing as multitasking,” he told me. I rolled my eyes to myself when I realized that this would be yet another exercise in learning to let things go.

I tried a few more sessions, and his advice helped. Mediation didn’t have to mean sitting cross-legged in a dark room and listening to a chant or guided thought pattern. I developed an unorthodox and relaxed version that involved the breathing I practiced in yoga classes and a breakfast of cinnamon raisin oatmeal and yogurt. It meant waking up a little earlier to enjoy a quiet apartment and enough time to empty my mind before starting another day. That being said, more often than not, I found myself swept up in YouTube videos and answering emails before something remotely close to meditation had happened.

I shouldn’t condemn this, though, according to yoga’s mental teachings. As attendance of classes and my interest in yoga grew, it was explained to me that beyond breath as a central focus, yoga is about accepting everything from pain or sensation to a negative thought, allowing yourself to feel it, and letting it go.

“Challenge yourself to detach from any ideas of success or failure,” said Burns after my class had completed an especially difficult pose. My competitive spirit stung, and I tried not to feel proud that I had competed the more challenging variation. The feeling of success lingered, though, as I walked out to my car.

A Facebook post by a friend and teammate from high school inspired me to consider the mental practice of yoga more seriously. Madison Miler, a college student in her early 20s, has been traveling Asia and Europe solo for the past few months. While in Thailand, she signed up for a ten-day meditation retreat, where she meditated for nearly all waking hours during her stay. She shared her experience with me and explained that stillness could not only be difficult, but painful, too.

“After about four days I was feeling these tiny sensations so strongly that I was in extreme pain. It felt like worms were crawling through my nose, under my skin, and being pulled through my ear. There is nothing you can do to stop these sensations other than to observe them objectively, and even the slightest aversion to the pain makes the pain stronger,” she explained.

I began to realize that releasing my mind in yoga class didn’t mean betraying my natural tendency to think a mile a minute. It meant opening my body and mind to the experiences of others. I’m well aware of how “granola” that sounds; I thought it was ridiculous before starting this project. But, as Miler explained, experiencing things at a primitive level can result in a new understanding of the world. “On a fundamental level humans are all so similar — we all have natural aversions to pain and misery and natural cravings toward things that can bring us happiness and joy,” says Miler.

I loved that idea, but I still had no idea how to find the stillness to experience it. I don’t even know how to make it through a conversation without bouncing my legs and glancing around the room.
"The need to be flexible, it turns out, is the biggest misconception about yoga."

A BUNDLE OF NERVES

Coincidentally, I found myself in the throes of panic attacks and the worst anxiety of my life around the time I started reporting on this story. My counselor, Jamie Dunn, is warm and petite. Though the job description of a counselor likely reads, "Must be a good listener," Jamie has a special knack for it. At the end of my first session in her office — me swinging back and forth anxiously on a swivel chair as she observed quietly from her desk — she listed off a few things I should try to help with my stress levels. At the top of the list was yoga breathing. This, she explained, could have the same stabilizing effect I had begun to notice in yoga class when things started to go sour in classes or relationships.

Carrying the principles of yoga outside the studio wasn’t a new idea — plenty of instructors had mentioned it. My best friend, Sarah Thomason, swears by it. "Sometimes it’s important to stop what you’re doing and focus on what your body is saying," she told me.

I’m surprised to admit that I’m a yoga convert — I even bought a shiny new mat of my own. The bare feet, the challenge and the mutual respect between instructors and students have become symbols of getting out of my racing mind for just a few minutes. The poses have squeezed themselves into my spare moments: a shaky crow pose in front of the TV, downward dog when my back stiffens from typing for too long. I still haven’t sorted out how to let things go, exactly, but I’ve found the discipline to let go for the window of time I’m in the studio. I was wrong about yoga — there’s nothing more intense and appealing than a tough mind. ☛