

A SIMPLE AND PROFOUND THING

by Denise Benitez

You may be an important person, flying all over the world to meet important people, but when is the last time you investigated your big toe?

—Thich Naht Hahn

One of the eight limbs of yoga, which include practices such as social respect, breathing, and physical movement, is “dharana.” This is a Sanskrit word which means focus or concentration; the word concentration draws up images of furrowed brows, nights spent studying impenetrable texts, and a dullness of energy. On the contrary, this beautiful word represents mental freedom; freedom from the unconscious tendencies we all have and which make life often less than pleasant, to say the least. The type of concentration referred to in the eight limbs of yoga is one which harnesses the latent capacity we all have for a life lived in a peaceful relationship with time. How often in your daily life do you feel that time is closing in on you, that there is not enough of you to go around, that life is a long tunnel of tasks which never seem done? Or, have you ever had the opposite experience, when time seems limitless, and full of expansion, even when your looming tasks have not disappeared? These timeless moments seem to happen when we are deeply concentrating, or pushed outside our normal day to day mind, like when we are doing yoga, or making love, or creating art. Or, our relationship with time can be torturous; our lives seem to be spent on a treadmill of things needing to be accomplished, and at the end of the day, we drop off the hamster wheel, exhausted.

There is a Tantric practice which goes like this: many times during the day, gaze with soft open eyes at the top of a tree, or clouds moving by in the sky, or the activities of a bird, or a blade of grass growing. Do your best not to internally define these things, nor anticipate their beginning and end. You will be living in a few moments of absolute spaciousness, touching with your individual consciousness the reality of infinity. The effect of time on our lives is real, but time can only exist within the container of vastness. If there is no infinity, there is no time. If there is no silence, there can be no sound. Infinity, vastness, and spaciousness are absolutely as real as time, and co-exist.

To increase opportunities for peace and happiness in your life, you don't have to do elaborate practices or fly to remote places on the planet where there is deep quiet and cell phones don't work! You simply create your own daily exits from the group consensus; while everyone is scurrying around, sit on a park bench, and watch the sun's shadow creep across the sidewalk. It only takes five minutes, yet those five minutes seem to create an extra two hours of time in every day, because your relationship with time is now under your own auspices. You are no longer a sled dog tied to the heavy weight of routine; you become aware that the great mystery of pure beingness surrounds you at all times. Then, you carry a great and sweet secret with you at all times. In the most mundane of places and circumstances, you can find beauty and expansion.

It is stunning to realize how transformative the simple practice of concentration can be. And, of course, one of the most effective and juicy places to practice this kind of focus is on our yoga mats. Yoga asana practice provides a perfect opportunity for watching what life feels like moment to moment, without muddying it with fractured, chaotic awareness.

We have all heard stories of people who could somehow find relief and even joy in the most daunting of circumstances: prison camp, illness, loneliness. They were able to focus and concentrate on some aspect of the mystery of being: singing a song, moving their bodies, gazing with openness at a plant pushing through the sidewalk. This open focus allowed them to experience a profound freedom in the midst of the deepest challenge. Surely if they could find this capacity in such places, we can be inspired to cultivate it with dedication on our yoga mats!

The Sanskrit word “dharana” refers to this open focus; the lens of your heart and mind expand, giving you a life-changing glimpse of the fullness of being. And the more you intentionally practice these moments of focus, the more they seem to come to you unbidden, allowing you to live with a soft, sweet and grateful heart more and more of the time.