

KEEPING IT LIGHT: YOGA AS PLAY

by Denise Benitez

I'm sure we all have memories of the playful freedom in our bodies when we were children. I remember summer nights when I was young, the magical flying feeling of riding my bike in the almost dark, the spinning dance of the neighborhood kids under the streetlights as we played our last game of kickball, the wonderful terror of skating down the steepest driveway, the coordination of hips, torso, arms, required to spin the hula hoop. Those were my earliest yoga practices.

Every once in a while that feeling visits me on my yoga mat, and lately I have been intentionally trying to cultivate it even more. Although our beloved yoga practice is a form, which means there are some parameters we place around the movement, there is also the possibility for a great deal of exploration. And it is in this exploration where often the most understanding and growth occurs.

Watching children grow up, observing their early attempts at movement, seeing the incredible patience with which they learn to crawl, stand, walk, is inspiring for us as we see that we may have to practice many months or even years to find the place where we can kick up and balance in handstand. The lesson from small children is the attitude they bring to their "practice" of learning to walk, crawl, speak. It seems that the quality of frustration does not enter their experience until they are much older.

This recognition causes me to wonder: what would my own body experience be like if my agenda were much softer, if I could playfully enjoy my attempts at poses that are currently beyond me? What if I absolutely believed that whatever I set my mind toward and practiced consistently and wholeheartedly, I would be able to do?

Take a walk past a playground sometime or watch the children in your life doing their silly, important developmental practices. Although structure is necessary to practicing in a way that is most beneficial for us as adults, the softness and openmindedness of playfulness must also be present in order for us to want to step onto our mats, dedicate ourselves to what most nourishes us, and leave our practice feeling revitalized and wanting to practice again.