

FIERCELY GENTLE, GENTLY FIERCE

By Bianca Raffety

You may have heard your yoga teacher at one time or another mention that yoga is a balancing of oppositional forces. Sometimes these forces are easy to understand; other times not. When we draw in and extend out we can either find ourselves caught in a tense place between the two or allow the two to rhythmically pulsate in our bodies with each breath. While the latter may be more optimal, in getting there I think most of us dance between the two for awhile. Where it may get more challenging is when we take our practice from the physical experience of friction into the realm of feeling and the heart, which in Anusara Yoga is pivotal to deepening how yoga impacts our lives. It's also what spoke to me deeply about this practice.

For me something that I've been working on for a long time is balancing the friction between being able to be gentle and fierce when needed and at the same time. When I comprehend what is gentle and what is fierce I bring together two ideas; one that is tender and soothing and one that can reflect powerful intensity of emotion or conviction. Both serve their purposes well when needed; however the union between the two creates a spark resulting in a beautiful clear balance and can even inspire change. When this balance is reflected inward as well as outward, it can affect us on many levels, bringing in an inspired quality of being able to see and interact clearly with dedication and care. Without this balance in relevant situations I frequently feel incomplete in the expression of my heart, not to mention occasionally feeling like a jerk! I remember many situations where I felt as if I stepped back too far or was so aggressive in my conviction I lost connection to my heart or the person I was speaking with.

Since a balance between gentleness is frequently unavailable in the moment, I bring it to my mat, my most steadfast and regular place for practice. When I come to the mat feeling fierce in my being or in my thoughts, I frequently feel discomfort, dogmatic, or frustrated if there is no balancing quality. When I move deeper into my physical practice fierceness translates into hardness and aggression, where I may set myself up for injury or dissatisfaction in my body. Who needs it!?

By consciously breathing gentleness into my practice I begin to feel that fierceness can translate to commitment and dedication on a level of tremendous love. Using the pulsation within Anusara Yoga I can allow the dance to occur between being gentle and loving in my body, heart and mind while speaking fiercely through each asana. By allowing the two to have friction they change, becoming complimentary rather than oppositional. I have discovered that I can smile when I'm fierce; that I can be receptive and open when I'm gentle. I can still take in the beauty of the community of our practice and the wisdom of the yoga while feeling my own emotion and conviction expressed with an open and sharing heart and all of this without compromising my imagination in that moment. That's pretty great, but it's still when I'm in the safety and warmth of my practice.

Taking the activities and balancing of the heart is much harder when you move through your day, interacting with friends, family, coworkers, etc. I have definitely felt sadness by not tapping into that beautiful balance that I can cultivate on my mat, inadvertently hurting someone or myself with thoughts, words or deeds. Being too fierce can be painful to you and others and being too gentle walks that fine line of being passive in a way that doesn't honor you or others either. I guess that's why we call what we're trying to do practice. Part of the gentleness we cultivate is the gentleness with ourselves as we learn to balance oppositional forces. Part of our fierceness rests in the knowledge that we can be kinder and more loving in our convictions.

So now, after many years of practicing on the mat, I can sometimes, more often than before, remember to be gentle when I'm tapping into the fierce goddess within. I can remember how good it feels when I can be this way with myself in a difficult pose or when I come to my mat working through a difficult issue. Because I begin to see myself more clearly, I can see the person in front of me more clearly as someone who also struggles to find balance. Even if it's still difficult to be consistent, I find that it gets easier to try with all of my heart to respond with wisdom and clarity even if it's not available to the person I'm speaking with. And in the art of practice I have learned to come back when I can and in so many words say: I see you and I'm sorry, can we try that again?