

THE FRUITS OF PRACTICE

by Denise Benitez

The amazing process of learning anything is a testament to the capacity of the human mind to evolve and grow in the course of a lifetime. You can go from a tricycle to Lance Armstrong; you can go from not comprehending the dots on a page of music to playing sonatas; you can be in complete confusion listening to a foreign language, and a few years later, be dreaming in that language.

Most people who come to their first yoga class have a learning curve, which is to be expected. The forms, shapes, and words are unfamiliar. Yet, within a remarkably short period of time, and with guidance, yoga students become used to the subculture of yoga: the place to put your shoes, how to take your seat, the chanting of Om or an Invocation, the general flow of the class, and of course, the first Sanskrit word most students learn, Savasana.

Then, is that the extent of the learning? From my experience, not even close. Learning the basics of a yoga class routine, becoming familiar with the key standing poses, understanding how to move into a pose; while this is all invaluable knowledge during your first few years of yoga, it is like learning the basic alphabet of a language. You have learned enough to *think* you know yoga, but you haven't yet learned enough to know how much you don't know.

I have experienced this over and over again in my yoga teaching and learning life. I'll reach a pinnacle of knowledge about something, say; how to do backbends, and think I have it figured out, and then I realize that there is a whole philosophical and emotional field to explore relating to the human heart, the expansion of the heart realm, and I'm back to the beginning...knowing more than I knew before, but awed (and excited!) by the vastness of what I don't know.

Because the field of yoga is so enormous (physical poses, anatomy, breathing practice, meditation, philosophy, lineages, etc. etc. etc.), we necessarily dive into certain streams of interest for a while, learn deeply there, and then come up for a breather, with another diamond of interest to turn toward. I am in awe and deeply honor the traditions and explorations that came before me; I also am informed by the rapid pace of innovation and creativity that Western yoga practitioners are adding to the stream of the practice.

And yet I speak here from the stance of a life-long yoga practitioner and long-time teacher. For those who come to a yoga class once a week, and have other interests and busy lives, how do they learn about yoga's depth and meaning?

I believe that even someone who comes to only one class a week can learn and benefit from yoga's profundity. The key is constancy; in *The Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali gives us the five qualities that must be cultivated in order to maintain this constancy, even if it is a commitment to a once a week practice: faith, energy, mindfulness, remembrance, and wisdom.

Faith: You don't know why exactly, but you always feel better after yoga practice. Next time you think about not practicing, you remember to remember that yoga affects us in mysterious ways, and you make a decision to trust the practice, to have faith in the many practitioners who have illuminated this practice, and to get on the mat or meditation cushion.

Energy: Some commentators on *The Yoga Sutras* use the phrase "heroic energy" here, and that is what it feels like sometimes; the kind of emotional and spiritual energy that comes from deep inside, and is not so much about dominating and pushing through, but stepping into the stream again and again, turning your life force toward what is optimal and harmonizing.

Mindfulness: This can be thought of as getting to know yourself better and better, so that you are not *in* the thoughts that limit your capacities, but *watching* them. You can then see the right action in any moment, the accurate micro-adjustment in a pose, the true way to arrange your energy field in class, the perfect breath to take.

Remembrance: It's easy to stay small in our vision, and in our sense of our potential and worthiness. Remembrance brings us to practice, because it is joyful to step into practice when it means coming home again and again to our own beauty and dignity.

Wisdom: True wisdom happens over time and is something that is deeply felt, rather than just an intellectual theory; you see the results of devotion to practice, to evolution, to meaning, to the ritual of your practices. As wisdom expands, you recognize it more quickly and closely over time, which strengthens your sense of trust and faith.

There is a way to be in the flow of life and a way to try to stop the river. Practice is about trusting the flow of the river, using its energy to support you, being aware of the power of that energy and its magnificence, seeing that *you* are that river and that magnificence, and dedicating yourself to its freedom. Then, even once a week practice can contribute to a life that is beyond the commonplace.

As Paul Muller-Ortega said in a recent talk, "Our strength, wealth, support derives from our practice. When times of challenge come, we have that to fall back on."