

# THOUGHTS ON YOGA

by Fred Ward

I have practiced yoga on and off since 1988, mostly on since 1998, and very regularly since 2003. In the last five years, my practice has begun to have a greater impact on my daily life: challenging myself while not pushing too hard, recognizing my limitations while taking risks, persevering without enduring, looking to the future without wishing away the present, and enjoying the process without just focusing on the results. Growing up, my primary life strategies were endurance, defiance and caution. I strove to navigate over and around those who hindered me. In short, I had a hardened attitude, replete with distrust and fear.

Using the asana practice as a metaphor for my approach to my actions and my relationships, I have begun to take more risks. I am able to experiment with pushing myself beyond my immediate comfort zone without moving into my danger zone, and recognize that my comfort and danger zones are not the same as anyone else's. I can focus on the intention of maintaining alignment and ease in a pose while accepting the limitation of tight hamstrings just as I can focus on the intention of making an effective presentation to a group of people while accepting that I am not going to be a dynamic motivational speaker. But I am open to the possibility that I can change, even while making mistakes along the way and experiencing the pains of growth.

I have also begun to focus more on my intentions than on the outcomes. I intend to realize a pose fully even though it may not be as "full" as the one in the calendar on the wall. I can say what I need to say and accept that I do not have control over the actions that other people take or don't take. There is nothing more that I can ask of myself than to be honest and have a good intention. Letting go of outcomes means a steady practice of self acceptance.

The aspect of anusara yoga that I most appreciate is the constant vibration or recalibration of the loops and spirals: the idea of putting forth energy and enthusiasm but balancing that with safety and reason. Life is not either/or, but an infinite gradation of subtlety. Memorization and facts are useful tools, but balance and negotiation of life's challenges are arts that require a deeper understanding of the process and the goal.

As for the other limbs of yoga laid out in the Yoga Sutras, I view the concept of *ishvara* as psychologically analogous to the cosmological theories that, by necessity, trace back to a single point, the first cause of the universe. In astrophysics, the question always remains as to what came before. In psychological terms, what is at the essence of a person, what is it that without which I would not be who I am? Would the loss of a particular relationship cause me to no longer exist as myself? The loss of a job? A house? A limb? A child?

Recently, I went on a yoga retreat in Guatemala where, like most of the world, the standard of living is low. I wondered what it might be like not to be able to read and not know about most of the things I know about. Is what I know at the essence of who I am? Do the thoughts that I am expressing here make up who I am? Would I be me without the experiences I have had or without my interests and plans for the future? If I lost my family members and friends in a civil war, would I still be me?

The goal of yoga, as I understand it, is to quiet the *vritti* or turnings of the mind. In other words, to appreciate that attachment to things, ideas or people sit on top of who I am, but are not who I am. What does this mean in the messiness of everyday life? If someone is hostile to me or disregards me, that is not who I am. If someone does not follow through on a promise, that is not who I am. If I am frustrated while stuck in a traffic jam, that is not who I am. It is not necessary to react to circumstances as if my essence were at stake. It is more important to respond in a way that is most likely to result in the outcome I desire. Even when I'm really frustrated. Even when I don't think it's fair.

Furthermore, I do not "know" what the best outcome is. This concept of surrender is at the heart of most religions, a concept so many of us have learned about but have not practiced. Letting go of attachments takes humility: accepting that I do not necessarily know what is best for me or for others. Most of us have had our hopes dashed only to realize that the actual outcome was more favorable than the desired outcome.

Not having attachments means recognizing that I am more than the sum of my thoughts, experiences, knowledge, desires and activities, that my value transcends any particular phenomenon. This is why meditation can be so challenging. The process of aging is a meditation of sorts. If we are fortunate enough to live a long life, we gradually need to give up many of the things, activities and relationships that we thought defined us, but in the end, what remains is our essence, that single point of our being, *ishvara*.