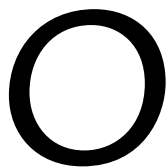


# WHAT THE BODY LOVES

by Denise Benitez



ur bodies love and live for movement. From the very beginning, motion is the sign of life. The new mother puts her hand on her belly in amazement and says with tears in her eyes, “I just felt the baby move for the first time!” When the newborn arrives, we anxiously look for movement, kicking legs, flailing arms, and we breathe a sigh of relief.

If they are pried away from their computers, children instinctively hurl themselves joyfully through great ranges of motion; climbing trees, jumping, contracting, expanding, squatting, sitting with freedom on the floor. Then the decades of sitting in chairs in classrooms, cars, offices begin, and most bodies begin to shrink their movement horizons to the narrow planes of forward and a little more forward. (Bet you’re sitting forward right now! Maybe lie on the floor and read this, while you wiggle your legs up in the air like bug antennae!)

In a yoga class, you are encouraged and allowed to move your precious body through a wide and unusual range of motion, touching places in your body that have not felt the light of day in a very long time.

As I refine my practice over the years, and keep learning, I am realizing that different kinds of movement are beneficial in different ways. As “hot yoga” and “power yoga” have swept across the country, I found myself quite judgmental about what I deemed “not a real yoga practice, just a workout.” Then, I began to read some of the work of Peter Levine, a neurology researcher who works with healing trauma. He has a wonderfully optimistic paradigm that he developed in watching how animals in the wild deal with trauma (this does not necessarily apply to our neurotic house pets!). When a zebra is hunted by a lion and escapes, the zebra will “discharge” the energy of fright and pursuit by shaking its’ body, flinging its’ head up and down, running around madly for a while. Then, it is over. The zebra is not afraid to visit the place where the incident occurred, it does not slink around in fear for the rest of its’ life. What does this have to do with hot yoga and fast movement? Peter Levine describes trauma as frozen energy. “The opposite of frozen is flow,” he says. We have the same innate instinct to discharge trauma that animals display. He even advises that if you are feeling traumatized or anxious, to get down on the floor and imagine that you are the lion instead of the zebra. Walk across the floor like a lion, feel your power, and even your appropriate aggression. (One definition of aggression — An uplifted, ready to face the world energy that is full of healthy power.) When we watch the nature shows, don’t we usually identify with the poor hunted prey? Lions have babies to feed, too, and their aggressiveness is in service to life. As in hot yoga, there is a time and a place to discharge and display aggressive energy in a beneficial, health-giving way.

That said, there is such a beauty and juiciness to moving slowly. At this stage of my life, that is where my body truly sings in joy. Movement such as running, biking, fast yoga vinyasa, are all activities that fire the parts of our muscular system that have to do with intensity, life and death, sometimes even a sense of desperation. Slow movement, on the other hand, builds a deeper, more intrinsic kind of strength, a close to the bone, close to the core, peaceful heart kind of strength. Slow doesn’t mean you won’t sweat or work, that your heart rate won’t be beneficially raised! It does mean that you will be deeply aware in every incremental moment of the movement. It means that you will have great opportunity to feel parts of the movement where you are using your muscles less optimally than you could, when you are on automatic pilot in your motions. Moving slowly builds physical strength in the parts of your muscular system that have to do with stability, equanimity, a spacious inner view even when the situation is challenging. Moving slowly is more body initiated and less mind initiated, which creates the possibility for revelation to come through from our inner instincts. There is nothing automatic about slow movement; it is a state of being and moving in which one is deeply engaged with the wisdom of life itself.

My dogs love to walk fast, to chase, to play and every day I take them for a fast, fast walk, sometimes up and down hills, all our leg muscles working, hearts pulsing, . It is luscious,, my body can become delirious with the joy of moving through space with such speed, with the nectar of deep breathing. Then I get on my mat and find another kind of potency and delight: the simple dance of gravity, body, weight, and breath, that still, after 40 years of practice, continues to nourish and amaze me.