

When Less Is More

By trying too hard, you may be adding tension to your poses...and your life.

By Phillip Moffitt

Some people approach their yoga practice as a break from the world, a separate space where they can recover from life's stresses and strains. Once they've pulled themselves back together, they return to their families and jobs renewed. I think that's legitimate, but it's not my experience. I approach yoga from the perspective that I'm learning something that can be integrated into my life. Over the years I've come to understand that life itself is mostly an opportunity to practice, to move towards wholeness of experience. Our formal practices like yoga and meditation provide us with a safe, nourishing environment in which we can gain stability and abilities that aid this process.

For instance, last week while I was teaching a yoga class built around working without tension, the relevance of yoga to the rest of life just naturally emerged. We started with Downward-Facing Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana). First I had the students push their hands hard into the floor, feel the resulting tension in the shoulder muscles, and notice how when they pushed themselves into the posture that same tension was built into the pose. "Just do the pose without adding anything," I repeated over and over. Next, I had them lightly place their hands on the mat, as though they were ready at any moment to lift off the floor, and witness how this also created tension in the shoulder

muscles and neck when they pushed up into Downward-Facing Dog. We experimented to see if it was possible to let go of the added tension once fully in the pose. It was a mixed class in terms of the students' skill levels and innate flexibility, yet by the end of class most of the students seemed to be incorporating the idea into their practice.

"Watch a senior teacher do their own asanas," I told them. "One thing you will notice is how relaxed they are in their bodies, as though they aren't exerting. No matter how much they urge you to work hard, they don't mean for you to tense. That's something you're adding because your mind wants to par-

ticipate. Just let your body do the work. Much of yoga is learning to get out of your own way."

I then pointed out that what we really want to learn is how to incorporate our yoga practice into the rest of our lives and to respond appropriately to life's challenges without adding tension. It is at this level that yoga really becomes a deeper practice. You can be under tremendous stress and come back into experiencing your feet on the ground as though it were just another moment of Mountain Pose (Tadasana); or you can receive a big disappointment and be able to drop into your breath, realizing it's just another moment of



ILLUSTRATION: LEIGH WELLS

practice, and allow the breath to move the feelings through your body.

Easy Does It

The idea of not adding tension is a universal principle. In teaching vipassana Buddhist meditation, which is a moment-to-moment mindfulness practice, I emphasize that the mind can just rest on the experience of hearing, just as the buttocks rest on the meditation cushion. In resting there need not be any reference to “I”; hearing just arises in the mind. The meditator then shifts the mind’s attention to the breath, and the same thing applies: The in-breath arises, has a duration, then an ending; the out-breath follows the same pattern. Over time the meditator is able to experience many moments on the cushion where there is no added tension, no contraction into the idea of a rigid unchanging Self. Eventually the understanding spreads into daily life. When there is no added tension,

there is the opportunity for liberation, to simply be with what arises in the moment. This is what is referred to in Zen as “beginner’s mind,” and it applies directly to your yoga practice.

Recently I experienced how easy it is for tension to creep into my poses when

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my teacher Tony Briggs and I attended a two-day workshop with one of his teachers, Shandor Remete. Shandor is an inspiring and demanding teacher, and I was intensely efforting in each pose. I glanced over at Tony and saw that his body, while fully engaged, seemed very relaxed; there wasn’t any visible tension. At first I wondered, “Why isn’t he working harder?” I kept sneaking looks at him until I finally realized the truth: He was just doing the

pose. In contrast, I was having to overcome the constraints caused by the tension I was adding to the pose. Later when I asked Tony how he stayed so relaxed in a pose, he quoted his first teacher, Judith Lasater, saying there’s a difference between “action”—the doing of the pose—and “friction”—unnecessary efforting.

Don’t confuse not adding tension with just hanging out in a pose. Of course you have to work the arms in Downward-Facing Dog. But don’t tense the arms, the shoulders, or the back to work them; instead place your awareness in the bones, feel the skeleton providing stability, and allow the nervous system to be neutral. Maintain that neutrality as you use your muscles to push up into the pose. Then activate only those muscles needed to move the pelvis farther away from the arms, and to create space between the pelvis and the thigh bones, and between the top of the pelvis and the rib cage. You will discover that you can create more space in your body and hold the pose longer. How can you tell if you’re doing it correctly? Another of my teachers,

Ramanand Patel, will tell students to observe the breath; if it can't move freely, there is constriction in the pose.

Shift into Neutral

A question that arises for us all is, "What is the proper use of will in yoga and life in general?" On the one hand, it takes a certain amount of will just to practice, let alone grow your yoga practice, and the same is true in life. On the other hand, excessive willfulness creates undesirable tension. Finding the balance between will and acceptance is part of what you are learning in your yoga practice, just as you are learning what is the proper balance between pain and relaxation. One of the benefits of doing yoga is you begin to develop the intuitive art of finding balance in any life situation.

Another way to approach this question is to begin to differentiate between intention and willfulness. Intention is setting a direction for yourself in movement or in actions in your life and holding it as both a vision and an outcome, so that it acts as both an inspiration and

a map. Many books on the "inner game" of various sports make use of this viewpoint. Willfulness is the determination to push through any resistance. The difference between intention and willfulness in this context is that intention implies flexibility and gentleness, while willfulness is absolute, unswerving, and rigid. Both intention and willfulness can be desirable, but for most of your yoga practice and for your life, intention is the more balanced, healthier approach. Again, you can learn to make these distinctions in the laboratory of the yoga studio and then carry them into the rest of your life; that's what makes yoga such a profound practice.

To discover this for yourself, try this experiment. Do Triangle Pose (Trikonasana), and as you bend over to the side, focus your mind on your own body experience. See if you tense the lower abdomen as you start to bend. Your instructor may well have been saying for months not to harden the stomach as you bend, and you never grasped the meaning before. If it's not clear whether

or not you are tightening, deliberately tense the stomach as you bend and see how difficult it is to both extend and twist the spine with a tense belly. Then do the opposite and see how much more potential exists for fluidity. Or do Warrior II Pose (Virabhadrasana II) with the intent of keeping the little toe side of the back foot on the ground while you bend the front leg in the proper manner. It's very easy to think you have to tense the back leg, but the opposite is true; the more you simply rest the back foot and allow the weight to flow from the buttock to the floor, then let the front leg bend from this anchor, the easier it is to do the pose.

Neutrality is a key concept in movement. When the body is in neutral, it is ready to move in the desired direction without delay or additional effort. One way to assess your body for neutrality in yoga is to see if you are relaxed in beginning a pose and if you can maintain the sense of overall relaxation as you begin working the body.

In a similar manner, equanimity is a

key concept in vipassana practice. When the mind has equanimity and something pleasant arises, you experience the moment without trying to hold onto it and creating tension. If something unpleasant arises, your mind does not contract in a futile attempt to avoid what is arising. Instead, it stays open and relaxed even though you are having an unpleasant experience; therefore, you suffer less.

You can experience the truth of this yourself in yoga. In his book *Light On Yoga*, B.K.S. Iyengar rates every pose according to difficulty except for Corpse Pose (Savasana), which he does not rate because he says it is simply too difficult to register on the same scale with the other poses. Savasana is the ultimate neutral position—the mind and the body are alert, both are awake, but they are not contracted in any way.

Living your life with equanimity has the same flavor as Savasana: You are alert, but the mind is not attaching to anything; it is just appropriately responsive. Although the teaching of mindful equanimity is a Buddhist practice, you can imagine being able to go through your yoga practice and even your usual day while in Savasana. It may sound far-fetched at this point in your practice, but many people have varying degrees of this ability which they've attained through diligent practice. It's not an all or none situation; rather, it is about adding a little more calmness and alertness to your practice, your work, and your home life. Of course, you can be assured you will completely lose it and have to rediscover it, and that this pattern will repeat itself endlessly. But, overall, there is growth in your practice and in the quality of your life, and you have more moments of being able to live from your deeper values.

Relax into Life

So, is it possible to let loose of tension once you are in a pose? It depends on where you are holding the tension. In movement, there is a primary path of intention in the body and also secondary paths. The primary path involves weight-bearing effort, such as the action of the

hands and arms in Downward-Facing Dog; the secondary paths are such things as the neck, abdomen, hips, and chest. Because they are not weight bearing, the secondary paths can move in and out of tension while in the pose; but in the primary, weight-bearing path, tension gets locked into the pose. Try as you might, you can't release it without breaking the structure of the pose.

Jackie Joyner-Kersey, the Olympic gold medal track star, once said of her running style that she established her speed as quickly as possible and then concentrated on relaxing while she allowed her body to run. A yoga pose is like that. You can find the appropriate structure of the pose for yourself on any particular day with your body just as it is, then relax into the experience regardless of the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the sensation. Don't waste energy creating tension, judging the pose, or wishing you were somehow different than you are in this moment.

Is your life any different than your yoga practice? Is it possible to relax once you have fallen into tension in a moment of your life? My experience is that it is exactly the same. You can be tense when starting to make a presentation and then relax, or get tense in the middle of a discussion with your wife or husband and then let it go. But if you lock into a point of view in which you have to be right or the other person has to change, then that is just like a weight-bearing pose in yoga, and there is no getting rid of the tension without relinquishing your position and starting over. Letting go of tension in life is a lot harder to do than relaxing in Triangle Pose—one more reason to appreciate your yoga practice. ♦

Phillip Moffitt is the founder and president of the Life Balance Institute, a nonprofit organization based in Belvedere, California, devoted to the study of the mind-body relationship in both inner growth and organizational leadership. He teaches hatha yoga, vipassana meditation, and somatic education, and has a black belt in aikido. He's coauthor of The Power to Heal (Prentice Hall, 1990) and Medicine's Great Journey: One Hundred Years of Healing (Little, Brown and Company, 1992).