

Finding Ease and Comfort on your Cushion

— a layman's approach

by Hazel Faithfull

I can still hear a teacher's catch-phrase: "find the ease and comfort of the pose" which at the time holding an extended stretch in a long asana-led class seemed an irony. More likely, my grumpy early 20s self heard 'ease and comfort' as sarcasm as the hyper-flexible teacher elegantly swooped in and out of poses, neither sweating nor puffing!

In time I felt at home on my mat, had learnt sequences and gained some understanding of the complexities of postures, when I found I hit my resistance to stillness. Why is doing very little such hard work? Like many I found my own company scary but by small amounts of sitting regularly, and dragging my mental self to stay put, I did and do feel real peace in stillness.

As teachers we often forget to make things simple and approachable. We forget where the start line is. To try formal meditation is, for so many, the biggest challenge in their weekly class. The accessibility of yoga in the West gives space for spiritual and atheist alike. The most important lesson I believe is: 'you bring who you are to the mat and take from the class that which you need or want.' Keeping a

diverse and interesting introduction to stillness and progressing with meditation techniques in our teaching is vital and we are letting our students down if we don't.

In a recent article actress Sheila Hancock discussed how poems helped her in the healing process through grief and bereavement. Poetry can be a good starting point to find time for stillness.

'From that moment I began climbing out of my depression... Looking back, finding the Yeats poem [When you are Old] was a full stop...[and I] found solace there.'

Another from her choice of poems is *Leisure* (see box).

When teaching we can hear ourselves repeating instructions. It seems interminably, but students request those reminders and someone in the class won't have listened before! Likewise reminding students to take time out and consider the world around them can be a constructive cue.

The written word was my way of easing into meditation. I found Angel cards useful; each morning shuffling the deck and the theme of the chosen card forming the basis of quiet reflection. My favourite is still the Laughter Card which describes the qualities that be gained through meditation or laughter:

Laughter is a wonderful healer. It shakes out fear and leaves you feeling happier, clearer and more relaxed. Remember Angels fly because they take themselves lightly.

These Diana Cooper cards are a simple format with just script (many picture decks reference a separate book). To be inclusive and not alienate some students I take inspiration from all fields and various religious texts. A famous quote or saying can offer a meaty subject matter to focus the mind on.

Out of clutter, find simplicity. From discord, find harmony. In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.
Albert Einstein

Leisure

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?
No time to stand beneath the boughs,
And stare as long as sheep and cows.
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.
No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance.
No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began.
A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

W H Davies

In Stephen Copes' yogic discussions with Donna Farhi she tells how yoga created a space away from her difficulties as a teenager, her understandable fear and feeling ostracised as a 'foreigner'. From her first yoga class at 16 years of age:

...that I felt - for just a brief moment of time - completely safe. Safe! ...I discovered that I could conjure up that same feeling through practising yoga by myself at home.... there was something that drew me like a magnet to practise."

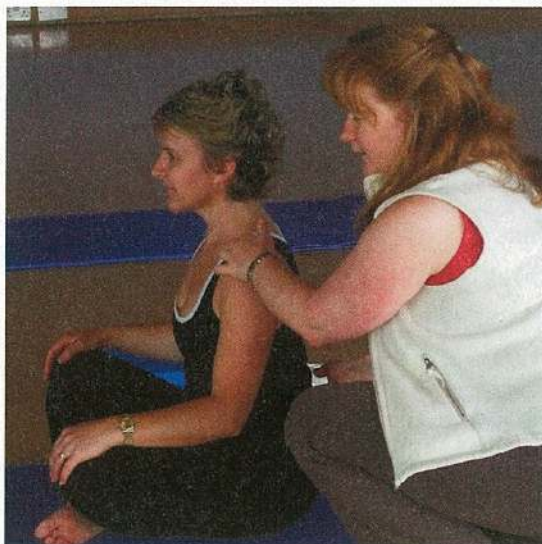
Farhi - Will yoga and meditation really change my life?

Recently one student described how her weekly class 'glued her back together'. It's a nice image as our lives tend to be pulling us in different directions, the fragmentation between our personal mix, be it a mix of work demands, parenting, exhaustion from illness and/or depression, hours of study or the way travel and social commitments steal hours. The glue effect, I believe, comes from our breath, the steady constant in our lives. My own catch phrase is: "breath and smile, if you are grimacing you have forgotten to breath."

It is too easy to hold the breath when concentrating, if we can relax and let the breath move freely we return to 'ease and comfort' we aim to find it even in that difficult one-legged balance. Full comfortable breath gives us more oxygen or prana - the vital energy of our lives. Amazingly the balance becomes more stable too.

Experience yoga as the quality of attention, rather than the quantity of minutes you have practised, and you might find that you have lost track of time altogether. Julie Rappaport, 2009

To begin with be aware of how you breathe, both while you move and in relaxation. Then introducing a longer exhalation, or out breath, and compare if the effect is calming. To enhance the feeling use three deep sighs. To sigh out reminds the body to loosen habitual tension. To empty the breath out completely encourages a deeper, full inhalation and so the circle of breath becomes stronger.



Mindfulness is creating this calm awareness. By taking note of how we are and how our movement functions, our feelings bring us into a deeper awareness and leads into a calm detachment. Mindfulness often stops when a yoga class ends so try to take your practice into the rest of your activities.

Try to regularly come into a comfortable sitting position and watch your breath. Sitting with feet comfortably grounded while on a chair or in an easy

upright sitting posture on a cushion, or use a slow walk so your steps can measure out your breath. By concentrating our minds upon the breath we begin to distance ourselves from the clatter of thoughts we carry in our heads. The simple act of breathe awareness brings us into stillness.

'Meditation is as simple as breathing. After you have practised for a while you'll find that you are a living meditation.'

Mediation is easy - Penguin Books

During my training with Marteen Vermasse he introduced the yogic texts and full pranayama. Ease and comfort is the translation from the oldest text, Patanjali's Yoga Sutra:

Sthiram Sukham Asana: Poses should be firm and feel good.

It is interesting how sometimes it seems by osmosis we adapt an idea or technique to our own understanding. It's always worth trying something just to see how we absorb or reject that technique. Offering uncomplicated approaches to students can lead them to discover a deeper and meaningful journey.

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