Emotional balance means mastery of our feelings. His wife’s reaction to losing her job was a classic case of not knowing how to control her emotions. He said, “She’d just let her anger out,” he said. In fact, it’s our outer focus – and what it does to our minds and bodies – that lies at the heart of our emotional struggles.

Today’s professional climate demands that we perform at high levels externally, but gives us no guidance for assessing our inner emotional and spiritual progress. So we measure ourselves and one another by our output: what we achieve in our jobs, how much work we produce. There’s nothing inherently wrong with outer focus or the drive to produce – both play key roles in our creativity. But they usually work best as a natural extension of inner focus and inspiration.

The dilemma: how do we move at our own pace when everyone seems to be racing along at lightning speed? And how do we cultivate inner focus when it feels like the world demands outer focus? Looking inward is the first step in developing emotional balance. A yogi friend of mine remarked over tea the other day that his wife, long known for her strict emotional control, was suffering from acute anxiety. She meditated every day, he told me, but she looked deeply unhappy during and after her meditations. “Sometimes, I wish she just let her anger out,” he said wistfully. “All I ever get from her is the silent treatment.” His wife’s stomach problems told the story: the anger she couldn’t express was devouring her from the inside out. “Zen means inside, chaos on the outside,” he said.

It can be tempting to think that emotional balance means mastery over our emotions: that we don’t feel them deeply, or even at all. Yet we are biologically primed for reaction: emotions are wired into us. Few of us, even yogis, can encounter such as grief and disruptive emotions, without taking a hit to our self-esteem. We are biologically primed for emotional balance: when we feel them deeply, then let go and be present with our emotions – to feel them fully, then let go and return to centre. This requires a dynamic balance between the activating and resting parts of our nervous system.

Emotions are mediated through the autonomic nervous system, which has two branches: the sympathetic (fight-flight-freeze) and parasympathetic (rest-and-digest). This two-pronged system structures our emotional well-being. Think of a car. The sympathetic nervous system is like the accelerator: it revs us up and provokes an emotional response. The parasympathetic system is like the car’s brake: it slows down the nervous system and returns us to our emotional centre. The more we press the accelerator and move into nervous system overdrive, the more deeply we wire in that pattern. Eventually, overdrive becomes our default mode, and it’s harder to put on the brakes and find our balance.

How, then, do we learn to balance the nervous system? This is where yoga and mindfulness practices come into play. For the past 20 to 30 years neuroscientists have studied the effects of both on emotional health. Yoga and mindfulness help to balance the nervous system and create emotional health in the following ways:

- Contemplative practices, such as meditation and restorative yoga, help calm the nervous system and build resilience to stress.
- Contemplative, relaxation-based practices such as restorative yoga help reduce anxiety and depression.
- Even a 10-minute daily yoga practice increases stress resilience and helps with emotional balance – perhaps even more, research suggests, than a twice-weekly 90-minute practice. This doesn’t mean, however, that you need to give up your favourite yoga practice.

"Infrastructure interventions" are tools that make your yoga practice more therapeutic: they balance the nervous system, strengthen the immune system, promote physical health, and build resilience to stress, anxiety and depression. You can integrate them into any style of practice, or craft an entire yoga practice using them. For example, try slowing down your practice and lengthening the transitions between poses. This helps all movement emanate from core strength and integration, which also makes your practice more challenging. These therapeutic practices help unravel the deeply woven emotional patterns of anxiety and depression, and create the embodied awareness that leads to lasting change.

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