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# YOGA, VULNERABILITY AND EMOTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

By Bo Forbes, Psy.D.

Many yogis I know lament that Hatha Yoga's mood-enhancing benefits don't last as long as they'd like—as one recently put it, “I feel like my best self—but only for about as long as a caffeine high.” Others confide that meditation's calming effects on the mind don't always improve their emotional lives or relationships—as one yogi admitted, “I'm much more mindful—just not when my girlfriend pushes my buttons!” When we're on the Yoga mat and meditation cushion, we can taste our potential for growth. Yet off them, we may encounter a force of great resistance that bars the way to lasting change.

When I teach, the most frequent requests I get are for hip-openers and heart-openers. The hips and heart seem to be receptacles for frustration. “My hips are so tight!” people say, or “How do I open my chest—no matter how hard I try, it doesn't seem to respond!” This is because much of our emotional armoring is concentrated in the hips and heart. These areas are repositories for painful emotions and memories, but also for creativity. So we may *think* we want to open our hips and heart and to connect more deeply with our bodies. Yet we can't access our deeper gifts without unraveling the layers of emotional experience that obscure them.

Yoga doesn't rid us of our anxieties, our sorrows or our stress: it brings us into deeper contact with them. It may make sense intellectually that we store our “issues in our tissues,” and that the mind and body are inextricably linked. Yet the real-life connection between restriction in our *fascia* (connective tissue) and emotional holding can surprise us. Yoga seems to penetrate our membrane of defenses to reach the deepest, most primitive layers of experience. So the practice of Yoga can feel like opening Pandora's Box: a primal storehouse of memories, emotions and experiences awaits us. This storehouse, which I call the *Deep Visceral Body*, evades the reach of the conscious mind.

Sometimes, the opening we find in Yoga has unexpected consequences: an avalanche of sadness that seems to come from nowhere, deep striations of vulnerability, a primordial and volcanic rage. As a clinical psychologist, Yoga teacher and Yoga therapist, I've noticed patterns in the way my students and clients respond to the emotional upheaval that a mindful Yoga practice evokes. Two reactions generally occur: First, the nervous system sounds the alarm and moves us into a fight-flight-freeze lockdown. Second, the emotional energy that comes surging forth from our depths can feel so threatening, so potentially self-annihilating, that it creates an immediate cognitive dissonance: *This can't be an intrinsic part of me—that would be intolerable!* So the mind responds



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in a deeply adaptive and creative way: It projects our emotional experience out into the world in the form of a story. By doing so, the mind takes this inner, intra-psyche experience and cleverly makes it external, or interpersonal.

The story usually involves wrongdoing by a parent, child, partner or Yoga teacher. The story can be as simple as, “My grandmother died when I was three; that's what this sadness must be about,” or more complex, such as, “My partner is cold and withholding; see how she's not taking care of me here” or “Look how my teacher is assisting that person over there; I'm clearly not one of his favorite students.” Usually the narrative fits neatly into a cognitive schema, a mental and emotional *samskara* (pattern) that we've refined and polished since childhood. The narrative frames and contains our primal experience, and makes it safer. As with all *samskaras*, we rehearse our story, creating a gravitational pull is difficult to resist.

The challenge: The nervous system's alarm response and the creation of the story happen within seconds, faster than the conscious mind can follow. Before we know it, the story has taken up residence in the depths of our imagination. And it feels absolutely, irrevocably true. This creative way of coping has an unfortunate side effect: It acts as a decoy, and lures us away from our deeper emotions. In this way, it reinforces the very patterns that

clearly contribute to our suffering. And it short-circuits the opportunity the story gives us: to go inward and root out the long-standing *samskaras* that cause us suffering.

Even when we're prepared for the story's emergence, it's hard to contain, let alone to shift. One of the most compelling settings for stories is a Yoga teacher training. Why does depth training in Yoga stir up such primal and challenging emotion? Teacher training involves a triple threat: It occurs in a learning environment, which evokes any performance pressure and attendant trauma of our early school experiences. It also takes place in the context of a teacher (i.e., parent) and colleagues (or siblings); this can reactivate the deep familial or competitive patterns of our childhood. Teacher training also asks us to inhabit our bodies in a deep way. This can be unsettling and scary, especially if we haven't learned to be present in our bodies, or if there is a history of trauma. And if the training is therapeutic, it holds the promise of healing, which we may hope, deep down, will come from our teacher. If healing isn't immediately forthcoming, an elemental disappointment can overpower us.

In teacher training, I've seen successful, in-control business executives shocked to find themselves suddenly embroiled in a primal rivalry, overcome with rage at their colleagues in training. One woman demanded to know why a peer who'd logged less training hours was assisting me nationally before *she* was. When we sat down to talk about it, she couldn't believe the intensity of her anger. "Why is it," she said, "that I haven't accessed this kind of emotion in all my years of psychotherapy?" I've also witnessed experienced, mindfulness-based psychotherapists, on the surface open to challenge and growth, begin to unravel as the training accessed "sleeping" and uncomfortable places in their bodies and minds. One psychotherapist had such a strong reaction that he abruptly left the program, refused to meet with our training supervisors, and accused me and another teacher of "deliberate abuse." These high-functioning, successful and well-intentioned people have high hopes for the transformative power of a therapeutic teacher training. Yet when they're ambushed by the primal power of the Deep Visceral Body, they feel overwhelmed, and ashamed to be seen caught in such a struggle.

What makes the story so powerful? For one thing, it's adaptive: it has protected us from emotions too difficult to feel and inaccessible by the conscious mind. The story insulates us from the primitive, "unattractive" elements of the Deep Visceral Body: emotions such as rage, shame or envy, and needs such as the need to be taken care of, to be perfect and to be loved. For another thing, these deep emotions and needs cause the nervous system to sound the alarm, putting us into "fight, flight or freeze" mode. Because the story forms when the nervous system is in alarm mode, it freezes into place in our conscious and unconscious

awareness. Part of the nervous system's job is to reinforce homeostasis, to keep things the same—and this includes the story. The nervous system is invested in the story's longevity. If we let go of the story, what emotional dangers might lurk beneath it? And finally, the story lives not just in the mind, but in the body, giving it an added physicality that makes it more powerful. The story's adaptive quality and its involvement with the body make it resilient and impervious to most modern therapeutic interventions.

True opening and transformation occur only when we're willing to sit with the original primal experience that the story helped us avoid. This means admitting that, while we may have achieved some mastery over the workings of our conscious mind, we are all vulnerable to the experiences of the Deep Visceral Body. It means taking on our fears: of not being loved, of abandonment, of failing, even of death. It means welcoming our rage (when we perceive that someone has threatened us, criticized us or withheld something we need). It means leaning into our sadness (when we feel rejected or unlovable). In the context of Yoga, it means enduring the shame that emerges when we realize our Downward Dog doesn't look like "everyone else's," or when we can't inhabit or move our bodies the way we're asked to. It means resisting the conviction that our teacher has favorites, and that we are *or are not* one of them. It includes tolerating the childlike and poignant need for approval we come up against in teacher training. And it means allowing ourselves to be truly and deeply vulnerable: to the activation of our story and to releasing it. If we let go of our narratives, what will we be missing? And will we then become more responsible for our own change? This vulnerability is scary. Our primal roadblocks of fear, anger and sadness can slice us further open, and we can—and do—get hurt. Yet this vulnerability is also nectar. It tells us that we're fully alive and engaged in our own direct experience.

Sitting with these difficult emotions and impulses and learning to tolerate them is the hardest part of self-study. Yet it's also the most valuable. Neuroscientists have discovered that a process called protein synthesis occurs each time we recount the story: This process means that our narrative actually changes and wires itself in more deeply with each retelling. Cutting-edge research in the neuroscience of emotion also indicates that, when we avoid a difficult feeling by telling a narrative about it, we temporarily escape that feeling, but then it tends to linger over time. On the other hand, without the insulation the story provides, our feelings of anger, sadness and desire can be temporarily more intense. This means that, no matter how challenging our anxiety, panic, depression, cravings or difficult emotions may be, telling a story about them reinforces our cycles of anxiety and depression. If we're present with these feelings and accompany them with awareness and breath, they can lessen over time and transmute into something different. A feeling of being

abandoned, for example, can morph into a tolerable awareness of being alone—or simply being with oneself.

We have to be willing to engage with the story differently: to question it, to be curious about it and to resist its incredibly strong magnetic pull. While mindfulness is helpful, we need an *embodied* experience of mindfulness so that we don't become rocked by the intensity of primal emotions or gloss over them entirely and create a false sense of emotional health. To fully transform our story, our practices must be rooted in the field of the body. And Yoga is ideally positioned to help us with this.

Sylvia, one of my teacher training graduates, was a successful corporate psychologist who lectured throughout the U.S. Yet despite her clinical training and nearly a decade of meditation practice, she hadn't learned to inhabit her body. Here she was, as an older adult, ensconced in a teacher training that asked her to be physically present. This invitation to "come home" to her body was anxiety-provoking. Understandably, she had trouble telling her right side from her left, moving her body in space, and understanding the shapes of Yoga postures. This difficulty continued when the trainees began to learn the art of assisting students' bodies in Hatha Yoga. Sylvia felt inadequate and exposed in front of her colleagues in training. Each time I approached to give her a suggestion, she began to dissociate or to weep in discouragement. She often felt as though she were being yelled at or criticized by me and wanted to run from her physical and emotional discomfort by leaving the training.

At the same time, Sylvia was very courageous, and resisted the urge to let her narratives take over. She met with me and directly expressed her discomfort. She also met with one of the training's supervising psychologists. She committed to a daily restorative practice, and found that a combination of the heart-opening Supported Butterfly Pose (*Supta Baddha Konasana*) and a calming 1:2 breath ratio helped energize her body and calm her mental anxiety. Sylvia's discomfort didn't go away overnight; she struggled for several months with feelings of awkwardness, vulnerability, exposure and low self-esteem. Yet she persisted. Eventually, inch by inch, she began to inhabit and reclaim her body. She could feel its comfort and discomfort, its restriction and expansion. She began to breathe with the feeling that she was "inept," destined never to have flexibility or grace. Through this daily restorative practice, Sylvia slowly shifted her narrative. She began to understand that the lack of compassion she'd attributed to me mirrored the

self-criticism she'd long harbored toward her physical and emotional self. By the end of the training, she came to see me as being on her side, as an advocate in this uncomfortable but essential process.

Many of us make Sylvia's daunting journey as adults, and our experience of *asana*, meditation or a Yoga teacher training ignites this journey. Yet one of the best ways to truly shift our story is through the practice of Restorative Yoga. When combined with simple *pranayama*, Restorative Yoga becomes a vessel through which we, as Sylvia did, can transform our narratives. A restorative practice addresses all the elements that cement our story into place. It balances the nervous system and unfreezes the story so it can take another shape. It relaxes the physical body, where the story also resides. It helps the mind remain alert and attuned to our experience. And it enables us to sit with and breathe through the difficult primal experiences we encounter in Yoga. We don't find this unique combination of balanced nervous system, relaxed body and witnessing mind either in meditation or in sleep.

Restorative Yoga turns down the volume of our story. It helps us become less reactive, more insightful and more compassionate to ourselves and others. Over time, the story begins to shift, and turns back into the pure energy from which it arose.

The contemplative practices of Yoga such as meditation, breath work and Restorative Yoga, teach us that Yoga is engagement with all direct experience, no matter how painful. These practices help us excavate and integrate the deep visceral experiences that stand in the way, not only of our potential, but of lasting change. And they show us a glimpse of what lies beyond the mind, emotions and story: the absolute and divine connection that dwells within us and in everyone around us.

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### TRY THIS

Are you in the midst of a transition, initiation or emotional story or experience? If so, try taking it into the chrysalis of a restorative pose like Supported Butterfly. Hold the intention of being present with the Story. Use a deep nasal breath with a longer exhale to quiet your mind and slow your heart. In this way, over time, you'll give your story the space and the *prana* it needs to transform.