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see p38



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE...

- OM Meets – Heather Mason
- Nutrition Zone – Fad fatigue
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ॐ om spirit

Dancing the wisdom of your body

The joy of spontaneous yoga.

By Julian Daizan Skinner

Imagine a roomful of yogis and yoginis standing, eyes closed, at the centre of their mats. They wait. Gradually things begin to happen. Some of them enter even deeper stillness. Some begin to make subtle, smooth, rhythmic movements.

A woman at the front is forming a rapid sequence of mudras with her fingers. Jerky spinal uncoilings are emerging from a young woman. A man in the middle is holding what looks like a regular Tree Pose, but it goes on for minute after minute. The practitioners are with their own processes, not paying attention to anyone else. This is spontaneous yoga.

"Sometimes it's not easy," says Sarah, a Zenways yoga teacher. "But when I enter this magical place, I feel utterly alive – my body, my emotions, everything flows. I'm literally home, one with the universe."

This practice arose (appropriately enough) spontaneously for me during my twenties when I lived in a Zen monastery. The life was anything but spontaneous. Posture and alignment were rigidly emphasised, in meditation as well as in movement, and even in the simple acts of daily life. There was almost no privacy – I lived with the other young monks in the meditation hall in a one metre by two metres space for sleeping, sitting and eating.

Opening up

Things were opening up energetically. The meditation practice was strongly focused on sitting in mountain-stillness, yet my body started developing an overwhelming urge to move. I had to hide in the bathroom, in the trees, anywhere I could be alone and let it happen. And happen it did. Tensions released; old blockages freed-up; memories and emotions arose and cleared. I was amazed at the precision of the wisdom in my body moving me in exactly the way I needed. And the journey continues. From then until now – more than 25 years – a thread of this spontaneous movement has been continuously part of my life.

I've found for myself that this moving from the inside out complements perfectly the outside-in approach of more formal asana work.

In discussing the relationship between these two approaches, Wisconsin yoga and meditation teacher, Betsy Rabyor writes: "Yoga is thought to have originated from spontaneous movements happening to long-time meditators. In other words, the yoga poses came afterwards as a tool or technique to hopefully get the awakening result."

Over the years I've experienced a powerful healing aspect to this spontaneous work and I'm not the only one. Writing in the *Journal of Authentic Movement and Somatic Inquiry*, psychotherapist and yogini, Joan S Harrigan, says this practice will "purge and purify the subtle system from toxins... I'm talking about negative thought patterns. In a time of trauma or life shock, what we experience around that goes deep into our system. It is stored in our molecules; it is stored in our muscles; it is stored in our organ systems."

Spontaneous movement

And there is more. This kind of practice opens wellsprings of deep joy. In Japan, my teacher, Shinzan Roshi, took me to Iwatakisan, a mountain where the famous 17th-century Zen master Hakuin spent almost two years in solitary retreat.

Writing about this time, Hakuin notes: "How many times did I



HOW TO PRACTICE SPONTANEOUS YOGA

In our Zenways yoga teacher training we include a period of spontaneous yoga every day. We've found it gives the new teacher access to a source of renewal and inspiration that is truly inexhaustible. If you would like to explore tapping into the wisdom of your body, here are some tips on how to start:

1. FIND A SPACE

Life is so busy these days. You need an undisturbed quiet room and some time. Some of our teachers find a daily period, perhaps 10 or 15 minutes, works well, others have a spontaneous day once a week, when they give it an hour or more. I recommend setting an alarm, so you don't have to keep checking the time.

2. JUST START TO MOVE

When you begin, it can help to gently sway from side to side or some other simple movement, and then just let things take off from there.

3. DON'T EXPECT

Each time you enter the spontaneous zone, it's new and fresh. Just invite the wisdom of your body to take over and enjoy the show. Don't try to replay the past or anticipate what needs to happen. It's a practice of surrender.

4. EXPLORE THE EDGE

When you're familiarising yourself with the spontaneous zone, it's helpful to come in and out of it several times. We all have something of an inner control freak and, when we really know we can take back control any time, it's easier to fully let go.

5. DROP IN A QUESTION

Like dropping a pebble into a pool, you can ask, "What needs to happen to re-align this shoulder?" "How can I best make a difference in the world?" "What do I need to teach in my next yoga class?" – almost anything you can think of. A deeply trustworthy response will come.

6. BE SURPRISED

Your body often knows better than your mind what direction your life needs to take. This profound and simple practice may well set you on a beautiful adventure into healing and wholeness.

jump up and jubilantly dance around, oblivious of all else...As for sitting, sitting is something that should include fits of ecstatic laughter – brayings that make you slump to the ground clutching your belly. And when you struggle to your feet after the first spasm passes, it should send you kneeling to earth in yet further contortions of joy."

Hakuin goes on to explain how after his retreat, for the rest of his life, he never again felt fear. As a young monk, my teacher Shinzan Roshi practiced in a similar way, alone on this mountain, and he wanted me to experience it too.

In the modern world perhaps the most prominent practitioner of spontaneous yoga was Swami Kripalvananda (1913-1981). Known to spend 10 hours a day in spontaneous practice, Kripalvananda taught extensively in the US, where to this day, the Kripalu Yoga Centre and Kripalvananda Yoga Institute bear his name. In discussing how this work tends to deepen, the swami wrote: "This spontaneous dance has two phases: external and internal. At first the dance has external movements. Gradually these movements cease until there is complete stillness, externally. Yet the dance continues inside."

Narada's tale

In illustrating this adventure, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna and many other great yogis from the past have told variations of a story about an ancient Indian sage, Narada, who was known to have a hotline to the heavens.

Once Narada was walking through the forest and he spotted a yogi sitting beneath a tree in such fierce and fixed stillness that an anthill had grown up around him. The yogi recognised Narada and called out to him, "Narada, please grant me a boon. Please ask the heavens for me, 'How long before I achieve complete liberation?'"

Narada agreed and continued walking.

Sometime later he encountered another yogi. In contrast to the previous yogi, this one was dancing, joyful, the currents rippling through his body a mirror of the flow of life though and around him in the forest.

"Narada," he laughingly called out, "Please grant me a boon." This yogi also wanted to know how long before he reached complete liberation. Narada agreed to ask for him and walked on.

Some time later Narada was walking down the same forest path. He came upon the first yogi, still sitting, encased in the anthill. "How long, Narada? How long?" he asked.

"I asked the heavens for you," Narada replied. "It will be four lifetimes before your complete liberation."

"Four lifetimes!" shouted the yoga. "I've been sat in stillness like this year after year. I curse the heavens." And through his resentment and anger the yogi hurled himself into hell.

Narada walked on and encountered the dancing yogi. "How long, Narada?" the yogi called out, "Tell me how long?"

"I asked the heavens for you," Narada replied. "Look up at the leaves of the tree you're dancing beneath – that number of lives."

"How wonderful!" the yoga exclaimed. "All this time for my beautiful practice." Immediately he found himself embraced by the heavens. Wishing you great success in your spontaneous yoga practice. ☸

Julian Daizan Skinner teaches Zen yoga and heads the Zenways community (zenways.org). He has trained more than 100 yoga teachers in the UK and Europe, the US and Japan.

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