

Spontaneous yoga in teacher training

Make room for spontaneity to keep your yoga passion and creativity firing forever.

By Julian Daizan Skinner

Over my 30-year yoga journey my greatest teacher has been the body. Learning to trust this teacher arose (appropriately enough) spontaneously during my early years living in a Zen monastery.

Monastery life was anything but spontaneous. Posture and alignment were rigidly emphasised, in sitting as well as in movement and even in the simple acts of daily life. I lived with the other young monks in the meditation hall so there was almost no privacy.

The intense practice was causing my system to open up energetically. My body started developing an overwhelming urge to release and move. I had to hide in the bathroom, among the trees, anywhere I could be unseen and let it happen; and happen it did. I was amazed at the precision of the impulse in my body, moving me in exactly the way it needed for release. And the journey continues. From then till now 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 yogic alignment work. In fact, I think of it as a source of alignment. In discussing the relationship of these two approaches, Wisconsin yoga and meditation teacher, Betsy Rabjor 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. In the Journal of Authentic Movement and Somatic Enquiry (2012/01/02), psychotherapist and yogini Joan S. Harrigan writes that 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."

In his book, Buddhist Yoga, Japanese author Rev. Kanjitsu Iijima describes this

practice, calling it "Divine Exercise", writing: "This is the most authentic yoga exercise."

In the modern world perhaps the most prominent practitioner of spontaneous yoga was Swami Kripalvananda (1913-1981). Known to spend 10 hours a day engaged in this practice, he discussed how this work tended to interiorise: "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." I've found that this kind of practice is not only transformative but opens wellsprings of deep joy. In Japan, my Zen teacher took me to Iwatakisan, a mountain about 10 km from our temple where the famous seventeenth century Zen master Hakuin spent almost two years in solitary retreat.

Writing about this time, Hakuin notes: "How many times did I 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 yo
to your feet
should send
further cont
Hakuin de
of his retrea
arose. But t
these feelin
point where
again felt fe
teacher, as
similar way
wanted me
In our Ze
we include
every day.
teacher acc
inspiration
I recommen
the wisdom
embarking
tips that o

1. Delim

Life is so b
undisturbe
Some of o
perhaps 1
others inc
a week wh
I recommen
have to ke

2. Just s

To start, it
your atten
three-fing
centre of
Japanese
side, or fi
and then
there. WH
strongly,
tending t
moveme

3. Expl

When you
spontane
to come
all have s
and whe
consciou
easier to
feelings
you can

4. Don

Each tim
it's new
your bod
to replay
to happ
with a p

5. Dro

Like dro
ask a qu

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 describes how in the early stages of his retreat, many fearful experiences arose. But through continuing the practice these feelings resolved and he reached a point where for the rest of his life he never again felt fear. Zen master Shinzan, my teacher, as a young monk practiced in a similar way alone on this mountain and he wanted me to experience it too.

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. I recommend you explore tapping into the wisdom and vitality of your body. In embarking on this journey here are some tips that others have found useful:

1. Delimit time and 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 include a spontaneous practice once a week where 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

To start, it can help to stand and centre your attention on the central energy point, three-fingers' width below the navel in the centre of the belly known as 'tanden' in Japanese. Then gently sway from side-to-side, or find some other simple movement, and then just let things take off from there. While the body may move quite strongly, you may equally find your system tending towards stillness or very subtle movements.

3. Explore the edge

When you're familiarising yourself with the spontaneous movement 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're confident we can retake conscious control any time, it becomes easier to fully let go. Similarly, any time the feelings or experiences seem too strong, you can always take a break.

4. Don't expect

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

5. Drop in a question

Like dropping a pebble into a pool, you can ask a question like: "What needs to happen

to re-align this shoulder?" "How can I best make a difference in the world?" "What do I need to learn right now?" "Almost anything you need to know. While nothing is ever infallible you can expect a deeply wise response to come, sometimes a veritable fountain of responses."

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 an extraordinary adventure into healing, wholeness and awakening.

In illustrating this spontaneous adventure, Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda, Ramakrishna and a number of other notable yogis from the past told variations of a story about an ancient Indian sage, Narada, who was known to have a hotline to the wisdom of the heavenly realms.

Once, Narada was walking through the forest and came across 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. This one was joyfully dancing, the currents rippling through his body, mirroring the flow of life around him.

"Narada," he laughingly called out, "Please grant me a boon. Please ask how long before I achieve complete liberation?"

Narada agreed to ask for him and walked on.

Some time later, Narada came upon the first yogi, still sitting fiercely. "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 yogi.

"I curse the heavens." Through his resentment and anger the yogi hurled himself into hell.

Further on, Narada encountered the dancing yogi. "How long, Narada?"

Narada replied, "Look up at the leaves of the tree you're dancing beneath – that number of lives before you achieve complete liberation."

"How wonderful!" the yogi exclaimed.

"All this time for my beautiful practice." Immediately he found himself embraced by the heavens.

Julian Daizan Skinner is a Zen master with over 30 years experience teaching meditation and yoga and the founder of Zenways (zenways.org)



ZEN
WAYS

www.zenways.org

YOGA TEACHER TRAINING

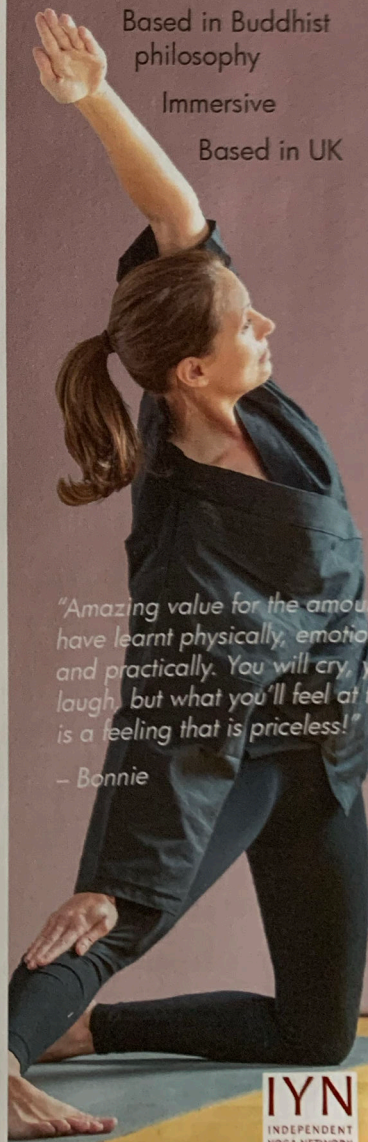
In-person, hands-on learning

Centred around you: finding your truth and expressing that

Based in Buddhist philosophy

Immersive

Based in UK



"Amazing value for the amount we have learnt physically, emotionally and practically. You will cry, you will laugh, but what you'll feel at the end is a feeling that is priceless!"

– Bonnie

IYN
INDEPENDENT
YOGA NETWORK



WIN!

One of three Pulsin Foods plant-based Mega Bundles - worth £250 each!

Ommyoga

& lifestyle

JUNE 2022 - £5.99

Yoga
**TEACHER
TRAINING**

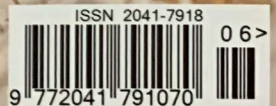
70-page
special report

*Be a
rebel and
love yourself*

8
**POWER
YOGA
POSES**
to fire your core

4 simple
practices
to cultivate
more
awareness

**HOME
SWEET
HOME**
turn your shed
into a shala



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE...

- Yoga nidra - the dream practice
- Nutrition Zone - Vegan Life Live
- Buxom is beautiful - yoga fashion
- Yoga retreats - 2022 travel ideas

