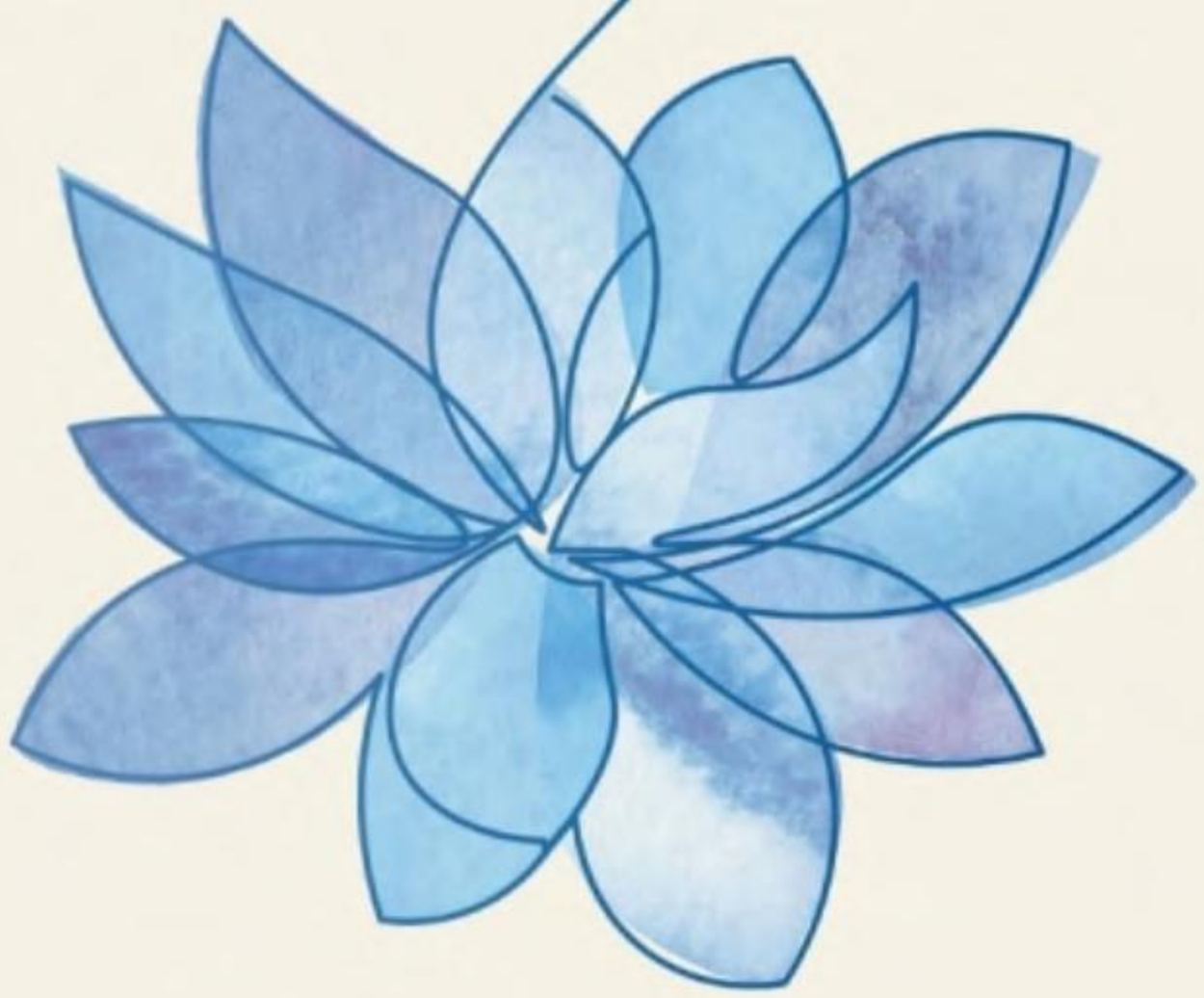
THE PRACTICE IS THE PATH

LESSONS AND REFLECTIONS ON
THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF YOGA



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Introduction

NOT EVERYONE IN life finds a path that is meaningful and helps cure the spirit. Many never make it to the trailhead. More often, people end up moving through life in pursuit of the next best thing. Many, by default, end up on roads that lead them to strive for gain—making money, achieving popularity, and being successful. These roads have fast lanes, enabling people to move at greater speeds and achieve their goals in less time. Some end up in cul-de-sacs, confined by lives focused on pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain.

A path is different. On a path, you are meant to meander, to enjoy each footfall. Every ascent and descent is part of the journey. And there may be moments—days, weeks, and months—when

you feel totally lost. A path is winding and circuitous and the experience of losing your way is part of the way. A path is wide enough only for footsteps. You cannot drive an RV equipped with a kitchen and flat-screen TV down it. By necessity, you must travel light.

Sometimes you find yourself on the path by happenstance, someone on a whim takes you there, or you look for it on the World Wide Web. It doesn't matter how you get there. What matters is that sure-footed, with shoulders back and heart lifted, you trust the pads of your feet.

The path I am speaking of is not a trail that cuts through canyons and meadows or crisscrosses the mountain. The path I am referring to is the Big Path, the Tao, the Way. It is a path that opens the lungs, fires the spirit, and awakens faith. It is the path of pilgrimage, one that leads straight to the heart of being.

This book is about being on that path—the Path. It is about an essential journey that begins the moment you hear the reverberation of an inner voice that says simply, "I must." It is about listening to the voice of yearning inside, despite the odds, and the many competing voices calling you back to familiar commutes along paved surfaces.

For many of us, there is one year in our lifetime that sets the stage for all other years, one year that shapes our destiny. For me, it was when I was seven, and a voice prompted me to delve into the caverns of my soul. A strange yearning took over my young and impressionable mind, a longing to explore the labyrinth of my inner self. It set me on a journey through many landscapes, teachers,

instructions, and techniques. This voice, this spirit-whisperer, coaxed me on—at times gentle and merciful, and at other times fierce and uncompromising.

The trek has demanded every fiber of my being, and along the way, I have had to question the realities I assumed to be true. Through my teens and twenties, my internal navigation device worked erratically. I spent years traipsing off course, isolated in remote canyons and narrow tunnels. All too often I found myself stranded, having strayed from essential connections to myself and others. But despite years of disorientation and confusion, an inner longing, a hidden hunger, prompted me to persevere.

On a mountain path there can be many obstacles: mud, fallen trees, rocks, washed-out terrain. Yet the spiritual path is more arduous, for the obstacles are not external but internal. On my own path, I have had to contend with stumbling blocks that are essentially products of my own making. They include my urge toward perfection, a desire to be good, a tendency to push my way forward, restlessness, craving, and a fear of letting go. I believe these hindrances are common to many fellow seekers on the path, so I will attempt to address them in this book.

A path is made by the multitudes who have gone before us. Like river rock, smoothed and polished by the ongoing flow of water, the path has been worn by wayfarers on quests similar to yours and mine. Thus we do not have to carve out a new trail. At first, we must learn to follow. The intent to follow guides us away from the false notion that this is "my way." As we follow we take faith, and the path itself is the guru, the guide.

It is a godsend to find a path that enables the maturation of the soul. For me the path has been yoga, but any craft—such as acting, cooking, woodworking, or playing an instrument—may suffice to steer you into landscapes unimaginable. In this book I reflect on the changing horizons I have seen on the trail. I look back on the time I first embarked from the trailhead, the expectations I had of myself and the assumptions I held about the journey's end. I see now that what I thought was enlightenment was part of a greater delusion.

In the first half of the journey, we adhere to order, security, rote discipline. We are more inclined to live by the letter of the law rather than its spirit. We may impose strict boundaries on ourselves and be quick to judge others. Idealistic and moralistic, we may approach spirituality from the side of our small-minded self, eager to be liked, obtain approval and succeed. Out of a desire to gain a solid foothold within ourselves, we get attached to our systems, our techniques, our memorized verses, our badges and brands. In the beginning we need affirmation that we are making progress—success and security are paramount. We may overidentify with a style of practice, a sequence of poses, or a system of teachings. In the first half of my journey, I held strongly to the code of Ashtanga yoga, vegetarianism, and mantra. Initially, these foundational practices provided important footholds that enabled me to climb. In the arduous migration of the soul, however, we all come to a crossroads where we must relinquish all title, rank, and name. This demands another kind of exodus, one that involves risk and surrender.

The first half of my climb lasted until the end of my thirties.

Several formative experiences prompted me to gain a more panoramic view of myself and insight into the heart of the yoga teachings. The first involved my forays into Zen and the Middle Way teachings of the Buddha. When I first encountered the Heart Sutra and the cryptic yet compelling instruction "Form is emptiness and emptiness is form," my very foundation rocked off its center. The second was by plummeting into the murky world of dreams. Through dreamwork I caught glimpses of the longing, fear, and urges that reside in the umbra of my psyche.

It is oftentimes a split, some traumatic moment, loss, or rupture that prompts us to break through the boundaries of our early practice. This can be threatening, painful, even shocking because we become so invested in the initial formulas that provide us with grounding and stability. Why on earth would it need to change? Yet in order to evolve, we must leave behind the strict order of the first half of practice and enter a new phase—one in which we realize the fragility and insubstantiality of the self. In the second half of the journey, we are made humble and stand in awe of the mystery. We step out of the shackles of shame and doubt and form a liaison with a force much greater than ourselves. This book is really for students who have made a practice for themselves in the first half of their journey.

In the beginning, the path is often defined by attitudes and beliefs that we bring to the mat. Within our connective tissues we hold a history—a personal narrative of thoughts, memories, and ideals. We may harbor inflated (or deflated) expectations of ourselves. Much is at stake, and a potentially crippling crisis arises.

Caught in the quandary of self, we struggle with feelings of pride or shame. There is anxiety and a gnawing apprehension: *Am I getting this right? Am I good enough? Am I worthy?*

Unbeknownst to ourselves, we each lug around a heavy pack stuffed with a longing for acceptance and a fear of rejection. At the beginning of the trail, and from a vantage point that is extremely limited, we equip ourselves with ideas and beliefs *about* the journey. In the beginning we make elaborate assumptions about the way we should be. The soul is yet to pass through the gates of fire, loneliness, and deep silence that build maturity and wisdom. We have yet to experience loss and suffering and to witness directly the beauty and fallibility of our own small, fragile selves.

When we first come to the mat, our beliefs may have been molded by an overarching religious structure that is wont to divide the world in two: right and wrong, good and bad, male and female, pure and sullied, true and false. Armed with fixed convictions, we unwittingly block the flow of the soul-self, which is fluid, shadowy, polymorphous, and full of a raw and wild energy. The enduring spirit of the soul-self is nonconforming.

At the beginning of a yoga path, we may simply wish to become sleeker, sexier, more efficient, or more powerful. We may have a burning desire to get away from where we are. Progress on the path typically becomes a kind of self-improvement project. We may use the practice as a means to escape either the pressures of work, our personal history, or the drone of our own thoughts. Because we are driven by self-interest, the path is inevitably narrow, and we can only see a few yards ahead.

These first years involve hardship. Physical hardship. We experience pain in our knees, back, and shoulders. In many instances, we seek out physical hardship through "power" practices that are strenuous and uncompromising. If we make it through the early trials of practice, the body and mind start to break open. We become less constricted and guarded, less myopic. The dimensions of the path widen, and we begin to see bigger and broader horizons. The path is no longer proscribed by our three-by-six sticky mat. From the vantage point of a more panoramic view, we become more available to others. In the flow of our daily lives we are more adaptable, more able to meet the demands of changing circumstances.

One of my Zen teachers would always ask, "How wide is your path?" Might we see in time that the path is everywhere? Might the way of our path, like the old Tao, include all things?

In this book, we will travel the path together, a path that enables us to see beyond the confines of our own perspective. Each vista on the path is inevitably circumscribed by the view we are afforded, just as we must experience the world from the limited standpoint of our own small selves. In the journey that lies ahead, we must leave behind the person we always thought we should be and travel, step by step, to where we are. There is really only one way to do this, for as we will see in the chapters ahead, the practice is the path.

—Tias Little

Santa Fe, New Mexico

August 2019

THE PRACTICE IS THE PATH

I

Empty before You Begin

I TYPICALLY BEGIN my classes with *savasana* (corpse pose). I have students lie down on their backs and be still. I say, "Empty before you begin," encouraging them to let go of the pressures that may have accumulated during the day from work, driving, parenting, or simply trying to hold everything together. This is a way to slough off the burdens of the day and just be. While they are in savasana (I always use the Sanskrit for this pose since I find the English translation to be a misnomer), I encourage students to visualize strain or stress evaporating off their skin. It is an invitation to become an open vessel and become receptive to whatever may arise.

Empty before you begin is a most difficult practice. Typically the inbox of the mind is jammed with messages: private messages

from family and loved ones, work-related messages that add to your task list, advertisements that goad you to acquire something you really don't need. It is only by emptying that we can become fully attentive and present. Empty before you begin is essentially a call to presence. Here at the start of this book, I implore you, reader, to empty before you begin—that is, to make yourself open and clear for each word on the page.

Ideally this process of emptying happens before you leave your home in the morning. When you actively let go at dawn (the ideal time for meditation practice), you prepare your mind and heart for the day. The key is to get up, take a pee, and go right to the cushion. Before checking your inbox or sending and receiving, sit in silence with a tall spine and lifted heart. At the threshold to your day, empty your thoughts, expectations, and management strategies. Just sit with a clear mind and a soft, open breath.

This can be an arduous task. Typically, if we are not careful, our minds get monopolized by the demands of the day. Deadlines and obligations engulf our attention. Insidious voices infiltrate our heads, and we find ourselves reviewing past conversations or rehearsing conversations to come. All too often when we wake up and open our eyes, a torrent of thought inundates our minds, like a dam breaking loose. When we learn to arrest the flood of thought, we rest in wide-open attention.

This process is something like opening an empty file, a new blank document, on a computer screen. Do not rush to fill your mind with text and images; allow it to be open space. This clear, uncluttered space of mind and heart is full of potential, full of pos-

sibility. The more you can rest in a spacious awareness in meditation, the more it will stay with you throughout the day, even in the midst of the hum and buzz of the daily round.

The mind can be like our home's garage after twenty or thirty years of residency—crammed full of old stuff, boxes stacked high toward the ceiling. We hold on to high school yearbooks, letters from long-lost mates, stuffed animals, old coins, memorabilia from vacations, photographs of moments in time. The storage space of the mind becomes cluttered. We are mind hoarders, holding on to people, events, and conversations. Like stuff heaped away in an attic or a garage, ideas, hopes, and fears pack our minds.

Through meditation, yoga, chanting, and prayer, we clean house. We sort through piles of personal history, troves of impressions, wants, and needs. In the beginning, this proves difficult, for it is hard to maneuver through the aisles of clutter. In sorting through the paraphernalia of our mind stuff, we get lost somewhere in the timeline of our personal history, in the narrative we have become.

When we get to the cushion and sit with a lifted spine, we must ask, *Out of all that I have accumulated, what really belongs?* We identify with our mind memorabilia, but is it really "me"? When we look long and hard over many sessions, we begin to realize that all the stuff we have compiled in our minds and hearts over the years is surplus. We come to realize that what we really need is to pare down, discard, and let go.

How do we let go in the midst of lives that are full to the brim? How do we learn not to hoard not only material possessions, but

feelings, viewpoints, and ideals? This is where practice comes in. We learn bit by bit, breath by breath, to let go of who we think we are and who we think we ought to be. Yoga is as much a process of *un*learning as it is a path of learning. In the first years, our practice is like a raft, one that ferries us across the divide of self. It provides security and certitude and helps us travel. However, at some point, we must be willing to dismantle the very same raft that has carried us along. We give up the raft but keep the wisdom entrusted to us on the journey.

The process of unpacking and letting go begins in the body and involves a passage from outer to inner. For instance, at the beginning of yoga practice we do postures that stretch and loosen the superficial fascia, the outer covering of the body. This flexible layer of connective tissue, just under the skin, is responsible for determining our characteristic identity structure. Our exterior may be taut and constricted, or it may be lax and weak. In the first years of practice, we engage the outer musculature—the extrinsic muscles—such as the deltoids, traps, glutes, and hamstrings. In time (and this takes years), we open and activate the core musculature, the intrinsic muscles along the spine. Hatha yoga is a pilgrimage to the inner sanctum of the spine.

As we travel from outer to inner, we must shed or molt the outer layers of self. In this process, we are as delicate as new butterflies emerging from a chrysalis. At some point in the journey we realize that we are confined by our own outer cover, the cocoon-like structure of our exterior self. A short poem by the Japanese Zen poet Shuho captures this idea:

Cicada shell
little did I know
It was my life.[1]

A cicada is an obnoxious insect that makes ear-splitting clacking sounds in the summer heat. Maybe you recall finding its flimsy shell, its exoskeleton, like the hull of a small shrimp, clinging to a tree. The cicada nymph abandons its shell when it molts and emerges into adulthood. For hundreds of years in the poetic traditions of Asia, the cicada has been a metaphor for transience and spiritual metamorphosis. It is an analogy for the process of emerging, morphing from one state to another. The spiritual journey requires that when ready, we cast off the armoring that confines us so that an interior soul-self, tender and less constricted, can emerge.

Dropping the bulwark of armor is not easy, for it may have provided needed protection. Oftentimes the exoskeleton serves to protect us from the ghosts of our own past—from emotional hardship, trauma, and loss. It may provide a kind of refuge, one that we never received from family, school, friends, or lovers. Dismantling the armor is a necessary stage in the maturation of a yoga practice. It is tricky, for all too often we identify with our protective gear, given that our shell, at one time, was necessary to keep us safe. Thus we may not drop our shell all at once, but rather over days, months, even decades. We may discard our outer shell and then, feeling vulnerable and exposed, don the familiar protective covering. This can happen repeatedly: we remove our cover and put it on again. It takes time for the supple, open, tender

inner self to have the courage and trust to be in the world without having to hide.

Some never make it out of their protective armor. By holding to rigid belief systems, people get stuck in chivalry, fear, and bigotry and defend their code of honor. Fundamentalist Christians, Hindus, Jews, or Muslims adhere to the binaries of *us versus them*, male or female, gay or straight, black or white, criminal or law-abiding, strong or weak—or as Dr. Seuss depicted so colorfully, the Star-Belly Sneetches versus the Plain-Belly Sneetches. Our beliefs about ourselves and the living world around us seep into our connective tissues—into the microbes of our gut, the organs of our heart and liver, and the synapses of our brain. "Belief becomes biology" wrote the author and educator Norman Cousins. Over time and with practice, we come to see the particular ways that our tissues get informed by convictions and assumptions.

Letting down our defense mechanisms while learning to let go is a difficult yet most essential practice. When we practice letting go, we loosen the fixed attitudes and beliefs that come to define us. For when the mind hardens around belief, it is a big fix! By letting go, we prepare to live an all-inclusive life, motivated by altruism, kindness, and tolerance. In raising children, being in relationship, aging, and dying, we actively let go. Ultimately, we must practice letting go in the midst of our daily rounds. In one day alone, we must let go five times, fifty times, ten thousand times. Living itself becomes a perpetual process of letting go.

This is not to suggest that we head straight for the checkout lane, abandon society, and move to Idaho to live in a concrete

bunker. I don't suggest pulling the plug on your family, your livelihood, or your friends and neighbors. Rather the task is to interact with the world wholeheartedly, with passion and verve, while at the same time not becoming fixated or stuck. This requires a double movement, one that is difficult to do and requires simultaneously engaging and letting go.

We learn this double move in asana training when we learn to execute a pose. It is commonly called "opposing action," and it is worth learning. For instance, in a pose like half moon pose (*ardha chandrasana*), opposing action requires that the student press down through the heel of the standing foot while simultaneously drawing upward from the floor along the inner shin and knee. In other words, the student must move in two opposite directions at once. It is valuable to accomplish this "opposing action" somatically in concert with the psychological process of engaged letting go.

Breathing lies right at the heart of letting go. Each breath we take in and each breath we let out is practice in letting go. The breath itself becomes the guide, the guru, teaching us to empty and release. Also, we must learn to let go of thoughts, sensations, expectations, and judgments. With practice, every moment that arises is an opportunity to let go. The art of mindfulness is remembering to let go.

Over time we cultivate a willingness, a readiness, to let go. The longer we practice, the more we become predisposed to letting go.

Like training the body to ride a bike or the brain to memorize a poem, we train the "letting go muscle" in order to be free of malice, shame, ill will, and craving. We learn to let go of corrosive thinking so that it does not eat away our soft interior. Once established in the "memory" of letting go, we are prepared to be in the world without clinging to circumstances, people, or the changing tides of experience.

In this way, practice is preparation for how we live our lives. Yoga and meditation are all about alertness, readiness, having all systems go, so that we can engage in the world with open hearts and clear minds. The mettle of the spirit-warrior is to participate in the world without clinging. Like a soldier preparing for battle, hours and hours are spent training in the art of engaged letting go. This is the lesson of the warrior hero Arjuna. In the Bhagavad Gita, while rehearsing for the theater of war, Arjuna ironically equips himself with an attitude of yielding:

> Renouncing all objects of desire and willful purpose, completely restraining the senses and the mind, he should gradually relinquish all, holding firm to the *atma* (soul-self) he should rest empty of all thought.[2]

In premodern India, when yoga was being cultivated as a means to procure the spirit, both the warrior and priestly castes honed the will by concentrating the internal energies. By readying himself in the spirit of renunciation, the devout warrior prepared

rigorously to live to the fullest without becoming attached to the outcome. The archetypal form of the seated Buddha captures this same spirit of preparedness and foresight. His enduring presence suggests readiness. The next time you look at a figure of the Buddha seated on a lotus pad, eyes cast downward and spine lifted, note his exquisite alertness and poise, anticipating everything to come, ready to let go.

We often imagine letting go to be a passive thing, akin to releasing our clasp on a balloon string. However, there is effort involved, sometimes referred to as "nonefforting effort." Right effort is cultivated in all of the martial arts, such as aikido, karate, tae kwan do, or jiujitsu. In the internal arts of tai chi, qigong, or yoga, right effort is the gateway to the subtle body. In chapter 4 we will investigate the perplexing practice of right effort in more detail.

There is a difference between active letting go and passive letting go. In savasana, when passively letting go, we typically fall asleep or check out. Active letting go is to observe frame by frame the process of emptying and releasing. Profound relaxation within the body facilitates greater concentration in meditation and helps cultivate a luminous field of awareness. When there is both physiological ease and psychological space, we yoke to a force much larger than ourselves.

In many regards, yoga is truly a preparation for death, the final letting go (an idea we will explore in chapter 9). When we empty before we begin, we are enacting a little death. We train by witnessing things come and go. By way of savasana, we experience

death daily, and by its practice, embody the process of dissolution. Nothing is constant. Through *vipassana* (insight), we see that the world is actually showing us how to let go. Simple, poignant, but elusive, the Buddha taught, "All that arises ceases." Birth and death are a continuum. When we practice emptying before we begin, we are preparing to let go of whatever may come.

Emptiness lies at the very heart of the Great Teaching (Mahayana) of Buddhist practice. However, the term *emptiness* is mostly misconstrued, second only to the word *enlightenment*. People think emptiness is vacuity, blankness, nothingness, nil. In fact, emptiness is closer to receptivity. When we are empty, we are receptive, available, impartial, broad-minded, and tolerant. Paradoxically, emptiness is fullness. When we empty out, we feel full, spacious, open, and unconfined. When awakened in heart and mind, we feel fulfilled by each small thing—the shape of a cloud in the sky, the morning text from a sibling, a shared meal, a hug.

When we empty before we begin, we give back to the world. One of the oldest analogies for the mind in meditation is that of a mirror. When we discard our assumptions about things, we can reflect things as they are. If we only see the world through the narrow lens of "me, my, and mine" then we fail to live a full and boundless life. The American poet David Ignatow captured this so poignantly:

I should be content
to look at a mountain

for what it is
and not as a comment
on my life.[3]

As we brush the dust off the mirror of the mind (a classic analogy for clearing the junk, the "defilements" from the mind), we become more reflective. We can see the mountain for what it is: we bear witness to the heart pangs we feel in caring for an ailing mother ravished by dementia. We see the pain in our adolescent child, struggling to grow up in the world. We see the concrete sprawl of a the city overtake a fragile ecosystem.

It is difficult to realize the mirror-like nature of awareness. All too often we affix Post-it notes to the mirror of our mind. On those notes, we scribble down our jobs, our management strategies, our plans: pick up Jimmy from soccer; feed the dog; write thank-you note to Betty Sue; research online for a new vacuum; buy more Post-it notes. Over days, weeks, and months our notes pile up; they glom together like wet leaves until it is hard to see the mirror behind the notes. At times in meditation, we catch ourselves compiling a to-do list and we remove the note, but the adhesive backing leaves a sticky residue on the mirror. The habit of pasting our scribbles leaves a film (in yoga this mental residue is called *samskara*) so that in time we cannot see the clear, translucent, "empty" nature of mind.

By practicing yoga postures, controlled breathing (*prana-yama*), and heart-centered meditation (*metta*), we see through the

tacky stuff of mind to the empty mirror. When I first began to practice meditation, I was always yearning to be free of thought, to be quiet and clear. This intention had merit because it prompted me to persevere and keep practicing. However, the yearning to be free of thought left a sticky imprint on the mirror of my mind. Each time I would come to the cushion I would desire to be silent and serene. Over time this craving left its mark so that each time I sat, I would get stuck on wanting to be free from being stuck! It is a common conundrum. It has taken me many years to let go of my gluey grasp and its sticky film on the mirror of my mind.

The experience of the mirror-like nature of the mind requires, at some point, a kind of surrender. The word *surrender* implies "giving over," as in the French word *render*, "to give back." For the first half of my spiritual journey, I never understood the significance of surrender. I thought it meant to give up, concede defeat, throw in the towel, and lose out. However, in the way that a mirror gives back whatever appears before it, surrender implies giving back that which does not belong to us. When we empty before we begin, we are ready, willing, and able to give of ourselves, to reflect back in kind.

There is another energetic quality we cultivate when we empty before we begin. Along with receptivity and surrender, we generate the spirit of forgiveness. On your morning cushion, it is helpful to embody the sentiment of forgiveness. This is not easy either, for in dark times when inhumane violence and cruelty are prevalent, it is difficult to forgive. In the still, quiet hours of my reflection, I take

the word "for-giving" to mean "giving before." In meditation, I prepare to give to the world as much as my heart will allow on any given day. This is imperative on the path to building a Big Heart, a heart imbued with kindness, forbearance, resilience, and patience. If we do not kindle the fires of forgiveness, we are prone to moods, attitudes, and beliefs both cutting and negative. If we are not careful, we are quick to criticize and blame. When generating the spirit of forgiveness, we must first endeavor to forgive ourselves. We do this by accepting our own shortcomings, our own failures, our own mess. We for-give ourselves the space to be who we are. Each morning on the cushion we must breathe in forgiveness so that it penetrates down into our bones.

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968), a social activist, Zen practitioner, and man of faith, practiced inner communion. He sought the same space that yogis cherish for renewal, visions, and the simple joy of being. Through the practice of emptying, he entered what he called "the space of liberty," a heart-filled space yoked to the energy of love and possibility:

> The contemplative life must provide an area, a space of liberty, of silence, in which possibilities are allowed to surface and new choices—beyond routine choice—become manifest. It should create a new experience of time, not as stopgap, stillness . . . not a blank to be filled or an untouched space to be conquered and violated, but a space which can enjoy its own potentialities and hopes—

and its own presence to itself. One's own time. But not dominated by one's own ego and its demands. Hence open to others—*compassionate* time.[4]

Each morning we must enter this "space of liberty" for one half hour or more. We must set our devices aside and enter a wide-open landscape, full of potential. On this open ground we need not lay claim to anything. We enter a strange territory that has no authority, no ownership, and no rules. In Japanese Buddhism, this is the "pure land." In Vedanta, it is the *jivan mukti*—the space of self-liberation. All the twists and turns of the path, all the uphill and downhill slopes, lead to this space of liberty.

When I practice breathing, I focus on exhalation. If inhalation is the life-sustaining phase of the breath, exhalation is the letting-go phase. Exhalation is like an outgoing tide, ebbing away from the shoreline. Its movement draws us back to the ocean within. Dispelling the breath out of the body, is an act of letting go. For this reason, the exhalation can conjure fear and trepidation. It is always hard to let go of what we think we have and who we think we are, and this holds true for the breath. Only by exhaling can we truly learn to empty and be fulfilled by each passing thing.

In the morning, exhale repeatedly before beginning your day. In the evening, exhale before sleep, siphoning off the pressures that may have accumulated in your chest, abdomen, or neck. While driving to an appointment, exhale deeply before arriving. Exhale before moving into a yoga posture. At the very end of life, we

exhale as we pass through the veil to the other side. The exhalation guides us back to the source from which we have come.

When I invite students to begin class in savasana I encourage them to drop their bones into the earth. I invite them to return to the "home" of their body, the "home" of their *prana* (life force). When the surging demands of the day overwhelm us, we must come back to the temple of our bones. We accomplish this by exhaling, emptying, and relinquishing the weight of our bones.

There is a well-known story in Indian mythology that speaks to this dissolution. Vishnu is the god who sustains the appearance of the world through the magic of his *maya*. Like an optical illusion, or special effect in a Hollywood blockbuster, the world is the work of his stagecraft, produced for a time and then made to vanish. Vishnu proclaims that at the end of time, everything returns to him.

> I am the cycle of the year, which generates everything and again dissolves it. I am the divine yogī, the cosmic juggler or magician, who works wonderful tricks of delusion . . . This display of the mirage of the phenomenal process of the universe is the work of my creative aspect; but at the same time I am the whirlpool, the destructive vortex, that sucks back whatever has been displayed.[5]

Each day we participate in the magical spin of creation. In time we see that reality is like a mirage, a concoction of the senses,

a product of imagination. In the act of emptying, we let go of the delusion that sustains everything. This is why we practice savasana and learn to exhale. It is paradoxical to practice this pose at the beginning of a session. Yet there is tremendous power in letting go before you begin. Why wait until it is all over?

PRACTICE, INQUIRY, AND REFLECTION

IN MEDITATION

The Other Side of the Mountain

When you wake up in the morning, take your pee and go straight to your cushion. Don't make plans, don't check your mail or start sending and receiving. Don't look at the morning news. Stay offline. Choose a seat in an uncluttered part of your home, ideally away from books, appliances, and foot traffic. When you arrive at your seat, nestle in like a roosting hen. Settle into the weight of the bones of your feet, shins, and legs. Let your entire body come to rest. At the same time, lift your spine toward the sky. Imagine you are drawing a long and slender piece of grass upward from its sheath. Float the stem of your brain upward while casting your eyes downward. Look down into the center of your heart.

Sense the soft, steady breeze of your breath. With your lungs lifted and ribs wide, let your breath be delicate, steady, and light. Sense and feel the spaces between your ribs. Like a venetian blind

whose horizontal slats open and close, open your ribs outward and upward as you inhale, and allow them to lower and contract as you exhale.

Relax your tongue, and release the short but powerful muscles that pin your mandible to your skull. Allow the skin covering your scalp to be supple, soft, and permeable. Empty all the air out of the sails of your lungs and exhale down to your nadir, down to the tip of your coccyx.

Rest in an uncluttered space of liberty by letting go of any agenda, strategy, or grand design. Sit in a spirit of receptivity, opening up to something just outside your control. Don't attempt to manipulate or micromanage your experience. You will only get in your own way and cause clutter. In the space of liberty, yoke to stillness, silence, and possibility. Spend time on the other side of the mountain, apart from the all-too-familiar terrain of "you." Empty before you begin, so that the flavor of openness stays with you throughout your day.

ON THE MAT

Savasana and the Art of Dropping

Lie in savasana with the back of your head supported by a blanket and a bolster tucked under your knees. Be sure you are warm enough; drape a blanket over yourself if necessary. As you lie down, allow your body to spread horizontally along the floor. Elongate the back of your legs by pushing out through your heels

one at a time. Center your pelvis so that your sacrum spreads and widens against the floor. Lengthen the back of your neck by sliding your occiput (the bone at the back of your skull) away from your shoulders.

Savasana is the art of dropping. Allow the skin of your back to spread wide as it rests to the floor. Visualize the musculature of your legs releasing from your bones, like the flesh of a well-cooked salmon. Loosen your calf muscles, hamstrings, and gluteus muscles and permit them to give way and release to the floor. It is most important in savasana to relax the structures that surround the brain. Imagine the back of your skull to be like a ripe grapefruit, its rind leaving an imprint on the floor. Let the flesh of the fruit of your brain expand against the inside of your cranium. Let go of your jaw, tongue, throat, eyes, and inner ears. Become an empty vessel, spacious and bright.

Once you have reached a state of profound somatic quiescence, begin the process of letting go psychologically. This requires relinquishing your hold on things, people, and plans. Drop any attachment you have to material objects—your car, computer, kitchen, photo albums, and home. Know that when you die, you cannot take your laptop or smartphone with you to the other side! Then relinquish the ties you have to people, including friends and loved ones. Let go of the concepts, ideas, memories, and plans you may hold. Finally, discard any notion you have about spiritual accomplishment or revelation. Let go of who you think you are and who you think you ought to be.

OFF THE MAT

Engaged Letting Go

In the course of your day, practice engaged letting go. Prepare to give generously to each task, to everyone you meet, and to every passing circumstance. Engage fully with all your heart and mind. Put your passion into your living so that you are present for each passing thing. At the same time carry the spirit of letting go with you. Remember that each and every encounter is passing right before your eyes, like a bubble on a fast-moving stream. This does not suggest that you should be careless, irreverent, or detached. Practice right attachment, meaning give what you can and then let go. When I studied dance, one of my choreography instructors, Jonathan Wolken of Pilobolus, referred to this as "make it and break it." If you are overzealous and try too hard, you squeeze the moment and create tension. This is not good for you (as it can lead to great fatigue) or your partner. If you should let go too soon, you miss the moment and fumble your connection. Is your tendency to grip too hard, holding on to situations and people too long? Or do you tend to let go too soon?

This practice requires two opposing qualities—yielding and resiliency. By yielding you allow for spontaneity, expression, and connection. When yielding, you loosen the need to dominate, control, and lay claim to the moment at hand. Through resiliency you remain concentrated, present, and steadfast. This provides

the determination and staying power to continue. Embody this spirit of yielding and resiliency in the marrow of your bones. Bone marrow is both solid and liquid. In the alchemy of the mind-body-spirit connection, your bones are the source of the deep life force, called the original *qi* in Chinese medicine. Resiliency is to be unwavering and solid, and yielding is to be fluid. Bring these qualities of solidity and fluidity to each passing thing as you practice engaged letting go.

2

Always New

WHEN WE WALK, we walk in the footsteps of our ancestors. Many have preceded us on the path, and the trail is well worn. We trust the way of the wisdom keepers who have worn the path step by step, for thousands of years. While we follow the way of those who have gone before us, our steps on the path are initiatory, always new. It is not that we are trying to replicate the walk of the Buddha, the guru, or the guide. In the yoga room, we are not trying to make a carbon copy of the posture that the teacher is demonstrating. On the mat today, our agenda is not to re-create the same posture we did yesterday. A wholehearted commitment to being on the path requires a willingness to tread in a way that is always and astonishingly new.

On the first half of the journey, we proceed like children, imitating what others have done before us. We may strive to execute a pose in precisely the same way that it has been shown to us. We copy the teacher, and we follow fellow students. I often see students in class copying the person in front of them, even if their fellow student is really out of position! There is nothing wrong with this kind of learning. At the start of the path, we all do this; we mimic our teacher in order to get the movement down. Without thinking, we do what we are told.

Inevitably, however, this brings up a big dose of self-doubt. *Am I doing it the way it should be done? Am I getting it right? Am I good enough? Are others doing it better than I am?* This kind of questioning can last for years. Some students never make it out of the mind-set of trying to do the movement correctly.

At the outset of our practice, we rely on the predictable, the routine, in order to become established. We conform to a particular pattern and repeat a set sequence. To make the practice stick at the beginning, we firmly adhere to the rituals, the book, the guide, the code, and the formulas. We "follow tradition," believing the method to be true. We get attached to our teachers and are loyal to their methods. While we generate conviction, we may have little tolerance for other traditions. In the beginning we rely on clear and solid boundaries, and we expect others to do the same. We form significant ties to our practice group and its purpose. We feel that we are "in," and we assume an identity within the "tribe," or *kula*. At the outset, our practice has the flavor of something very

special. It may become a source of pride, self-assertion, even self-righteousness.

Later in our practice, we come to a crossroads where the exacting structure we have followed up to then must give way to a less formulaic approach. At this crossroads, we see that the first prescription for progress on the path may no longer serve us and that in fact the path to embodied wisdom requires another move, one that is less predictable and more elusive. What is necessary is a leap outside the familiar. While a flowchart that shows how to perform the movements is invaluable in the first half of the journey, it may not apply to the inner passage of the second half of the trek, which can be paradoxical and perplexing. On the path to embodying *prajna*, a Sanskrit word that roughly means "wisdom beyond knowing," the standards we relied on at first may no longer serve us.

The Middle Way teachings of the Buddha describe the trials of this very shift. Composed around the third century B.C.E. following Siddhartha's radical vision of the unity of all things, the Parable of the Raft is a delightful tale of two monks ferrying from the near shore to the far shore of a river. They carefully construct a raft both rigid and secure, one that enables them to make the arduous river crossing. The construction is elaborate and thorough, yet once they have traversed the body of water, the meticulously designed raft is to be abandoned. The story elucidates the teachings on nonclinging:

> I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose

of grasping. Bhikkhus (monks), when you know the Dhamma (teaching, code of conduct) to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings, how much more so things contrary to the teachings.

If we are not careful, strict adherence to the raft leaves us standing on the far shore, urgently elevating the status of the raft, covering it in gold leaf, and safeguarding it at all costs. By clinging to the raft, we cannot travel on; thus our progress on the path is stunted. We may become defensive, dogmatic, and authoritarian. If we can integrate and include all that we have learned in the crossing without holding blindly to the devices that transport us, we open ourselves up to ongoing discovery and surprise.

In the journey onward, the real task is to make every moment new. That is, we must realize that it is impossible to replicate moments in time or to do things in the way they were done before. This applies to teaching. For instance, there are times when I think I have taught a really great class in my Tuesday morning time slot. The theme I used, the sequence I delivered, was just right. Then the following Tuesday I say to myself, "Ah, the class last week was great, so today I'll teach the same class just as before." Halfway through the class, I realize that I cannot repeat the experience from the week before. I instruct the same sequence and try to capture the same flow, the same spirit, but my class ends up feeling contrived, forced, and inauthentic.

You may know the expression "You can't step in the same river twice." The river of time is streaming past, and no two moments are

ever the same. This is the very essence of the Tao. The Tao signifies the dynamic, creative, ever-changing nature of things such that all experience is likened to flowing water. Not only does the world around us change, but there is perpetual change inside our bodies. In this very moment, the spongy tissue of your lungs, the cells in your spleen, and the nerve fibers in your neocortex are in constant motion.

In this way, things are always new and happening for the first time. On the journey, we come to realize that every moment is fresh, spontaneous, and unconditioned. In our minds, however, we may assume that the experience we are having now is one we have had many times before. As a result, our lives appear boring, mundane, and monotonous. All too often, we find ourselves going through the motions. In any walk of life, this stifles the spirit and causes angst and suffering. When the spark of spontaneity is snuffed out, the essential life force wanes. The joy in authentic living is not to get stuck in the snare of habit but to find "always new."

There is an expression in yoga: *sadanava*. *Sada* means "ongoing, everlasting," and *nava* in Sanskrit shares the same origin as the English word "new." *Sadanava* suggests that things are constantly changing and eternally new. From the outer reaches of the galaxy to the blood vessels at the tip of your finger, nothing is fixed. To what extent we allow ourselves to be in the river of constant flux determines our overall quality of life. By living in the always new we feel more alive, more attentive, open to surprise and discovery. Yet how do we come to see the world as always new? This is why practice is important.

Everyone recognizes the reverberating sound of OM as integral to the yoga experience. The intonation of OM is one of the oldest and most widely practiced means of invoking the essential spirit of yoga. I think in every yoga studio from Tallahassee to Toronto, OM is called out at the start or end of a class. Why OM? What does it mean? This simple one-syllable mantra is called the *pranava*. *Nava*, as we have seen, means "new," and *pra* suggests "manifestation, coming forth, or being produced." The vocative OM is used to conjure creation itself. All manifestation—from the sound of the wind, to the cry of the newborn, to the clang of the recycling truck—is OM. The brush of the breath in the back of your throat on each inhalation and exhalation is OM. When intoning OM, all emanation throughout the universe is condensed into the vibratory power of a single sound. OM is charged with a creative power that gives birth to all things. By chanting OM, we are reminded that everything is perpetually happening anew.

In practice we learn to sense and feel that every breath, every pulsation, and every tremor across our skin is unique. It is as if we are leaves that have fallen onto a fast-moving stream. Suspended on the current, in the flow of the Tao, can I let go in the torrent of time? What if this very body and each and every breath is the actualization of time passing? There is an expression in Chinese Buddhism: "Make this very moment ten thousand years." In the perpetual flow of time, this very moment as you read is ten thousand years. The first morning light is ten thousand years. The breath you are on now is ten thousand years. We are part of a boundless flow of time.

A yoga posture is a perfect vehicle by which to observe the flow of the river of time. If I am in downward-facing dog pose (*adho mukha svanasana*), I listen to the current of my breath: sometimes rapid, sometimes shallow, sometimes still. I observe the expansion and contraction of my connective tissues. I sense the way that pressure continuously shifts as I bear weight in my shoulders. I observe the nuance of sensation that travels through my fascia, skin, organs, and joints. Different sensations arise as I stay in position for thirty seconds, one minute, two minutes, three minutes. Because the pose is constantly changing, it is always dynamic. To an outside observer, a three-minute pose may appear static. Nothing seems to be happening. Yet in the atmosphere of the inner pose, there is constant change. Like a meteorologist, I track the shifts in weather, including high and low pressures, humidity levels, wind variability, and temperature changes. In this sense, the atmosphere within me is shifting all the time. Without moving an inch, I travel miles and miles.

I am reminded of a video exhibit that I once saw at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. The photographer had placed his camera on the Icelandic tundra over a twenty-four-hour period in late summer when there is perpetual light. Set in one spot, the camera captured the beauty of the enduring landscape: cloud cover came and went, shadows drifted, a glint of sunlight reflected onto a rocky bluff. There were subtle shifts in light between "dawn" (there was no night), midday, and 3 a.m. The video was displayed on the exhibit wall, which was the size of a roadside billboard. Shown in real time, the cycle for the entire "show" of the

video footage took twenty-four hours. There were several comfortable couches in the exhibit, and so I sat and watched time slowly pass. It was a virtual meditation to witness the nuanced changes taking place in the natural world. I sat for forty-five minutes absorbed in a presence both vast and immense. A line from a Juan Ramón Jiménez poem entitled "Oceans" came to mind: "Nothing happens? Or has everything happened, / and are we standing now, quietly, in the new life?"

One of the primary ways to be on the cusp of change and to experience the always new is to decelerate, slow down, and bear witness to moments passing. Meditation requires an exquisite settling into stillness. When sitting on the cushion, I slow my respiration rate to that of a hibernating fish. Periodically, a big breath rolls through, and in its wake, my ribs, organs, and ligaments expand and resuscitate before settling down. I observe the way my thoughts meander like clouds, sometimes gathering into thick, ashen clusters and other times breaking into thin, wispy strands. As I drop further into the seated position, my heart rate slows, the peristaltic rhythms of my digestion become regular, and the neural firing in my brain goes silent. As time slows to a crawl, my awareness dilates. The aperture of my mind becomes far wider than my body, wider than place, date, and time.

When we do not slow down but rush headlong into our day, experiences get cemented together, like sedimentary rock—a mishmash of gravel, quartz, pebbles, and clay. It is hard to individuate one moment from the next, and nothing stands out clearly. When everything clusters together, held together by the