

New Year, New Possibilities Debbi Murphy, PhD, ERYT500

Welcome the new year. Full of things that have never been. ~ Rainer Maria Rilke

2019. There's one thing I know: It didn't turn out how we expected. It was better in some ways and worse in others, but regardless of how it turned out I'm sure yours was as full of surprises as mine. The same will be true next year. Here's to enjoying the ride, wherever it takes us. ~ Josh Spector

Now's the time for New Year's Resolutions...those passionate, determined, optimistic & sometimes, desperate pledges we make to "better" ourselves. How many times do we begin with hope but end in frustration? Yoga offers some ideas to help avoid that.

Open to Change

They must change often, who would be constant in happiness. ~ Confucius

Fact: Living beings avoid change. Fear of the unknown is built not just into our socio-environmental DNA, but also into our physiology. Research shows that our most primitive (& dominant) brain is always trying to protect us from change. It's helpful to acknowledge that we have both built-in and external forces that work to keep the status quo. We cling to old habits because they feel safe. Yoga teaches us that change is constant (*parinama*). All yoga techniques (*asana, meditation, pranayama*) are tools to help us become more comfortable with that truth. Off the mat, we can see that while our lives and personalities *seem* stable and unchanging, we are actually always in dynamic flow. In this dynamic shifting that true transformation occurs. It is key to our resiliency. We can *learn* to welcome the inevitability of change, to be curious about where change is taking us. When we are open to change, we are more prepared to become active in directing it with intention.

The practice: A simple breathing exercise can help you find ease with the constant rhythm and change that goes on every moment of life. In a comfortable seated position, close your eyes or find a gaze point. Draw attention to your breath. Observe as it enters & exits the body. Feel it stroke your throat, the fibers of your nose. Rest your hands on your belly and notice the movement there. On each exhale, pull the belly in and press the breath out completely. Relax the belly on each inhale and notice how the next breath rushes in. You don't need to force this. It happens automatically. In fact, each hour we take almost 1000 breaths. The body is undergoing this dynamic transformative process without our awareness constantly. As we breathe in and out, there are constant shifts taking place within every cell of our body. We are releasing what we no longer need to make way for what we do need. By letting go of the old, we create room for the new. For the next few cycles of breath add these words, I exhale the old, I inhale the new.

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Expand Awareness

The flute of interior time Is always playing, Whether we are listening or not. ~ Kabir

Intentional change requires self-awareness. We spend much of our time listening to others, seeking advice and looking outside of ourselves for insight. Yoga teaches us to develop our own insight through careful and compassionate observation. By giving us the opportunity to slow down, yoga helps us recognize what is personally important. As we settle into stillness, we might find clarity and with clarity it becomes easier to intuit what changes will truly enhance your life. Through yoga practice, we also become aware of the relationship between our thoughts, actions and experience. I can be as simple as noticing how posture influence the quality of breath or how a small change in the placement of hands make a challenging pose easier. This process of noticing of generating insight seems simple but over time as you carry this art of awareness into everyday life, every choice can be better informed, every action more intentional and every response more insightful.

The practice:

Balancing poses are particularly effective for developing awareness for a simple reason: without awareness, we fall. Notice that if you are watching others in a class while trying to balance, it throws you off. Notice also that if you are concerned that they are watching you, it throws you off. Try to stay aware of your own body attempting to find *equanimity*. You might even challenge yourself to close your eyes. Instantly, the unconscious process that were holding you in the pose will reveal themselves. When you stop looking outside yourself for balance, your internal intelligence will rise to the challenge! Journal how this worked for you. What were your feelings?

Find your Focus

Yoga develops our ability to follow through on intentions. Each pose is an opportunity to develop concentration. We direct our effort & attention to simple actions: staying aware of our breath & body as we hold a pose. Each pose is an opportunity to develop commitment: we learn not to give up at the first sign of boredom, anxiety or fatigue.

The practice:

Pick a standing pose. To achieve true change, focus on the integrity of each action, rather than the outcome you hope to achieve. To find this quality of focus in your yoga practice, choose a standing pose that is challenging but accessible to you. Enter the pose with commitment, but without ambition. Hold the pose as long as you can, without losing the integrity of the poses' alignment or sacrifice the the quality of your breath.

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End the pose when you feel too uncomfortable to continue, or when you feel a sense of satisfaction and completion. Carry this focus and integrity to an action in your life.

Surrender Your Timeline

Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. You are pure potential! ~ Martin DeMaat

Change happens in increments, sometimes large and sometimes achingly small. When we want change to happen instantly, we tend to give up. This is a natural phenomena. In fact, this is was the topic of my doctoral dissertation (where I showed the importance of recognized the 5 stages of behavior change, the last one being relapse!) Yoga calls these stages, kramas and urges us to develop patience to allow change to happen at its own natural pace. Yoga also teaches that small steps, performed consistently, can create profound change over time. The word they use for this is abhyasa.

The practice:

To develop this patience in your yoga practice, enter a pose that directly confronts your patience. Choose a pose like pigeon that challenges your flexibility, but that you can comfortably hold. Relax in the pose and wait. Breathe deeply. Commit to holding the pose for five minutes, or as long as the pose remains relatively comfortable. Notice how the body's tension unravels slowly. Practice the same pose daily. As your body adapts to your consistent patience in the pose, your starting point in the pose will change as well. Develop the patience to move towards change slowly and purposefully.

A Practice for Life

The conditioning of the mind is to get in a rut, to always take the same path. Through yoga, we attempt to create new and positive Samskaras. When this new Samskara is strong and powerful enough, the the old distressing Samksara will no longer affect us. ~ Desikachar

Yoga is just that - practice for everyday life. Apply these qualities of openness, awareness, focus and patience to any change that you would like to see in your life. While we cannot control all of life's many changes, we can act intentionally to shape our lives and experiences.

May this practice be a precious tool, one of many, that you can use to help you feel your unbounded expansive glorious nature, to fall in love with your life!

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10 Ways to Deepen Your Yoga Practice this Year

- 1. Quit doing yoga, and instead feel it.** Throw out the file cards that tell you how you should look, feel, be.
- 2. Go slower.** Exercise physiology research supports moving in a slower, more conscious way requires more muscle fiber firings (it takes more work) than quick action/reaction movement. Going slower also allows you to become more “feelingful” & more present which affects our neurophysiology in a positive way. Going slower helps us become aware of our breath & allows for optimal exchange of oxygen/carbon dioxide. Going slower helps us to stay within our edges and avoid injuries.
- 3. Be playful.** Experiment with transitions. These intuitive and spontaneous movements will take you out of your set pathways and broaden your range of possibilities. Experiment with breathing style, too. How does it feel to inhale in a forward bend and exhale in a backbend? Try classic asanas from different orientations to gravity (e.g. handstand, crow tree pose on your back). Playfulness opens up to new possibilities and teaches open-minded in all arenas of life.
- 4. Ritualize with Intention-Review-Congratulate.** Set each day with an intention of when, where and how you want to practice. Check in on the intention throughout the day to see how intention and action are synchronizing. Review at the end of the day. Most likely, your intention and action weren't totally in sync. However, find one good thing you did towards your intention...maybe it was just setting the intention in the first place. Soon this connection between finding the good in what did happen & your goal-setting will provide you with intrinsic motivation to keep trying.
- 5. Keep it real!** Do less during your session, more throughout the day. Set an intention for your yoga practice that is a small step, a shorter period of time or with fewer poses than you'd “fantasized”. This of course, makes it more doable. However, find time throughout the day, not only to review your original intention but also to reflect on how yoga's limbs can be integrated into your activities of daily living. Twist mindfully at your desk chair, take a few moments to breathe consciously while waiting in line, extend loving-kindness to other drivers while running errands.....and my favorite, pick one yama or niyama a day and notice how it weaves throughout your actions.
- 6. Don't compare** yourself to other or even to yourself. Know that every day & body is different.
- 7. Take a risk!** Get out of your comfort zone. Try a new asana or playing with one that you thought you didn't like or that you couldn't do. Go to a different type of yoga class.
- 8. Lose the all or none attitude.** A few minutes in Tree pose is way better than nothing. A little every day is better than one long bout each week.
- 9. Begin and end each session with meditation.** Even if it's only for a moment or two. This doesn't have to look any particular way (you don't have to sit in lotus with your eyes closed, savasana doesn't have to be laying flat on your back). During the beginning meditation, bring to mind loved ones who will benefit by your practice and dedicate the practice to them. At the ending meditation, express gratitude to yourself for taking the time.
- 10. Have fun** Make fun playlists, find comfortable and inspirational yoga wear.....attend yoga festivals, buddy up and yoga with friends. We all have different ways of having fun! Find what works for you.

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The Buddha saw: our thoughts, emotions, and actions are the primary sources of our suffering. Equally, our thoughts, emotions, and actions can be the source of our joy and freedom. Living, as much as possible, with conscious intention is the first step of this transformation.

—Thupten Jinpa, “Two Exercises for Turning Intention into Motivation” Framing our days between **intention setting** and joyful dedication, even once a week, can change how we live. It’s a purposeful approach of self-awareness, conscious intention, and focused effort—three precious gifts of contemplative practice—by which we take responsibility for our thoughts and actions and take charge of our selves and our lives. As the Buddha put it, “You are your own enemy / and you are your own savior.”

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Not only that, when our aspirations include the welfare and happiness of others, our deeds and our life as a whole acquire a purpose that is greater than our individual existence.

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How to get Comfy with Change Journaling

Step 1 - Root to Rise! What are your resources?

Step 2 - Visualize & FEEL! What are your dreams? If you could let go of fear and do whatever!?

Step 3 - Identify & Clear Out! What are your obstacles? (kleshas)

Step 4 - Break it down into small steps. Smart goals.

Step 5 - Get real. Write it down! Share it!

Step 6 - Commit to one thing every day that brings you closer.

Step 7 - Ritualize. Set aside time to review, reassess.

Step 8 - Repeat.