



## Practising Yoga with Injury

Today is the day I'm writing to you about practising Yoga when injury is present.

We'll talk about physical injury, but first let's back track a little and look at why we practise Yoga in a class setting in the first place. Some reasons presented to me over the last five years of teaching are:

- Relax more
- Improved flexibility
- Emotional strength and resilience
- Increased energy
- Happiness
- Mindfulness
- Make time to nourish myself
- Inner strength
- Feel good... feel great
- Continue to release emotional and physical blocks within the body
- Start / or rebuild a regular practice at home

And then some intentions are linked to areas of the body

- Increase core strength
- Monitor breathing
- Learn to breathe consciously
- Strengthen right knee
- Rehabilitate left shoulder
- Balance the body

A Yoga class can often provide the discipline needed to build a regular home practice of stretching with the breath.

21 days makes a habit - Let's make it a positive one!

However, when injury is present and mobility is limited, often going to a Yoga class is the last thing you feel like doing.

There can be embarrassment / feelings of awkwardness about not being able to 'do' all the poses. There may be other reasons.

Here are some points to consider, providing thought for moving past the idea of limitation, both physical and mental to get the most out of a regular Yoga class.

I would not be in my balanced state of health, relaxation and vitality now if I let injury stop me going to Yoga. For many years I experienced injury in the right knee, a legacy from my beloved 'thrill of the chase' netball... and I can definitely say... from an inflexible attitude developed trying to be perfect in everything. Perseverance is a blessing, and some unconditional love, too - blessings to the "Cate-work-in-progress' back then!

With loving teachers, I was guided to modify and listen to the messages of the body. This cultivation of body awareness continues to this day: in class, in my own home practice, in how I move and think about the body / mind / emotions in everyday life.

## **MODIFYING POSES**

**Adapt the pose to the body, not the body to the pose** is a fundamental principle of Radiant Light Yoga, and indeed any Yoga that advocates a self-referral way to practise Yoga. I call this listening to the body's messages.

How do we listen? Are we listening now, in class, as we wake up, when we work, play, eat, drink?

The unique benefit of guided Yoga is that it tunes you into the breath as you move. In class we encourage this connection of breath with pose, namely because we are not used to breathing deeply through the nose as a habit in the everyday. We want to invite this deeper breath to be a regular tool, as it initiates the relaxation response of the nervous system, thereby soothing agitated mind, emotions and

body. It is these two parts of a Yoga flow – breath with movement - that deepens trust in your inner voice.

So, if there is a pose you choose not to do in class because it will affect an injury, how can you modify to still stay connected to your breath, focus, concentration and relaxation? Some examples are:

- A shoulder injury may see you modify from dog pose to cat / cow flow on the knees.
- A hip sensitivity may see you modify Pigeon pose to threading the needle on the back.
- A lower back injury may see you step back to a modified knee down warrior pose instead of rolling down and then stepping back.
- A wrist injury may see you support this area by creating fists whenever we need to ground down through the hands, or indeed avoid the wrist bend altogether and opt to come onto the forearms/ elbows, as in a modified plank pose.
- PROPS support us in wonderful ways, reaffirming to yourself that you are listening. A rolled-up mat, blanket or bolster underneath the hips in seated kneeling pose – *vrjasana* - relieves pressure on the knees.

## **Inner Feedback and The Edge**

No, not the guy from U2! We are building a direct connection to inner perception. This is called intuition – the inner knowing. As we strengthen this connection, it may be that you come to value this inner feedback more than any other opinion or advice you receive from an outer source. On the mat, trusting our own inner voice frees us to transition to the edge of a pose: how far to move into a pose for just the right amount of stretch, with continual relaxation. It is the inner feedback that tells us when to go further or when to back out of the pose, with a smooth and steady breath as guide. It's a delicate operation, we could say, and one that gets more subtle, joyous and

uplifting as we move deeper into our own personal practice. Off the mat, this positively influences decisions and choices we make, increases confidence in our own abilities, enriches our relationships, and helps us to belong in an authentic way, as our True self, free from ego tyranny.

## **WITNESS MIND - The role of OBSERVATION in Yoga**

No one wants to be injured, however if it is present, we can start to witness the thoughts we may have around this situation.

- Do we feel upset with ourselves for letting this happen?
- Do we expect ourselves to do / be better?
- Do we hate the body part that is not working 'properly'?

All this, and more.

Injury can be a blessing for uncovering habitual patterns of movement that cause repetitive strain, as well as uncovering habitual patterns of thought! Yoga encourages us to meet ourselves exactly as we are in the here and now. Learning to observe is key to detaching importance from negative thoughts, and to start rethinking these habits, evolving our awareness to unconditional love for ourselves, and for others. I call this being gentle with myself. It's a daily cultivation.

Can we be gentle with ourselves and attend a Yoga class during injury? Yes we can. Realising that whatever you need can and is provided by the guided breath, as a connector to our inner perception. More correctly, we can say that whatever we need is all in us now. It's Yoga that gives us the tools to harness this knowing and act upon it.

We can start to move away from feeling that an injured part of us is the enemy, and start to welcome it as part of the whole. Here we start to move into the psychology of thinking, integral to thriving in the world. We also start to touch on the notion of mental injury. So, we may not have anything on the outside that is impaired, like a broken arm, but when we think and thus feel angry / upset /

dissatisfied about a 'part' of us, we are sending our Being the message that 'You are unloved.' We want to cultivate the exact opposite – **inner contentment** is a requirement of relaxation.

## **THE ATTITUDE OF YOGA – The role of RELAXATION**

We don't wait for the deep relaxation at the end of class to be relaxed. We are cultivating relaxation with every breath, with every transition in and out of poses, and from pose to pose. The primary aim of Yoga is to calm the agitation / stress in the body /mind /emotions. A few times people have practised Yoga in my class where they could scarcely move, due mostly to existing spinal injuries. What if you stayed in *shavasana* – final relaxation lying on the back (or stomach) for the whole of class, tuning into breath whenever you can? This is a legitimate participation that would bring much relief physically, mentally and emotionally.

Yoga asks us to embody **equal** parts **self-effort** and **relaxation**. Take relaxation out of the equation and we become rigid, critical and exhausted. Cultivate relaxation equally and we move towards suppleness of mind and body, towards a knowing of a neutral understanding that transcends judgement. We maintain a steady flow of energy internally, and with the practice of sense-withdrawal – *pratyahara* – this storehouse of energy can be drawn upon at any time to counteract tiredness, lethargy and divisive thoughts. One of my favourite sayings is by Yogananda: **Be calmly active, actively calm**. This encapsulates the ultimate every day, win-win benefit that Yoga can offer us.

Each class is a unique blend of students meeting themselves on the mat, cultivating body/mind awareness by attending to breath with movement, by finding equal parts effort and ease, and by listening to the messages of the body. We are working at the top most point of one's comfort zone in any given pose, and what a relief to know and embrace that this can look different from person to person. Close your eyes, and go within!