



Use Your Imagination

Visualization is an important yogic tool that can deepen your students' yoga practice.

by Timothy McCall, MD

Guided imagery is an example of a yogic tool that has gained wide popularity in both alternative and conventional medical circles—so much so that few people seem to recognize its origins in yoga. But thousands of years ago, yogis were using a wide variety of visualizations in their practice.

To some skeptical physicians, it seems far-fetched that your body could actually be affected by something you imagine—like a white blood cell gobbling up a malignant cell (to use an example now common in cancer care). But it's easy to demonstrate how visualization can change physiology. Just imagine biting into a lemon, and your lips pucker and salivary juices start flowing.

Medical science is also beginning to document this powerful mind-body connection. A study completed at the Cleveland Clinic found that simply imagining contracting specific muscles—without actually doing it—every day for a period of weeks resulted in a significant increase in the strength of those muscles.

Using Imagery in Asana

Whether you think about it or not, you are probably using imagery regularly in your asana practice and teaching. When you ask your quadriceps to lift your kneecap or your hamstrings to relax, you are visualizing what you hope will happen to help make it happen. Visualizations can also help your students transcend words. If you ask your students to try to create more space in the knee joint, for example, instead of telling them to contract their quadriceps, you are empowering their bodies to figure out the best way to get it done. This tends to keep them in the experience itself and not in their (or your) verbal abstractions about it. Similarly, modeling a pose for your students is planting an image in their brains that can help them do the pose.

Imagining yourself doing a pose just before you attempt it can help you do it better. Professional athletes use this technique all the time, visualizing their performance in detail just before they hit the court or playing field. Not only can this deepen the behavioral groove (or *samskara*, in yogic parlance) but it may



allow you perform the action without so much thinking when the time comes. Both athletes and yogis know that excessive mental effort can interfere with doing your best—which flows from being well-prepared and then fully present in the moment.

Metaphorical Imagery

Imagery doesn't always have to be so concrete. You might, for example, do a pose or sit in meditation while visualizing light traveling along the central channel of your body. Or breathe while imagining that with each inhalation you are bringing in peace and love, and with each exhalation releasing stress and tension.

One of my favorite forms of guided visualization is Yoga Nidra, nidra being the Sanskrit word for "sleep." In this technique, a teacher (or the recorded voice of one) takes you through a wide range of images while you lie supine in Savasana (Corpse Pose). It's a particularly useful tool for students who, due to anxiety or depression, simply can't relax in normal Corpse Pose, and for whom a regular Savasana might even be counterproductive. In a class setting that includes such students, consider talking more than usual and/or adding a few visualizations during final relaxation to help keep these students from getting lost in their thoughts.

Sankalpa and Samskaras

Sankalpa is the yogic tool of intention. Sankalpa is not what you hope will happen as a result of your practice (becoming more flexible or healing your back, for instance)—it's a promise you make to yourself about what you intend to do. For example, you might set the intention to practice 20 minutes a day during the week and for an hour on Saturdays. If you or your students have trouble maintaining a regular yoga practice, which is the key to healing and transformation, visualizing exactly what you intend to do in advance can help make it happen.

The more detail you bring to your imaginings, the more effective they are likely to be. Going back to the example of biting into a lemon, call up its bright color, the smell of the rind, the sour moisture of the juice, the feel of a seed on your tongue. For people who are less visual, use of tactile, olfactory, metaphorical, or multiple senses simultaneously tends to work better than visual images alone. In the case of your asana practice, you might see each pose you hope to do, imagining the sound of your breath moving in and out, the feeling of your body in contact with



the floor, and the sense of relaxation and well-being that the practice leaves you with.

On days when you are too sick or too busy to fit in your normal practice, visualizing it can be an acceptable alternative. You won't be weakening your samskara by missing a day but actually deepening the groove of your practice by going over it in your mind's eye.



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