



Yoga to Cultivate Compassion, Gratitude and Joy Part 2

Growth of these qualities is a sure sign that your students are on the right path in their spiritual practice.

by Timothy McCall, MD

In Part I, we discussed how breath work can help facilitate becoming more joyful and compassionate. In this column, we'll explore a variety of other yogic tools—from meditation to chanting to figuring out your life's purpose—that are likely to be synergistic in their benefits.

Meditation

If you believe the ancient yogis, meditation is the key to spiritual transformation. In the quiet that can result from a sustained meditation practice, a sense of connection to others naturally unfolds. Although we tend to see ourselves as discrete entities separate from the surrounding world, through the practice we come to understand that those boundaries are indistinct, that everything is densely interwoven, and that we are all part of some greater, unified whole.

The Dalai Lama said that "through compassion you find that all human beings are just like you." It can work the other way, too: by realizing through your meditation practice that others are just like you, part of the same thing that you're part of, you develop compassion. Indeed, the growth in qualities like compassion and equanimity is a sure sign you're on the right path in your practice.

Keep in mind that meditation, like the rest of yoga, is strong but slow medicine. Your students may not feel like they're getting much out of the practice early on, and they may be frustrated by their perceived lack of progress or their inability to slow their inner verbal parade. Encourage them to hang in there, and mention that scientific studies suggest that the health and psychological benefits of meditation accrue even to those who don't feel like they do it well.

One trick to ease your students into a regular sitting practice is to have them try a few minutes—or even just a few cycles—of alternate-nostril breathing, nadi



shodhana, immediately before they meditate. They may discover that doing so helps calm the mind and makes the practice easier and more enjoyable. Research suggests that alternate-nostril breathing helps balance the activation of the two hemispheres of the brain, and this may be why it's a particularly powerful prelude to meditation.

Other Yogic Tools

Service (karma yoga) can be a wonderful tool for building compassion and gratitude. When you work with others in need, your own problems may not seem so severe. Encourage your students to consider volunteering in a soup kitchen or for a community group, or perhaps helping elderly neighbors who need assistance with errands. As with forgiveness (another spiritual quality that yoga encourages), it is the giver, not the recipient, who tends to benefit the most from service.

Gratitude can be cultivated by thinking about all the people who have helped you in your life: those who cared for you, clothed you, educated you, cooked for you. Think of the statistical miracle that you were even born. In working with students who are depressed, my teacher Patricia Walden suggests that they write down and review all they have to be grateful for, every night before bed. Count your blessings every day, she says.

Bhakti yoga—prayer, chanting mantras, and devotional singing (be it gospel or kirtan)—can be a powerful way to connect to something deeper. You don't necessarily have to believe in God for this tool to work. Some people prefer to think of honoring their connection to the universe rather than praying to a deity, but how you conceptualize it really doesn't matter. Ultimately, bhakti practices are more about the emotions than concepts.

Faith is another powerful tool for spiritual transformation. Understand, though, that faith in yoga is different than the kind of faith that many religions encourage. In yoga, you are not meant to take anything blindly but simply to do the practice, and then watch the results. Try to get your students to make an initial commitment to practice, and let the fruits of that practice instill faith. While you can encourage them—and your faith and your example may be infectious—ultimately it's their own practice that must convince them to keep it up.

Finally, yoga can build spiritual qualities and well-being by putting practitioners in touch with their life purpose, or dharma. Yoga teaches that when you quiet the mind using the various tools outlined above, you gain access to an inner wisdom that—with sustained practice—becomes progressively subtler. When you learn to



listen to what your heart tells you, you'll know what uses of your life energy feel most meaningful, what you find fulfilling and what you don't. Steer your life as best you can in accordance with that ever-deepening wisdom, and greater access to joy, compassion, and gratitude are likely to follow.



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