

## A Twisted Story

A spiritual search usually begins with the recognition of some sort of suffering whether physical, emotional or mental. Finding an end to suffering was the Buddha's original quest twenty-five hundred years ago, and the object of that quest continues to propel people into yoga studios, meditation centers and various other spiritual homes.

Seeking an end to suffering can also imply a willingness to look at and consider the causes of suffering, and an understanding of impermanence. Those fortunate enough to stumble across the Buddha's teachings will discover that there is already a diagnosis, prescription, a course of action, and the possibility of total recovery from what ails us—or, what we "think" might ail us: a journey of discovery in its own right. As Marcel Proust said so eloquently, "*The true voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes*".

For me, the intertwining of Buddhism and yoga arose organically as a literal twisting and untwisting that occurred in my physical body. At 20 years old, I was struck with searing pain. I was in art school in NYC at the time, and had been in fact debating with my fellow students earlier in the month about whether or not – since I had grown up in a nice home,

with a loving family -- I had suffered enough to create really good art. It was an ironic karmic twist that physical agony would suddenly be offered as a way to suffer for my art or for anything really.

I'd had no prior experience with serious pain, so I did as I'd been taught to do: "rise above and ignore." After several months, I finally had to surrender (as I viewed it at the time) and seek medical help. I found a doctor I thought would be able to determine the cause of the pain and know immediately how to fix it.

At our first meeting, I suspected that this doctor didn't truly believe me when I tried to describe the amount of pain I was in. He repeatedly commented on how healthy I appeared, how pretty I looked. He was dismissive and haughty, and said he couldn't find any organic cause for the symptoms I described. Not knowing what else to do, however, I continued to see him, reiterating the same complaints every time, even bringing him a drawing of myself and all the places I felt the pain. I think he finally arranged to have me undergo exploratory surgery simply in order to end my visits.

The surgery revealed that an ovary had become attached to part of my large intestine. The organs were separated and I was assured that all would be well after a brief period of rest. However, all was not well and I

continued to experience excruciating, chronic pain. I returned to this doctor again and again until he finally announced that the pain must be in my mind: he could see nothing else causing it. "If it's in my mind," I asked him -- having no idea that I was foreshadowing a solution I would later find for myself-- "then what could I do about my mind?" He was not amused.

Over the next several years I went from one specialist to another continually thinking - *This one will save me, this next one will be able to fix me, this new person surely has to have the answers.* I underwent what felt like every test known to medical science, and yet no one could determine the reason for my continued pain. Over and over, my hopes were shattered. Over and over, it was suggested that the pain was a "phantom," a "figment of my overactive imagination", a "female problem": just take two of these, five of something else, and go away - we can't help you.

In the meantime, I accidentally started taking a yoga class. It was called "movement" but it was unlike any other movement class I had taken, so I asked the teacher what kind of movement it was and she whispered – *yoga*. I was so immediately drawn to the experiences I had in her class, that I took as many classes as I could find, which in the late seventies wasn't so easy. I moved an hour north of New York City, so it was even

more challenging to find classes, but fortunately I found some excellent Iyengar - trained teachers.

I started practicing yoga at home, from a Sivananda book that had sequences in it. I liked practicing alone, for several reasons. Alone, I didn't feel the need to impress anyone--no matter how hard I tried to get around it, I still worked a bit more in a pose when others were in the room. I often felt emotional in poses as well, and wanted to have the option of stopping and crying if I needed to--which I wasn't at all comfortable about doing in front of others. Moreover, the teacher whose class I attended most frequently was constantly emphasizing the -- as yet to my mind, unsupported --facts about the healing effects of yoga. Her pronouncements made me feel even more isolated in my illness--and along with years of being marginalized by doctors, made me feel like I was the only person in a yoga class who wasn't well – this situation didn't exactly fill me with hope. This feeling of being (unfortunately) unique and beyond repair would later materialize, surprisingly as a magnificent gift for empathy that I would later appreciate as a teacher.

I continued practicing yoga anyway simply because I liked it, rather than because I thought it would save or heal me. In fact, I also continued to experience constant pain. My humiliating past encounters with doctors

kept me as far away from them as possible for about three years, until I couldn't stay away any longer. I went to a well-respected gynecologist at Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Maryland. After hearing my story, he sent me in for another exploratory surgery. This was my fifth exploratory surgery. He found another cause for my pain: ovarian cysts. He removed part of each ovary, and genuinely thought that would be the end of my problems. However, after a lengthy recovery of a month in bed, I was still in tremendous pain.

### **A New Twist**

More years went by--eight since the first time I'd sought medical help. I tried different doctors, undergoing a variety of new tests, none of which shed any light on the cause of my pain. All the 'rising above' had been exhausting. The painkillers only made me dull and I was losing my ability to be joyful. I became difficult to be around: for example, I would feel a surge of intense unexpected pain in the middle of a party or a dinner, which would render me speechless or streaming tears. I felt guilty about sounding like a broken record -- and about being just plain broken. I was in my late twenties and I felt robbed of any semblance of a normal life.

Finally, out of complete desperation and exasperation, I sought out a local surgeon and asked him if he would open me up once again. I

convinced him that the pain was truly organic, and that I couldn't continue to live with it anymore for him to agree. He looked around a bit more than previous doctors, and found yet another cause for the pain—one that was truly bizarre. I had always thought that I was different: first because of the natural development of my delusional ego, then as an artist, then as someone in chronic pain, so in an odd way I felt justified about feeling so special! My large intestine had knotted, twisted and traveled all the way up to my heart, taking the appendix along with it and herniating my diaphragm along the way. Finally I was healed, I was saved – or at least, I had a cause for what pained me.

After 6 weeks of bed rest I was finally able to walk around, but since I had an incision that ran from my pubic bone to my navel, I could barely lift a plate full of food. I was convinced, though, that this time I would eventually become pain free and back to 'normal'.

Three more years went by. Although I was in pain most of the time, I kept “a stiff upper lip” would “rise above and ignore,” and “put a smile on my face” as I'd been taught as a child. Most people were never aware of the extent of my discomfort. I became proficient at hiding it and not talking

about it. Frankly, I bored myself with my “pain story” and its chapters full of complaints.

In addition to practicing yoga, I also tried a variety of alternative practitioners. I made appointments with people who charged me a substantial amount of money to wave a wand around my head and give me odd-looking concoctions to boil and ingest. Some suggested affirmations for me; others recommended books about powerful women to read, suggesting I needed some sort of heroine to relate to. I’d never been into “voodoo” practices per se, but I was open to anything at that point.

My patience with non-scientific methods eventually wore thin, and my tolerance had holes in it at that point, so I decided to go to the Yale Pain Clinic. Surely, they would be able to help me at least manage the pain. I booked an appointment and waited a month with optimistic anticipation for the day to arrive. I drove up to New Haven with a tremendous load of blind faith that someone at Yale would finally, finally help me.

Unfortunately, the solutions they offered were more excruciating to hear than the physical pain itself was. Surgeons could perform a nerve block, so that I didn’t register any sensation in the right side of my pelvis, but the surgery was accompanied by incredibly high risks. Because the area

to be operated on was close to my spine, the surgery could possibly paralyze me. There was also a small chance that the operation could put me into a coma. I never asked how or why: just hearing that was enough to compel me to get up and leave.

I walked out to my car defeated and deflated. I cried so hard that the parking lot attendant made me wait until I had calmed down before he would let me exit the lot. I pulled myself together sufficiently to leave, but cried my way home. The hourlong drive became a cathartic experience though because half way home I made a vow: that I would help myself get well, I would figure this out on my own, I finally got it that I couldn't rely on anyone else to help me. I had to help myself.

### Straightening Up My Home/Body

I suppose I had the option of giving up, but it didn't occur to me. Instead, I began to do some research. This was pre-Internet, so libraries and bookstores became my second home. I had an intuition that food could help me, as I had a difficult time digesting, so I looked into the healing properties of food. I studied the area of my body that wasn't working properly- the intestinal tract. I learned how it functioned optimally, what it looked like and where it was located (or *re-located* in my case). I studied anatomy- enough to have a good idea of where organs and

glands were and what their functions consisted of. I learned about muscles by looking them up in Grey's Anatomy, then trying to sense them while moving around in a yoga pose. Reading that the Buddha recommended sitting, standing, walking and lying down as postures suitable for meditation, I began to see my asana practice as a combination of those four choices, with an understanding of impermanence and relative reality found in his Satipatthana Sutta:" ...a monk reflects on this very body from the soles of the feet on up, from the crown of the head on down, surrounded by skin and full of various kinds of unclean things: 'In this body there are head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, gorge, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin-oil, saliva, mucus, fluid in the joints, urine.'" This graphic and simple description of a body was exactly what I needed to see my body as just a body, and work with observing it as such.

Rather than just question why practicing yoga wasn't healing *my* body, I was now compelled to find out why not. Was I missing something? I began to read about yoga's origins and its healing potential. I had no idea that there were so many different ways to practice yoga, or that that hatha was only a small component of a much larger field of physical,

philosophical, and spiritual disciplines. This information came at just the right time to give me some hope that maybe I just hadn't found the best way for me to practice yet. I was especially inspired by this passage from BKS Iyengar's "Light on Yoga" . *"Where does the body end and the mind begin? They cannot be divided as they are inter-related and but different aspects of the same all-pervading divine consciousness"*. I had intuited the mind-body connection, but to read a statement from such a well-respected teacher gave me the confidence I needed not only to continue my search for understanding the connection of body and mind, but to unleash the power of utilizing the connection. A quote from Panatjali offered another source of both inspiration and hope " Through faith, which will give sufficient energy to achieve success against all odds, direction will be maintained. The realization of the goal of yoga is a matter of time". I was very willing and able to give myself the time to practice and beat the odds.

I also had this seemingly radical notion that perhaps I should consider that the pain *could simply* be in my mind at this point; and if that were the case, what could I do about it? I realized that I knew little about my own mind, *" Mind is not matter, but mind does matter. That is why looking into mind means investigating what seems to matter most of all."* ~ *Tarthang Tulku*. Though I hadn't seen this quote at the time, I

intuitively knew that it was time for me to get to know my mind as well as my body- after all, who or what else was going to truly know it? I wasn't exactly sure how to go about getting to know my mind, but knew that my mind was racing and anxious, and I had heard a lot about meditation calming the mind, so I found a local meditation group. I loved the sitting practice, but not, as it turned out, for the reason I initially went. I found myself feeling extremely high and ecstatic while meditating. I wasn't getting to know my mind, but leaving it and my body behind. Although the experience was terrifically pleasant, I was all over the place mentally. I knew even then that I needed to stay grounded in order to understand my mind, so I looked for another tradition that might help me do that.

### Sitting Straight

On the advice of a friend, I decided to explore vipassana meditation. I knew I needed to immerse myself, so I jumped right into a ten-day retreat led by students of S.N. Goenka. This was the first time in my life that I'd committed myself to sit still with any and all sensations, emotions and thoughts. I practiced their remarkable body- scanning technique, which I continue to utilize as a way to become meticulously aware of my entire physical being. Beginning at the crown of the head, you linger there until you feel a sensation, and then proceed a quarter of an inch either to one side or down, moving slowly along your entire body. Though such a

minute investigation can literally take hours, bringing the mind so closely into its physical realm and investigating sensations in such a microcosmic way, affords you the opportunity to get to know your body extremely well. Upon practicing this technique for the first time, I felt as if a veil had been lifted: I could recognize the distinction between what was real and imagined, and the impermanence of both states of mind. In other words, I could stay in my mind and lose feeling of my body, which was imagined, and I could also stay with the sensations in my body and witness them arise, change and fade, which was very real.

I also noticed that I wouldn't "die" if I remained consciously aware of uncomfortable feelings – and as someone brought up to deny any "negative" feelings, this was, in itself, an enormous accomplishment. I had been so deeply programmed to move away from discomfort of any kind- whether physical or emotional. I had no idea how hard it was to watch my breath after I got bored or to feel emotional pain for more than a brief second. But to my surprise I did it. I felt like a scientist, able to see how my mind worked and how my body would process my mind. When my mind was spacious and quiet, the pain in my body became more of a decoration than declaration. Both of my practices completely enhanced each other. My body became a body, not just *mine*. My mind became more fascinating - not so heavy and serious. After every meditation retreat—and I attended several in quick succession over the next seven

years --I felt lighter and more at ease with what was. The Buddha suggested four postures suitable for meditation – seated, walking, lying down and walking, I stretched this a bit to mean to mean that practicing a yoga posture became just another shape in which to meditate. Being in my body then became a doorway into being in the present moment and not flying far, far away.

Sometimes while practicing poses, it was as if I were reliving drug-enhanced experiences. I began traveling deeply inside my body like Alice down the rabbit hole, into a world of dark spaces as well as colorful designs. I could wander around inside using my breath as a guide, and discover which areas needed attention and care and which ones offered a certain kind of delight--a sparkling, vibratory experience. I played around, imagining tossing fairy dust into my veins and making my intestines sparkle. I visualized my pelvis as a giant glass bowl with brightly colored flower petals at the base. With my breath I would swirl the petals around and around the bowl bringing vibrancy back, if only in my imagination. What I didn't know at the time was that it wasn't simply a case of engaging my imagination: my body was physically being healed at the same time, with out my conscious awareness.

Six months later I ventured over to the Insight Meditation Society where I met my first and present teacher Ajahn Amaro. One significant technique I learned early on from him was the art of contemplation. His instructions were so simple and clear. Quiet the mind and choose a subject: the bigger the better--like "mother." Drop the "subject" into the quiet lake of the mind and just wait to see what bubbles up. *Mom, Mommy, Mum, etc.* --repeat the words, the ideas, and wait to see what associations arise. I would practice this type of contemplation to uncover emotional patterns caught in my body, imagining my body as my house. I scanned my body as if it were a property with which I was becoming re-acquainted and seeing more clearly, like coming home from a trip away. I would imagine where I stored my childhood memories, and what that particular area of my body felt like; where my parents stayed when they came for "a visit"; where I needed "repair," where the house was the darkest and where it held the most light.

This type of creative contemplation provided me with intuition about my emotional body, and once again how my body processed my mind. Pursuing this link gave me a key to what I believe was a turning point in healing my body. I harnessed the power of my own mind to locate areas that needed attention and care, areas that I needed to "clean and air out," problems I might need to actually talk through with someone else (as in parent-related issues) where I needed to bring in more light –

which in my mind meant awareness. At this point I was convinced I had the power to help myself heal, and had no doubt about it, as Jamgon Kongtrul points out “ *Doubt is the only supreme obstacle*”.

I would position myself in a yoga pose that opened that particular area and I would wait for my eyes to ‘adjust’ to the darkened space – just resting my mind. It was as if I became my own best friend: the friend as a witness to the stories my body needed to tell, who stayed no matter what came up, who never made me feel embarrassed or small, who believed everything I said.

Mostly while on retreat, which I began doing five or six times a year, I would intentionally imagine peristalsis over and over again. I started this visualization at the beginning of the large intestine, and worked my way down to the end – a kind of variation on the Goenka body scan I had learned on my first retreat. I coaxed my body over and over to remember what it was like to work normally, as normally as when I was a child, before the problems began. I yearned to simply re-awaken it from its slumber by reintroducing the patterns of movement it once had had.

Eventually I was no longer afraid to sit with discomfort. I could experience pain as sensation as well as a uniquely changeable experience that wasn’t always unpleasant. Initially, just allowing the pain

to be, without moving my mind away from it or trying to transform it, was a challenge. Eventually though, I was able to view pain as a sensation--neither comfortable nor uncomfortable, that simply arose and changed.

I spent one ten-day retreat just focusing in on and dissecting an entire area of pain – using the pain as the support for my practice rather than my breath. The painful area was huge and emotionally overwhelming – it usually encompassed the entire right side of my pelvis, often moving into my right leg. But when I stayed with that single sensation, it gradually broke into many smaller ones, and I began to distinguish between them. Some felt like a tickle or tingling, for instance; others hot and some like moving liquid. But I found that when I stayed with each sensation I could eventually locate the nadir of the pain. Through this process of dissection, the pain lost its ability to frighten me--by literally shrinking. Even though freedom from intense pain might happen for only moments at a time, if I looked pain directly in the face, it lost its power to overwhelm me and my body could relax around it. I felt larger than the pain, like a person gaining her full personality back, not to be labeled or only relate to myself as a person in pain. When one becomes overly identified with something like pain or illness, it can narrow and constrict life. It was as if I'd opened an aperture and allowed my view to widen. I returned to being more than just a person in pain.

## **As the Twist Turned**

After imagining my intestines waking up and working normally time and time again they actually began to work on their own. I was ecstatic; I was returning to 'normal'. This turn of events totally shocked the doctors I told, as they had repeatedly insisted that there was no way to re-trigger peristalsis: it was a part of the autonomic nervous system, and like the breath, functioned without our conscious control. Fortunately, being a yogi and practicing Pranayama, I was brazen enough to think I might have the same control over peristalsis, which is what actually happened. A quote by Bokar Rinpoche from the Profound Wisdom of the Heart Sutra gave me the confidence to re-train not only my mind, but my body as well “ *We should not forget that the mind, whatever turn that we want to give it, is very flexible. To the extent that we train ourselves, we create a habit and the mind accepts the crease that we give it.*”

Once in a while I could actually feel my intestines move and unwind: a surreal experience, and one that at first I thought I was imagining. Once though, I looked down at my abdomen and saw it actually move as I felt something wriggling around. This would only happen when I was concentrated with particular effort on the area, and imagining moving a tingling feeling through my pelvis. As my practices were weaving together, my body was literally unwinding.

I knew for certain that my mind was moving my body, moving inside of my body, motivating my body. The unknotting of my mind created the spacious atmosphere for my gut and the muscular area around it to do the same. The physical, energetic, seen and unseen were now living compatibly and consciously in my home/body. This reconciliation was seven years in the making – getting to know my mind, body and heart to the degree that they could communicate intimately.

Meeting Tibetan Buddhist meditation masters facilitated this process tremendously. After seven years of Vipassana retreats, I attended a Tibetan Buddhist meditation retreat, and became close to several teachers. One teacher loved to hear the details of my recent healing, and urged me to teach what I had discovered – he also gently pressed me to tell my story of healing, saying it might help others – (it took me a good five years to share this story with anyone without feeling embarrassed by the oddity of it.) Mingyur Rinpoche, my current teacher, taught me a great deal about loving-kindness and compassion, which has enabled me to continue to heal on an emotional level in addition to the physical – and the two are completely intertwined. After the pain began to subside, I was able to investigate the area of my pelvis emotionally and slowly accept some of the stories it held about being hurt or disappointed as a young child. I had insights about these memories on silent retreats, but it was through

compassion for myself that I was able to forgive myself and others for what had hurt me.

I had been searching for someone to save me, thinking that others might know more about my mind/body than I did. With respect to the physical positioning of my intestines, it turned out I did indeed need external help, but all other aspects of help needed to be of my own devising. The drawing I had brought to that very first doctor in New York resurfaced during a move I made ten years ago. It turned out that the points of pain I had drawn along various parts of my body were the meridian lines for the large intestine. Many of the drawings I'd made during those years of chronic pain look now like twisted intestines, and mini implosions. Some of the visualizations that I thought I had made up, have been found in books describing Tibetan tantric techniques, and have been called by one of my teachers "bliss." Apparently I had, without knowing it, tapped into a number of ancient traditions. I now teach from this vantage point: that we can know a great deal more about ourselves than we have been led in our culture to believe, and that when it comes to utilizing the power of our minds, we are only at the beginning.

## **Straight to the Heart**

I'm grateful for all of these experiences, which I truly never thought I would be able to have the luxury of saying. Having had something as stubborn and persistent a teacher as pain presented me with a vessel (my body) from which I found compassion and resolve. My illness brought interdependence to the forefront of my consciousness; ironically as part of my intestine traveled to meet my heart; that my mind is indeed connected to my body; that I am not the separate entity I first believed myself to be, that we all share the common goal of happiness.

The paths of yoga and Buddhism intertwined with out any type of manipulation on my part. For once, I didn't have to work so hard to twist or untwist, take care of any details, the connection was organic. Following the Buddha's teachings have inspired me to help others help themselves, to assist others to get to know their own mind, body and hearts a bit better and to take positive action armed with the best information available.

Yoga postures can be a doorway into the mind - an invitation to witness our minds through the physical entrance which most of us can relate to. When the body becomes the conscious home for the mind, and is able to fully inhabit its form, this connection becomes an invitation to experience emptiness. This experience allows us to loosen the grip of

ego, so that we may relate to the body as just a body, the mind as just a mind, and embrace experientially the interconnectedness of life- and the compassion that naturally blooms from this realization.

As I entered into Buddhism through the physical door, I have invited many others to do the same through the postures of yoga, and mindfulness of the body. For many of us, it is easier to relate to the body than the mind – so the practice of mindfulness in the body is a practical means to see the mind without feeling overwhelmed by a sitting meditation practice. It can be an organic introduction to how this body works, feels and ‘wears’ the mind. The mind can be seen as the inhabitant of the “house”, the one that can re-arrange the furniture, open the windows, clean the closets. Often this a yoga practice imbued with awareness empowers others to take further skilful and conscious action to make positive choices in their lives. I have seen this over the twenty years I have been teaching yoga and meditation, and am especially passionate about working with those who normally wouldn’t have the opportunity to practice these traditions.

### **Bound Together**

Feeling so alone in my illness, so marginalized and misunderstood became the seed of intention that has propelled me to help anyone I

could not have to feel the same way. My tools are my practices and most importantly, my experiences. I've sought out ways to bring the Buddhist view, and postures of yoga into places that wouldn't normally have the opportunity to practice them, and developed the School for Compassionate Action: Meditation, Yoga and Education for at risk communities and those that serve them. We train teachers to work with at risk youth and adults, people in recovery from substances, and those living in chronic pain and with illnesses – we also serve the communities by offering classes that are specifically tailored to meet their needs. This work allows me to share my story, give hope and offer practical means to those in need and not likely to wander into a yoga studio, or meditation center. *“The goal is to serve others, but how do we start? We have to start with ourselves. If I am going to serve you, I have to start with myself, by improving my attitude and actions to make myself a good servant for you, to make myself a proper tool to serve you.”* said Tulku Thondrup, and this is exactly what our intention is. Get to know your own mind, body and heart, and you have a tremendous amount of insight and information to share with others so that they may do the same.

The Dalai Lama said *“It's easier to meditate than to actually do something for others. I feel that merely to meditate on compassion is to take the passive option. Our meditation should form the basis for action,*

*for seizing the opportunity to do something.*" This is my favorite quote from His Holiness, and many of us are now trying to make a difference in the world because of our practices. People who train with me go into their own communities and continue to spread the teachings. In this small yet meaningful way, my private pain became my public announcement, and will hopefully reach many, many others with hope, choice and the desire to help each other.