Vajra Yoga
An Interview with Jill Satterfield

Jill Satterfield turned to Yoga 30 years ago in an effort to heal from a debilitating physical condition coupled with acute chronic pain. She extended her exploration of the integral relationship of the mind and body through the study of Buddhism in 1992. By combining the disciplines of Yoga and Buddhism she healed beyond all medical prognoses.

Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM): How did your illness lead you to integrate Yoga and Buddhism?

Jill Satterfield (JS): I first started taking Yoga in the late 1970s. Yoga was much less known at that time. I thought I had signed up for a dance class, but the teacher whispered, “It’s Yoga.” I was instantly intrigued, and began studying Patanjali for the philosophy and Iyengar for alignment. I picked up Swami Satchidananda’s book. I was very inspired by him when I read he said asana is just one part of Yoga. Really? I was completely inspired to know why—as asana seemed so important. I gobbled up as much information as I could. But even though I practiced asana with a lot of mindfulness and attention, physically I was getting worse. I was in chronic pain and no one could locate a physical reason for the pain after many, many tests. So, the doctors told me that it was psychosomatic and basically dismissed me. So I thought, okay, if it’s in my mind, what can I do about my mind? I sought out meditation classes, first with a group of Swami Muktananda’s students. I found that style made me quite ecstatic but it took me out of my body. I needed to figure out what was going on in my body.

IYM: So, what did you do?

JS: I heard about silent retreats through my Yoga teacher at the time, and went with her to a 10-day retreat led by students of S. N. Goenka. Even though I had very little meditation practice before the retreat, was in a great deal of physical pain and had just left a marriage of 13 years—all of which made the retreat rather difficult—I was hooked. After that retreat, I learned about and began going to the Insight Meditation Society’s 10-day silent retreats. The view of Buddhism—the inclusiveness, noticing what is, being a Bodhisattva, being compassionate—really resonated with me and began to blossom in my heart. At IMS, I also met my first and current teacher, Venerable Ajahn Amara. And fortunately for me, my primary Yoga teacher hadn’t brought a traditional yogic philosophy into the asana class, so it was a purely physical practice. This opened the door for my philosophy and view of choice—Buddhism—to inform my asana practice. Some of my greatest insights and most wonderful experiences were on those silent retreats. I would often use a couple of the walking meditation periods to practice asana. I would hold a posture for 20 to 40 minutes and meditate in the pose. I chose postures that I knew would help my intestines (where I was in pain), clear the lymph and open the pelvis. I investigated my body with attention to minute detail. I would notice sensations on such a refined scale that I would take an area of intense pain and slowly ferret out the pinpoint size of it’s origination. I could distinguish between the nadir of the pain and the radiant area of the pain. This allowed me to feel not so overwhelmed by the pain, but to see it for the true size and variety of sensations that it was—tingling, stabbing, hot, cool, tickly, etc.

IYM: And you began to heal and then teach?

JS: Yes, after a time, I finally did heal myself through these intensive retreats, going so deeply into my body, into the asanas. But first, I insisted on a final surgery, which proved that the pain was not entirely in my mind. It turned out that part of my large intestine had knotted and floated up to my heart, and then wound back down. Very bizarre, yet very true! I had no peristalsis and the doctors informed that it was not re-trainable because it is part of our autonomic nervous system. It took me about seven years, and I actually did retrain peristalsis, which blew the doctors’ minds. This is what propelled me to teach. I felt I had to share what I had discovered on my own healing journey. I was seeking a way to transmit what had made so much sense to me and that had changed my life.

IYM: How else did you integrate Yoga and Buddhism?

JS: Mainly, by seeing that a Yoga practice is a skillful means. In other words, if we are attuned and attentive, anything that we are doing is mindful. The Buddha suggested four postures that are suitable for meditation: seated, standing, walking and lying down. I consider a Yoga pose and practice to be a confluence of these postures. If practiced with an open mind and heart, it’s meditation in stillness and in motion.

I’m so intrigued by the interdependence of mind, body and heart. I’m fascinated by the resilience of our bodies, minds and hearts, the innate capacity to open, soften, give, grow and love. The ways I discovered my own capacity (continually) is through the paths of Yoga and Buddhism and the various practices of both traditions: meditation, contemplation, asana and visualization.

Therefore, I call what I teach meditation in motion, or contemplative Yoga so that students know somewhat what
they are in for. My teaching approach is about mind-body integration, not performing asana. I see the body as the mind’s home, and as a reflection of the heart. Mind training can come in the form of bringing the breath into various parts of the body and simply noticing where we breathe and where we don’t. It involves recognizing our personal pattern of breath—how we hold it when in physical or emotional pain and how we tighten around likes and dislikes, etc. In a Yoga posture we can also be aware of whether or not we are actually embodying the pose, if we’re actually in this body. In this way we can begin to investigate our bodies as a guide to the mind and heart. We can see things as they are by paying attention, staying focused, disciplining the mind to stay. One of the literally—and figuratively—grounding subjects for the mind to train on is the body.

IYM: Often we find meditators who aren’t in their bodies and people who practice asanas not really seeing them as meditation.

JS: It’s so true! It’s fascinating to me to talk to meditators and learn that for some their meditation practice stays maybe just at the entrance of the nostrils; they are not really exploring the physical form at all. There’s nothing wrong with this, but it can be much more. We’re so in our heads that teaching people to be in their bodies is an incredibly practical tool. Many meditators may not want to be in their bodies but just want to experience the bliss of meditation, which is great and can happen—I wanted to do that! I didn’t love having a body (it was so painful) but, because of my illness, I had to discover my own body. I liked those times when I didn’t have to feel so tethered but being tethered to the body was, for me, an important component of my spiritual practice. Having an anchor or tether for practice is what trains the mind to stay on one thing for awhile. It is the object of meditation, until we no longer need a particular object. Being tethered to this physical form allowed me to understand it, take care of it and heal it. Knowing the body well offers the opportunity to take better care of it, hear its signals, make wiser choices about it and, being in the body is being in the present.

IYM: How can we integrate asana and meditation?

JS: We can practice mindfulness in asana; we can practice a visualization in asana. We can utilize the breath as the vehicle to “see” inside the body while in asana. We can break down the sensations in the body—a Vipassana technique in asana. We can move prana, chi, lung (Tibetan for wind) life force, energy around the body while in an asana. According to the Buddha, we can practice meditation seated, standing, walking and lying down. We can meditate in asana, which is a sort of amalgamation of sitting, standing, walking and lying down—there are many, many ways!

But what I have experienced to be the most powerful way to combine the practices is to bring compassion, kindness and gentleness to our bodies. Being compassionate creates a very fertile ground for all kinds of healing: physically, emotionally and mentally. If we can stay present and loving within this body, with all its sensations—pleasant, unpleasant and neutral—we set the ground for the challenges we face emotionally. Staying with the body, in all of it’s aging and changes for instance, is easier than staying with a broken heart! It’s great training for larger issues.

I hope that those who read this issue might be more curious to explore asana in different way or even look at Yoga with a wider aperture—more from the content than the container—and to make it really personal. That’s the heart of it when we bring it home, make it home and feel at home. Yoga isn’t only in the class. It’s what we make ours. If we all took a little time each day to do some quiet, introspective, contemplative practices, wouldn’t that be lovely? We could truly change the world.

Jill Satterfield is the founder of Vajra Yoga & Meditation, a synthesis of Yoga and Buddhism that combines meditation, Yoga asanas, visualization and contemplation practices. She is also the founder and director of the School for Compassionate Action: Yoga & Meditation for Communities in Need, a not for profit that trains teachers to offer Yoga, meditation and emotional support to at-risk youth, people suffering with chronic pain and illness, PTSD and addictions. For more information, please visit: www.vajrayoga.com.