Self-Care as the Foundation for Social Action: How to Thrive and Sustain Personal Well-Being in the Field of Yoga Service

Jill Satterfield
Founder and Director, Vajra Yoga + Meditation | The School for Compassionate Action
www.vajrayoga.com | www.schoolforcompassionateaction.org | jill@vajrayoga.com

It is essential for yoga service providers to find a balance between self-care and caring for others in order to maintain their mental, physical, and emotional health in the long term. This sustainable balance can be found in practices that cultivate wisdom and compassion. This article offers a five-week exploration of techniques that can be layered onto your existing asana and meditation practice. Beyond facilitating our own self-care, observing the breathing restrictions, fear, anger, and sadness that may arise with these techniques can help us to become more compassionate toward those we serve now and prepare us with rich experiences to pass on to the next wave of those interested in continuing this work.

We need to maintain a delicate homeostasis in our lives to meet the challenges of working in the social action fields. Without balancing our approach toward self-care and care of others, we become susceptible to mental exhaustion, physical burnout, and emotional fatigue, unable to give of ourselves any more. We may lose insight into the nature of self and other, take things personally when they are not, and project our own issues onto others. Inflamed with resentment or anger, our capacity for self-reflection is impaired, and we may even become physically or emotionally ill. To skillfully engage in the world requires dedication, perseverance, wisdom, and compassion.

Neglecting self-care is often rationalized by thinking that we have too much to do and no time for practice or, more perniciously, that the suffering of others should take precedence over self-care. Caregivers commonly feel that another’s needs are more important than their own and that taking time for yoga and meditation is self-indulgent or even selfish. This way of thinking sometimes stems from a misunderstanding of the bodhisattva ideal in Buddhist philosophy. A bodhisattva is a munificent being dedicated to relieving the suffering of all sentient beings, willing to delay his or her enlightenment until all suffering ceases. However, a bodhisattva is also a practitioner on a path. Much like the path of yoga, this path includes equal parts practice and study, as well as a determination to adhere to ethical guidelines. When either practice or study outweighs the other, this imbalance may result in one becoming overly conceptual and not grounded in practical wisdom. If we neglect ethical integrity, we risk losing sight of the greater
good. And if we cease to practice, we can lose sight of our deepest motivations for service.

While empathy may keep us committed to the pursuit of helping others, it is of the utmost importance that we engage in action skillfully and sustainably, both for ourselves and for those we serve. We achieve this sustainability by regular self-care in the form of practices that cultivate wisdom and compassion.

**Interdependence**
A good place to start in shifting our viewpoint on self-care is with an understanding of the interdependence of all life, which can be likened to a woven fabric in which every being is connected, like the gems in Indra’s great net. Each individual is a sparkling jewel woven into the net that reflects all others within the net of existence. To view ourselves as less deserving than those we serve is to pluck ourselves out of the shared web of an interdependent existence. We can understand this conceptually or intuit it directly through contemplative practices. From the perspective of our interconnectedness with all of life, caring for self becomes an act of kindness toward all beings, stripped of the guise of selfishness. With this understanding, we can effectively open into an energizing mode of clear seeing and self-compassion.

Taking care of ourselves ripples outwardly as we develop a profound understanding of all beings. Knowing our own mind, body, and heart through contemplative practice opens the doors of awareness to all minds, bodies, and hearts. We recognize that the differences between self and other lie merely in the details of our unique story that is based on our individual patterns of previously learned association. Although a necessary component of survival in the world, our story is not the whole truth of our being. When we know our own minds and hearts, we know those of others. When we care for ourselves, we care for others, and this is the foundation for a natural arising of compassion.

**Cultivating Compassion**
Neuroscience is catching up with ancient wisdom. It is now understood that practicing compassion decreases the effects of stress, increases social connectedness, and elicits kindness toward oneself and others (Davidson, 2012; Light et al., 2009; Slagter, 2011). These benefits of compassion serve us well when embarking on a committed path to serve others. We must remain connected to each other and practice self-compassion or we risk succumbing to compassion fatigue. To cultivate compassion, we begin by developing moment-to-moment awareness, commonly known as mindfulness.

Mindfulness is being in the present moment and allowing what we notice in our thoughts to be gently held without grasping, clinging, disliking, or desiring. We become attentive to whatever is going on, in and around us, rather than unconsciously wandering in our daydreams and inner commentaries. When we see clearly, we can make skillful choices about each moment and what it might require, and we are no longer reacting but thoughtfully and skillfully responding. From here, wisdom develops and flourishes.

Our messages and methods of practice must come from our own direct experiences to be accessible and useful to those we serve. Our ability to meet others where they are reflects an understanding of our own suffering. Suppose we are working with underserved youth. If we have not yet uncovered our own feelings of anger, displacement, or abandonment, for example, we cannot expect to understand how troubled adolescents might be feeling. If we cannot relate on some level to their suffering, we may feel pity, which is the antithesis of compassion. Without relating to their emotional needs and the underlying causes of their behavior, we lose the ability to be compassionate and, importantly, our capacity to pause if triggered by their behavior diminishes.

As another example, when working with people who have experienced trauma or who are in chronic pain, it is helpful to reach into our own practice of being gentle, kind, and accepting of ourselves. By practicing loving-kindness and compassion toward ourselves, we unearth what we dislike about ourselves and where we need to forgive ourselves and forgive others. We know in our bones how transformative and helpful the practice is, and we become able to pass on this gift of self-acceptance. Individuals suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder often feel that they should already have moved beyond the experience. Through our own personal transformation, coupled with an understanding of psychology of trauma, we can adapt the phrases of loving-kindness accordingly. For example, “May I be patient with myself” is an appropriate mantra for someone who is frustrated with experiencing the insidious and repetitive symptoms of trauma.

We evolve creatively to meet each community or population we encounter because of what we learn from our practices as our information becomes embodied. How and what we practice changes over time if we are deeply listening and attuning to ourselves. Once we have developed a strong foundation—alignment
In a yoga practice, and the ability to stay present to the breath and to focus the mind in meditation—we hold the fundamental tools for practice to become an expression of our being. This then becomes the greatest gift we as teachers and caregivers have to share.

**Meditation in Motion**

Many of us are accustomed to practicing asana while controlling the breath. However, practicing with the breath as it naturally occurs can change our relationship to breathing and provide an opportunity for a different kind of self-care. At first, it might seem uncomfortable to not manipulate or elongate the breath or emphasize retentions. By reflecting on the interconnection between breath and mind, we can begin to recognize breath as it is, without its usual covers of manipulation, preferences, or previous training.

Think of a posture as a shape or form and the breath and mind as the content. Where does the mind and breath go in this particular shape? Just as importantly, where do they not go? Little by little, we begin to distinguish where we like to breathe in the form of the pose and where we don’t. This observation can only be made when we stop trying to accentuate the breath here or there, making it this long or that short. We witness the movement of natural breath by allowing it to be as unadulterated as possible. I call this “meditation in motion” because, as in a meditation practice, we are watching the breath come and go just as it is. Welcoming of the breath rather than trying to fix it, a meditation in motion practice increases mindfulness because it trains attention and self-awareness.

Listed below are other suggestions that may help develop a new and possibly more personal view of your own practice in just five weeks. After you have experienced them for yourself for a while, envision how you would tailor the practices to the community you serve.

### A Five-Week Self-Care Practice

#### Week One: Changing the View

Meditation generally involves a simple seated posture so that our focus can rest with the mind and breath rather than adjusting the pose. Try to adapt this principle to your asana practice: Emphasize content rather than form. Don’t do any other practice first. Allow yourself to experience yourself without the benefit of what you already know an asana practice offers (e.g., more room to breathe, more comfort in the body, more ease in the mind). Start by exploring five simple postures that you know well—nothing too complicated or physically rigorous.

As you watch the movement of your breath in a posture, you are observing the movements of your mind and heart. The body and breath reflect our thoughts and emotions; the body can become the physical shape of the mind and heart. Recognize that where your breath flows easily are the areas of your body where you are comfortable. Where the breath cannot flow (yet) tends to be the areas of holding or constriction—emotional, mental, or both. Over time, practicing in this way will reveal the nature of the constriction. However, the first step is becoming familiar with the internal landscape of our home—our body.

#### Week Two: Moving the Mind

Use the same five postures as in week one. As you settle into each individual posture, choose an area of your body and imagine that your breath carries your mind there. As you draw a gentle breath into your right hip, for example, imagine this breath like a fresh breeze that lightly brushes the internal crested shape of the hip and the nearby organs and glands. Move your breath and your attention everywhere you can imagine. Note all of the places that you cannot breathe into or cannot imagine breathing into. Observe how you feel during and after this moving of the mind, listen to the thoughts that arise and make note of them. Feel the emotions that might come up from either lingering in an area or from difficulties in accessing a particular area.

#### Week Three: Staying With What Arises

Once you have discovered the areas of your internal landscape that are not so easily accessible, choose a different posture to explore those areas. I suggest a restorative posture, something that is very easy to stay in for a longer period of time. For example, if you have discovered that the breath does not move into your heart area with ease, roll up a mat and place it directly behind the heart center, a bit under your shoulder blades. Lie on this roll for at least 10 minutes.

As you are in the pose, imagine that you are simply pulling up a comfortable chair and sitting inside this area. Rest your awareness gently inside, returning your mind to this place over and over again every time you notice that you have wandered. Do not expect anything to happen. Simply sit as if you were with a dear friend who needs you. Notice the effects of this practice on your mind and body.
Week Four: Skillful Means

Begin to develop this keen sense of awareness in an asana practice of your choice. As you fully occupy your posture with mindfulness, more patterns may reveal themselves, such as the desire to not pay attention or the impulse to stay on one side less because of discomfort. As you begin to notice these relationships of mind and body, hold them very gently and kindly. Become aware of any tendency to judge yourself. Thoughts of being less than perfect or directing harshness toward yourself will help you to be aware that these tendencies will also tend to arise in those you serve and you can meet them with the same kind acceptance.

As you move from one posture to another, be mindful of transitions as much as the periods in which you rest in the pose itself. Transition times are very revealing moments; they reflect the internal adjustments that occur (often unconsciously), such as holding the breath or tightening the belly. Witness what happens when you step off the mat and move into the world, or how you are right before you enter a crowded room, or the moment after something is complete just before you move to the next thing. Such moments have stories to tell about our habits of mind, body, and heart. If you would like to reintroduce ujjayi, breathe into or toward the places that are beckoning your attention, rather than assuming your breath as it was before this experiment.

Week Five: Loving-Kindness and Compassion

Finally, introduce the practice of developing metta—loving-kindness and compassion—and infusing it into your practice.

Begin in a seated or restorative posture. Imagine yourself in the present moment or as you were when a child. As you imagine yourself, with as much detail as possible, offer the following phrases to yourself, repeating them silently or aloud as many times as you like.

- May I be happy
- May I be joyful
- May I be peaceful
- May I be healthy in body, mind, and heart
- May I be safe
- May I be loved and know I am loved
- May I love others freely and abundantly
- May I be forgiving
- May I be at ease
- May I be free from all suffering

Next, imagine that from deep within your heart, you can offer these phrases to all sentient beings—seen and unseen, born and yet to be born, human and animal, plants, and everything on our planet and beyond. Imagine these sentiments radiating from your heart in all directions. Sit quietly after this practice and allow your mind to rest on the coming and going of your breath for as long as you like.

Practice the metta phrases as they are or add your own. Repeat one or more phrases as you are practicing asana. Pay attention to what arises as you repeat these phrases. Whenever you become aware of judgements or self-criticism during your practice, recite the phrases, “May I be at ease” or “May I be loved.”

Metta is a personal practice but it also transcends the personal; it is as much about our connection to others as it is about ourselves. Becoming aware of what arises in this practice—such as fear, anger, or sadness—can help you to understand how difficult this practice can be for people who have suffered trauma or who have troubled lives. Use this practice frequently; it is very portable. A phrase can be silently repeated as you go about your daily life, without anyone else knowing what you are doing. Share this with those you serve—it can be both comforting and empowering.

Reflections

These practices are among my favorites. They arose out of many years of my personal practice of yoga on silent meditation retreats, especially during the years when I suffered from chronic pain and illness. They have helped me transform a critical view of myself into a more compassionate understanding. They have provided ways to turn my asana practice into meditation in motion so that I am mindful and can work with my mind as much as possible to stay present, no matter what I am doing or feeling. Importantly, these practices have kept me committed to practicing, reflecting, and taking kinder, more holistic care of myself. That, I think, might be their greatest gift. I am a much healthier human being and better teacher because of these practices.

I sincerely hope that you find treasures for yourself within these or similar practices so that you can remain healthy, vital, and flourishing with the work you are doing in the world. You are an extremely valuable and integral part of this relatively new and growing field of yoga service. Take excellent and kind care of yourself so that you last for many years to come.
As we collectively become more mature and seasoned leaders in this field of work, remember that taking care today will offer you the chance to continue long enough to guide the next generation. Within each new generation, there are the seeds of the previous generation. What you will be offering from your own experiences and practices will inform the next wave of those interested in continuing this work. This is ultimately the very best service we can offer to anyone.

**References**

