

transformation

an experience in yoga

Sue Jackson explores the experience of yogic transformation in the lives of a yoga teacher, her student, and a group of special needs students.

Do you go to yoga desiring a change to your body, mind, or spirit? Anticipating that what you encounter will change your life in some fundamental way? Can you imagine, just for a moment, what your experience of life might be if your ability to move was severely restricted? What if you could not speak to make your wants and intentions known? What if you could not see? And what if your life contained not just one, but several such disabilities? Would yoga be able to help you? Would you, as a student of yoga, be able to help people with disabilities, using yoga principles or practices? In this story, we examine these questions as we journey into local lives transformed by yoga.

Lives transformed by yoga

Therese is a teacher of students with multiple impairments. Having been introduced to yoga herself several years ago – seeking relief from ongoing neck and back pain – Therese started to think about how she could apply what she was

experiencing through yoga to her own work with special needs students. Therese came to love yoga, and to see the many benefits it brings. However, at first, she was a bit sceptical, wondering why there were people attending the class 20 years after they first began: “I thought to myself, ‘Why are you still coming to classes? Haven’t you learned it by now?! Couldn’t you do this at home?’ And now I realise you do need that group dynamic. Otherwise, I don’t do it – I try to, with my home practice, but I don’t extend myself. You extend yourself in a class a little bit further, and you’re glad you do it.”

More than just the simple motivation of trying a little harder in a group setting, Therese recognises the value of a group dynamic for learning and growing together: “And that’s what I try to do with my class too. Most people need that group dynamic of feeling part of a group, and growing together, learning and sharing.”

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Since Therese started working with her students two years ago, each day now includes a modified movement practice, based on yoga principles. The small group – all girls – have attended the special school five days a week, since they were around two years old. Therese and support teachers assist the girls to stretch and move, following a program developed by the teachers in consultation with an occupational therapist and physiotherapist. “The goal is to maintain the girls’ active movement and mobility, as well as to increase their comfort,” explains Therese. “Movements involve helping the girls to stretch out and roll on their backs, plus assisted movement of joints and muscles, moving shoulders, opening chests, rotating ankles and wrists, stretching arms and legs.” Due to the restricted movement control of the students, Therese and teacher aides physically facilitate the movement of the students. Due to their multiple disabilities, the students are unable to provide verbal feedback, “In fact, they don’t understand language at all. The students have neurological, physical, and intellectual disabilities; some also have visual; some are mobile, others in wheelchairs”, explains Therese.

Therese knows from her own yoga the wonderful release of tension and pain that the physical practice of yoga provides. “It keeps me strong, and able to do the work I love; a lot of my friends have had to leave work from sore shoulders or backs. I love what I do so I need to keep physically fit.” Therese believes her students also experience relief from physical pain and discomfort via the guided movement program. Sitting in chairs for much of the day means their hips and backs are tight all the time – they have constant tone. “I’m positive the stretching and moving is

having a good effect”, says Therese. “I’ve observed this has a follow-on effect to when they are doing something else.”

The positive effect of the movement program on the girls extends beyond the release of tightness and

predicted that she wouldn’t still be walking at her current age. Another parent, whose daughter, Jill, is in a wheelchair, is happy with the increase in active movement she demonstrates; in particular an increase in hip strength.

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excess muscle tone or tightness, impacting directly on their happiness. This is clearly demonstrated in the smiles and sighs that appear during and after movement class. Therese has found that the program helps the students to participate better in everything else they do in their day: “After class, the students are more relaxed and physically their muscles are more relaxed. You can’t have a conversation with them, but you observe – we’re pretty good at doing that, because we do it every day.” Further evidence that the program is having a positive effect comes from parent feedback: “Each year, we ask them what they want to continue, and it is always the movement program.”

The parents are big supporters of the movement program, commenting on the happy and relaxed feel of the classroom. One of the parents, whose daughter, Elise, has a neurodevelopmental disorder, epilepsy, and high muscle tone, believes the program has contributed to his daughter’s continuing to be mobile. Doctors had

Therese also sees progressively improving movement control in Jill, who can now roll by herself and move her arms.

Observation is critically important to the work of both Therese and her yoga teacher Leanne. “Each class has a particular feel to it, and that becomes the starting point for the small changes that might take place”, says Leanne. For Therese, knowing where her students are at relies totally on observation. “I know when Jill” – who is confined to a wheelchair, with acquired neurological disability from meningitis – “is not interested. She’ll be in a world of her own, rubbing the back of her head on her chair. When she’s interested, her head will be still, she’ll be alert,” explains Therese. “Although Jill cannot speak or see, it’s the happy look on her face, the smiles and sighs that let me know she gains something from the movement class.”

Jill’s mother also sees this change in her daughter when Jill stretches at home: “When I start to dress or move Jill, she does beautiful stretches and really takes her time and savours every

second. It really is such a natural instinctive experience. She ends the stretch with either a vocal sigh or smile, or just a look of satisfaction. I think having the movement and stretching as part of Jill's school day is not only therapeutic, but warms her heart and mine when I watch."

The Yoga is the Transformation

So what is it about yoga that has the capacity to produce this effect? Leanne, a keen scholar of the yoga of Krishnamacharya and his son

provides that contributes to the transformation. The transformation is the yoga. I believe our role as a teacher is to bring something to the class that will facilitate a change in a person."

Leanne recognises that most people don't come to yoga seeking transformation. "They initially come because of stress or back pain. They don't come because they're interested in yoga." That interest surfaces after prolonged engagement in yoga. For Leanne, her primary goal as a yoga teacher is to facilitate transformation at

critical aspect of yoga. "Over the seven years Therese has been coming to classes, I've witnessed a dramatic change in her awareness," says Leanne. "The Sutras explain that before we can teach others we must understand ourselves. We go from gross to subtle. Therese came to class with back pain, and worked through it; then worked with her breath, perception, and mind. I'm sure this has given her a sensitivity to work with the kids the way she does. Also, I've seen further change in her this past year with our discussions about patience, acceptance, and understanding — qualities yoga can bring forth. If these qualities are in Therese's understanding, I think they will come through when working with her students."

Unlocking the Energy Flow

Leanne believes that prana is relevant to understanding the work that both she and Therese are doing. Prana is translated as 'life force', and is the main motivating force of the subtle body system in yoga. Leanne believes that the changes taking place in the students are related to improving the flow of prana: "The movement practices remove obstacles so that the prana flows more freely and natural vitality circulates within the body. And that is why they are having a better day. We are all working with prana. But sometimes it gets distorted or obstructed. Our practice is really about refining it, removing what we might call pranic knots. And that's one of the reasons we move our body and observe our breath. It cuts through all the pranic knots."

Because of the students' restrictions with independent movement, they might not have many opportunities to experience the flow of pranic energy without a regular assisted movement program. As Leanne points out, "I believe the movement of prana doesn't stop with the specific movement work Therese does with her students. Through our own awareness and unobstructed prana, I believe we are able to pass this prana on to others. It may be intangible, perhaps call it a sense of wellbeing or spirit. It changes her relationship with her students; the students' relationship with their family, and so on ... that interchange of prana. Our work on ourselves, our refinement of ourselves,

Desikachar, believes it has to do with the transformation that can come about through yoga. Leanne explains, "Therese sees a difference in the classroom; the parents see a difference at home. *That* is the yoga — not the asana, but the intention of transformation — making habits every day. Whether it is how you move, or what you think of; all those things are yoga. It is not the postures that you do, or the practice that you have, but what you become from doing the practice. What is interesting is that Therese's students are not even doing the movement. It's from the interaction of the movement experience Therese

an individual level: "It's not about the tools — such as asana or pranayama — but why did this person come, and what can I bring to them to give them what they need for their journey? We're trying to set things up so that they can see it for themselves, let something come about for themselves. That is my biggest thing. Watching and working out what I have to do so they get it."

Leanne believes that what Therese is doing is similar, despite the context being quite different. Therese is also facilitating an experience for her student, one that is leading to transformation. For Leanne, the transformation is the most



affects every relationship – how we speak to each other, how we relate to each other – it doesn't end at the yoga class.”

Understanding Transformation

During our interview, Therese remarked about now being able to more clearly see the connection between her own yoga practice and the experience she provides for her students. Therese knows she has changed through her yoga practice, and these changes have positively influenced the students she works with – from the release of physical tension, to the movement of prana or energy, to deeper awareness of herself and her relationships with those she teaches.

A fundamental principle of the Krishnamacharya tradition that Leanne's work is based on is respect for the individual. Yoga is adapted to an individual's changing needs, to allow each individual to benefit from the yoga experience. The movement experiences Therese provides her students may not be viewed as yoga in the popular sense. But what is the yoga experience? Certainly she is taking what she is learning through her

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own yoga practice into other parts of her life, and the results of this are impacting positively on the lives of others. This is the yogic path of transformation. “It's because it's not the tools themselves, it's the phenomena, the observation of energetics, and what is happening that is important,” Leanne explains. “I think the relevant thing is that this awareness came from Therese's practice, from what she learned about herself. As a yogi, we learn to live more harmoniously with the elements, with natural phenomena. The more we do that, the more we take what we have learned into everything we do. That is what the yogic path is.”

Therese's story is about change, positive change, which can come about through embodying yogic principles into one's own life, and then taking this change out into the world.

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