

Creative Practice Yoga Notes by Peg Toliver



Always a Beginner

I teach a beginning yoga class and often am a student in beginning yoga classes. When I attend intermediate classes, the same poses are practiced as in the beginning class, with the addition of some more challenging ones. This often surprises new students. It's as if we see life is a ladder where we continue to climb and once we've climbed up one rung, we would surely not return to it. It would be like flunking a grade in school. Progress is viewed as this vertical pattern, not a spiral where we continually return to revisit the same region on the spiral's circumference.

I was once told that the difference between a beginning yoga student and the intermediate yoga student is that intermediate students know their bodies well enough to KNOW whether or not they can attempt a particular movement or should opt, instead, to rest in child pose. I think that's a pretty good distinction. It fits with the idea of growth as a spiral, we grow from the inward out, trying new things at each stage. As we move around the curve of growth we find ourselves returning to the same issues, the same stuck places. But as we age we can look at those places through the eyes of experience, deciding how to handle things differently this time. Just like the intermediate yoga student approaching the same pose for the 30th time in a month.

We do return again and again to basic postures – standing warrior poses, and twists and forward bends, and back bends, and inversions—because our bodies continue to have some basic needs for movement. And we return to the breath—our constant companion—discovering it anew each time we draw our attention inward at this miraculous exchange of revitalizing oxygen and waste gasses. It is

as if our minds race ahead with future living, forgetting to be present to the miracle sensations that are with us in the present moment.

It requires beginner mind to approach the sensations in our body like an infant exploring movement for the first time. Imagine the tiny body rapt with concentration and fascination at the fist moving past the field of vision. And the amazing discovery that the fist connects to the arm which connects to me!!! Wonder of wonders! It takes an experienced yoga practitioner to be able to access that beginner mind that experiences sensation in the body as a means to travel inward to discover who we really are and how we connect with the whole. We return to the same questions as the young child, exploring them at a different level.

What I notice most often with my beginning yoga classes is that my students aren't able to easily be present to the sensations in their bodies. Their minds and their will are running the show and trying to follow preconceived notions of how they should be. They need to unlearn many mental and physical habits and become like the infant first coming to encounter the physical self in the world—curious and persistent and gently coming to know the stuff they are made of.

Indeed, you have to be pretty advanced to practice like a beginner.