

Creative Practice Yoga Notes by Peg Toliver



Yoga Props

My yoga training has given me a new awareness of the importance of props in keeping stable alignment and balance in yoga poses. The ancient yoga texts say that two qualities are essential for each yoga asana or posture – stability and ease. But if we don't have the range of motion or flexibility to achieve a pose with ease, props can help get us there.

Props aren't there as a means of escape, or as a cop out, they help us to sense and experience what the fully-realized posture might be like. What are the lines of force in the pose? Where is the sense of rootedness? of lightness? Where is Center?

Just as we use these physical props in practice, we also use props in our lives to help us stay on a more balanced path. Yoga sees no shame in this, yet often, in class, people strive to do what they aren't currently physically capable of, straining and pulling themselves off balance and thereby creating tension and imbalance instead of stability and ease.

I attended a yoga class with a dear friend who struggled with chronic back pain. The teacher approached her with blocks and bolsters to help her ease into the postures, and she left the class embarrassed. No one else needed props and support! She felt as if she stood out like a sore thumb. Oftentimes what was offered as a means of help ends up making people feel as if they have failed in some way.

In fact, the prop is a gift, allowing us to sense what ease and balance might feel like even in our less-than-perfect bodies. For anyone with a health condition that

requires the regular taking of medication, that prescription can be seen as prop helping to support your health – a gift. Or, in the judgment of some, your need for medication can indicate that you are slacking off –not doing it on your own.

This sense of being a failure when we need something or someone beyond ourselves is a silly outlook, as a dear friend pointed out to me when I was bemoaning my need for certain props in my life. She was undergoing chemotherapy at the time, and said to me, “Life wouldn’t be possible without props.” She pointed out that friends are props to see one another through times when we couldn’t make it based on our own reach.

Indeed, just like beginners in a yoga class, we all have areas of instability. For some it is obvious on the outside and we see props such as wheelchairs or canes, eyeglasses or hearing aids. For others it may be a medication they take to correct some biochemical imbalance. For each of us, there may be a series of mental props we use to get us motivated or to keep us on track with our goals. This may include affirmations, goal setting, keeping lists or using insidious forms of guilt and shame.

Props are tools and they can be used well or abused. If they are used to achieve an appropriate end, they are good and healthy; if not, they become a problem. For example, a cane can be used to help one get from place to place by offering an extra bit of support; or it can be used to strike others in physical punishment. The prop itself is neutral and can be used for good or ill. It depends on what inner intentions are driving its use.

My yoga teacher Kim Schwarz suggested a gentle and clever approach to prop use in hatha yoga practice. Begin by using a thick city telephone book to give you the needed extra height in practicing asana. Day by day, tear one page out of the phone book, so that you can very gradually adjust your body to handling the alignment of the yoga pose all on your own.

This approach is gentle, but clearly directed toward progressing in the direction of independence. It’s what we do as parents raising our children to become independent adults. However, as we age, our children may need to begin to provide some props for us. It is part of being human --this give and take of various forms of support. Using props when needed-- and gradually removing them to allow your own glorious strengths to be fully utilized—is a natural part of the flow of living. No shame in that! . .