

Reflection
Reflection

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ri flek' shuhn

by Garth McLean

Reflection [ri flek' shuhn] (noun)

A process that requires light, light to be seen and, in turn, reflected back to the seer.

Introspection; self-observation; the reporting of conscious inner thoughts, desires and sensations. A purposive process relying on thinking, reasoning, and examining one's own thoughts, feelings, and, in more spiritual cases, one's soul. Contemplation of one's self.

The transference of an excitement from one nerve to another by means of nerve cells, reflux action.

(Sources: Wikipedia; various)

To witness a reflection then, it stands to reason that light, however obscure, opaque or clear, must be present, in order that its shining presence can be seen.

It was May of 1996, when the words Iyengar Yoga first entered my consciousness. I was lying in a bed at UCLA medical center relieved to discover that I did not have a suspected spinal or brain tumor. Rather, I had been blessed with a diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis. A battle was raging on the interior landscape of my body – my immune system was attacking my central nervous system and leaving multiple scars, or sclerosis, on various locations of my nerves' myelin sheath in its wake. (Myelin serves as the protective coating on the nerves that ensures uninterrupted service in healthy impulse conduction.) The results of several MRIs detected white matter lesions consistent with Multiple Sclerosis on my brain and my cervical and thoracic spinal cord. There was a breakdown within the matrix of my nervous system; the nerve impulses were not getting through to the various parts of my body.

My body had been rendered physically numb from head to toe. I had been derailed into the throes of physical crisis, emotional confusion and psychological anguish. I was stumbling over my feet when I walked and had lost the use of my motor skills to perform simple everyday tasks: holding a fork to eat, a pen to write my name and the dexterity in the fingers to button my jeans. Traumatic and frightening as that was, it was eclipsed when I experienced the humbling loss of control over my bladder and bowels. As a man in my mid-30s, I had joined the ranks of what I have since come to know as the hopeless, helpless, hapless.

An active guy, and not one to accept the role of "victim," I was willing to try anything to regain the use of my body and get my life back. After a flurry of medications to reduce the inflammation of the lesions, I asked my doc what to do for my physical therapy. He recommended swimming and yoga and underscored the need to vigilantly avoid overheating the body.

To some such a fate may not initially sound like a blessing, but it provided me with the springboard to dive into an interrogative exploration of self-healing and the challenge of brokering effective conflict resolution. Upon learning of my doctor's recommendation, visiting friends enthusiastically recommended the work of BKS Iyengar. Two days after my release from the hospital, I began attending classes at the Iyengar Yoga Institute of Los Angeles. The torch was lit, and thus began my inward and outward journey with Iyengar Yoga.

At first, the light of that torch was vague and nothing more than a dim glimmer of hope as I began to investigate the tamasic numbness that had engulfed my body. In the same way the sediment at the bottom of a lake clouds the waters when agitated, the numbness of my body stirred a dense cloud of anxiety and uncertainty that enveloped my thoughts. Within a few months though, I began to feel the remote areas of my body again – areas that had not been reawakened by the initially prescribed medications. Through the practice of asana, and a little faith, the turbulent storm of worry, doubt and fear that had consumed my mind began to subside. The light of possibility began to penetrate the thick veil of numbness and emotional heaviness. With the help of the props, the practice progressed and I began to catch glimpses of a future void of dependence, dis-ability or hampered freedom. The inner light began to shine through.

Inspired and willing to take a risk with my body, I gained the confidence to see if I could manage the condition naturally. I chose to forego the recommended pharmaceutical medications and instead embraced a daily practice of yoga. It was working. Naturally, I was inspired to meet the man whose work was having such a profound affect on my life. After waiting the requisite years, I made my way to Pune to study – hopeful to meet BKS Iyengar.

When I first met Guruji, I expressed my gratitude and wanted to discuss my course of MS with him. He acknowledged my gratitude and was compassionate toward my plight, but he did not want to speak with me further about it. Perhaps he sensed the eagerness of my western mind's quest for instant answers. At first I didn't understand the wisdom of his decision. I sat across from him in the library that first day at RIMYI and thought to myself, "If this man is really my guru, the one to show the way from darkness into light, then he will direct what happens next." So I sat there...studied him, studied myself and waited. Those were some of the most uncomfortable moments of my life, but soon the warmest, most loving smile broke across his face. He raised his eyebrows, looked at me and said, "Every day you must walk that fine line between courage and caution." I will never forget those words that fortified my internal light. He encouraged me to "be a learner, work slow, exercise patience and seek out alignment—not just physical alignment."

When I think back to that day in the library, how could I have possibly imagined exploring the effect yoga could have on my life, let alone the challenges of the condition, with a learner's mind if he had given me the answers my ego thought I needed? As every case is different with MS, there is no "one size fits all" approach. Instead, if I could honestly sit with an unknowing mind and courageously take the next steps to adopt and adapt the appropriate asana and pranayama without pre-determined limitations...imagine those possibilities!! This course of action has proven to be most invaluable in restoring and maintaining the health of my body.

Guruji offered insightful clues into what work was necessary in the further exploration of asana and pranayama. For my body, he strongly recommended to keep the anterior surface of the spine longer than the posterior. Although that has never come easily for me, I embraced and explored his suggestions and was further guided by the rigorously honest reflection of practice, supported by the sage and continued counsel of Geetaji, Manouso Manos and others.

In Terms of Application:

Generally speaking, all the inversions and variations have played a key role. I suspect the fresh supply of oxygenated blood keeps the brain and notably the glands of the lunar plexus located near the base of the brain healthy and working properly. The various movements of the spine in the inversion variations have certainly helped to maintain healthy avenues for the nerves that travel the corridor of the spinal column, making that thoroughfare “traffic worthy” as Prashantji so eloquently encourages. Working with some resistance (weights/ trestle/wall) in the standing and supine poses has been especially beneficial when feeling in the body has been compromised and when balance has been off. The resistance and support offer feedback to the sensory nerves to penetrate from the peripheral body toward the core and reflect back once again to the peripheral body. The philosophical and reflective aspect of paksa and pratipaksa bhavanam became a traceable action, rather than a mere philosophical concept.

I discovered that working with resistance helps keep the bones and joints firm and well connected, especially the sacral nerve plexus, and positions the femur bones well into their sockets. When an electrical plug is loose and not fully engaged in a socket, the electrical impulses are unable to transmit properly and the appliance fails to function. The same has been true with my nerves when the MS is in exacerbation. Alternating supported back and forward extensions every other day has been beneficial in restoring a sense of calm as they affect the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, respectively, and this practice helps to reduce stress... a potential trigger to an onset of an MS exacerbation. I have been cautious to avoid overheating, especially when working unsupported back extensions as well as twists and arm balances. I began to incorporate a pranayama practice into my daily regimen, especially the more cooling pranayamas, and found this to be energizing and of great benefit in keeping the nerves cool and the mind quiet. When I first thought of practicing yoga when I was in that hospital bed, I thought I would be unable to fully participate in much physical activity. Instead, I found myself moving beyond limitations perceived not only by myself but also by others.

In 2001, however, due to overpowering stressful events in my life, I encountered two significant setbacks with my condition. In January, I sustained an attack of optic neuritis, a common occurrence for people with MS. My eyesight was compromised for a couple of months. I could see vague patches of images, was extremely sensitive to external light, and was unable to read or see clearly enough to drive. As depressing as this was, it offered another opportunity to look inward! With eyes wrapped, I spent extended time in supported setu bandha sarvangasana and viparita karani. I practiced reclined ujjayi and viloma pranayama during this time, which offered significant psychological relief.

A few months after the optic neuritis storm passed, I lost feeling from the navel down.

On the surface, one could easily say that this was a regular pattern of the condition and to accept that as reality. However, I had to question with rigorous honesty whether or not I had failed to maintain my effort, as Patanjali suggests, and was experiencing this dukkha as a result. Was it the disease or was it the division in

my consciousness that exacerbated another physical manifestation of dis-ease? Had I become so intoxicated with my body's ability to surmount the physical obstacles that I had failed to exercise enough caution? Had my focus been so much on the therapeutic application of yoga that I really had missed the point and been unable to successfully integrate and penetrate beyond the physical periphery? Whatever the reason, my vrttis were fluctuating way out of balance and my body was once again caught in the tamasic clutches of prakriti.

Since diagnosis, my doctor consistently encouraged me to continue with ongoing medication. Although I had chosen to forego the drugs, with two severe exacerbations within six months of each other, he strongly cautioned that this could be the start of a more progressive decline. The medications offered no cure, but they might slow progression. As fear and doubt crept in, I acquiesced and began the protocol of weekly interferon beta 1-A injections. I continued my practice as best I could as I took the next steps on my explorative path. The medication had nasty flu-like side effects, which further hampered my already compromised practice, and carried with it the potential to compromise liver function.

In 2003, I returned to Pune. Invigorated after my time spent at RIMYI, I once again chose to forego the medication – a decision made after inadvertently leaving my meds in a hotel room in Calcutta. To me the side effects of sadhana were much more appealing than those of the medication, so I opted to experiment with my own body to see if I could once again improve and maintain my health through a yoga practice. I chose to manage the condition through my practice and diet. My agreement with my doctor was, and remains, that if my choice was to go off the medication, we'd take an annual MRI to monitor the activity of the MS lesions on my brain.

In difficult and uncertain times it can be a challenge to stay the course and maintain the practice, but it is in the practice where I find stability. Relieved to have the heavy cloak of pharmaceutical side effects removed, I fortified my resolve with the yoga vitamins of faith, memory, courage, absorption and uninterrupted awareness of attention. I approached the practice patiently and moved forward with courage and caution. The process of this setback and recovery was a tangible reminder of the ever-changing paradigm of prakriti while the true light of purusa remains steady and constant. Embarking on deeper exploration, I began to realize the vital importance of striving to achieve the archetypal structure of an asana and trace the subsequent effect it could and was having on my body—from the gross mechanics of the outer body to the more subtle awareness of the inner body and back again. There was no guarantee it would work, but if I could patiently listen to the noise of the inner body, begin to eradicate the kleshas and strive to align the motor nerves with the sensory nerves in asana, perhaps I could regain what had been lost. I tried to remain unattached to the results, but if it worked...Great!! Guruji offered ongoing inspiration with his words, “Learn to travel and explore fearlessly in the asana. If you have doubt, do the practice...see who wins.”

Aligning the sensory and motor nerves has not been an easy task for me, conceptually or actively, especially in areas where feeling is compromised. However, when I can identify and nurture the hidden areas within my body where I lack or have perverse cellular knowledge, I can bring some intelligence to those areas. To help, I employ a gross action (sthula) to trace the thread of the nerves to their subtle (sukhma) source. Working with weight plates and sandbags on various parts of the body, along with other props, has been invaluable in this process. The weights provide a clear pathway of the nerve fibers from the outer banks to the central avenues buried deep in ambiguity. The irony that the heaviness of a weight plate could bring a spacious, transparent lightness within was intriguing. These positive imprints help to provide a blueprint of how to work to seek the alignment of the nerves once the feedback of the weight was removed. It has served to further inform a more cellular understanding of vertical extension and horizontal expansion within the body, about which Guruji often speaks. Collectively, these actions began to re-sensitize feeling in my body, which in turn began to quiet my mind, relieve my nervous

system, and create a feeling of internal space so I could hold some meditative stillness.

In my pranayama practice of late, I have found the daily practice of nadi sodhana to have the most profound effect. I am continually reminded and amazed at the ability of the human body to overcome whenever I place my fingers for any digital pranayama... the same fingers that at one time lacked the dexterity to hold a pen or the ability to button clothing. These discoveries have come through diligent application of practice and not merely by knowledge gleaned from reading books.

The effects are not merely subjective; they hold objective merit. The latest brain MRI (April 27, 2009) has shown a consistent pattern of “no change” in the MS lesions present on my brain when compared against brain MRIs taken the previous year and tracing back annually to January 2005. Prior to these last 5 MRIs, the only change worth noting was a comparison of the MRI taken 1/26/05 against an MRI taken 2/07/2001. The results of the 2005 MRI reflected the clinical indication of “Multiple Sclerosis” with findings: “The previously seen white matter lesions have significantly subsided.” (Copies of these MRI results available upon request) My attending physician, Dr. Hart C. Cohen, Director of Multiple Sclerosis Research and Treatment at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and Professor of Medicine and Neurology at UCLA Medical Center found these results to be “amazing.” Noting that these results are not part of controlled scientific study, he has expressed that

“The MRIs speak for themselves. Some margin of change is considered to be ‘normal’ even with patients who are on the [MS] medications.” His advice: “Keep doing what you’re doing.”

Needless to say I am cautiously enthusiastic about these results. Since the exacerbation when I lost feeling from the navel down, I have yet to regain complete feeling in my right leg, and my right side remains weak. To the untrained eye, it may not look as if anything is wrong. One-leg standing poses present a significant balance challenge, as does persistent fatigue. Nonetheless, I continue to forge ahead, and seek to embrace all aspects of asana with courage and caution. I remain committed to my exploration and continue with an open, focused mind in order to penetrate beyond the physical and reach the eternal light of the Self. Then I try to get my mind out of the way to allow that light to reflect throughout my body and beyond.

There is no question as to the therapeutic benefits of yoga, and while Iyengar Yoga is not a clinical cure for MS, my experience is it certainly offers a way to manage the condition and graciously navigate the challenges of life. I will be forever grateful to Gurujī for shedding light on how to effectively work with yoga by adopting and adapting asana and pranayama while employing sensitivity, observation and sensibility. The true blessing comes, however, in not getting stuck on the physical, but rather, as Gurujī reminds us, to remember the aim of Yoga – and embrace Yoga in order to remove the effects of prakriti to become one with purusa.

Ocularity

*Do you reflect upon how ageless you are?
Do you see your true colors during practice?
Which color are you before class? After?
But the question is—which color do you
want to be?
And the path to discovering the self continues,
For the lucky ones who are awake,
in a place where people walk thorough life
with eyes closed.
Are your eyes open now?
Open your eyes and count your blessings.
NOW!
Free to move, wealthy in health and the
unlimited dancing of cells.
A choreography of wellness and healing.
Surely you realize how lucky you are?
To share this moment.
Where learning takes precedence
and rejuvenation grows.
— VLYS*

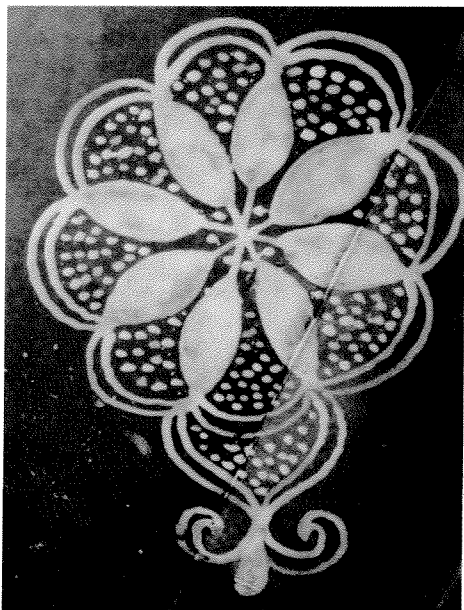


photo by Joan White