

## **What can Yogi's learn from Buddhism?**

After three weeks of spring retreat at the Upaya Zen monastery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, I've been wondering a lot about the similarities and differences between Zen Buddhism and Ashtanga Yoga or more strictly between the meditative and physical practices. It seems to me that they share a lot more common ground than they do variations. Here is a dip of a toe into a very deep lake :

Both have a very pragmatic goal of reducing day-to-day difficulties and developing a depth of awareness and way of being in the world that cultivates peace and ease. Both are based on rigorous and clearly defined practice methodologies that cultivate concentration, stillness and an awareness of body mind processes. Both in their own way emphasise the need to simply become aware of, and accepting of, whatever is currently present.

For most of us in Yoga our beginning explorations are in the territory of the body through asana practice. For Zen practitioners too, the breath and sensations in the body are a common starting point. Almost immediately the Zen novice in seated meditation practice will observe the activities of the wondering mind. However, in Yoga asana practice too, we soon become aware of the mind's tendency to wander off into musings from the past, imaginations for the future or what's happening on the next door mat!

My experience over this Zen spring retreat suggests that Yoga practitioners may be able to learn much from the lucid ideas and guidance relating to the cultivation of mindfulness in Zen. While Zen practitioners may find much of interest in terms of embodiment in the Yoga asana traditions. A review of Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga and Buddhist teachings such as the Sattipatthana Sutra reveal that each tradition contains the 'specialty' of the other. That is to say, yoga practitioners practice within a tradition that encompasses meditation and a clear model of the workings of the mind. Buddhism too has its practices relating to body awareness and the intricacies of the body-mind connection. But oversimplification by teacher and/or student or perhaps simply the emphasis of early practices in each tradition, may lead to a focus on body over mind in relation to Yoga and mind over body in relation to Zen.

As a Yoga practitioner, the following lessons emerge for me from this spring practice period of immersion in both the Zen and Ashtanga Yoga traditions:

1. Deep, abiding stillness is a state that is both intensely nourishing and revealing of the nature and activities of our mind. It is more easily cultivated when the body is still but in a state of active ease, than when we are moving or exploring boundaries of physical sensation.
2. While focusing on the breath or an integrated sense of body in asana practice develops a constancy of attention, practices of 'open attention' as used in some forms of Zen can be highly revealing of the ebb and flow of the mindstuff and the elusiveness of any kind of permanence.

'Meditation practice'\* can therefore provide a model for engaging with and exploring the nature of our wayward minds either in the context of 'just sitting' or within the realm of even advanced asana practice. In this way it may facilitate access by yoga practitioners to the other limbs of Ashtanga Yoga in addition to asana.

Conversely Yoga asana practice may give meditation practitioners a number of things. Firstly, the physical benefits of asana may lead to increased comfort and ease in seated meditation and awareness in walking meditation and samu (work practice ie awareness in daily activities). Secondly, the cultivation of concentration in asana may enhance a meditator's ability to sit mindfully and avoid the labyrinths of daydreams and memories.

Perhaps most importantly, the complementary skills epitomized by each camp, could facilitate the process of bridging the gap between 'practice' and 'daily life' - the aspiration of both of these traditions being the development of a way of 'wise living'.

\* I use the term 'meditation practice' here to differentiate between a practice and a state of being. There are many forms of 'meditation practice' using objects, questions or words to develop concentration and subsequently inquire into the nature of being. The term meditation, as used in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali however, describes a state of deep absorption and stillness, which may or may not be achieved using 'meditation practices'.