

Making Space for Spirituality

by Suzanne Eggins

A spiritual life doesn't mean putting on sack cloth, abandoning family and employment, denying yourself all pleasures and removing to a hermetic existence. But religion and spirituality are quite distinct, and the spiritual practice of yoga invites us to investigate and understand for ourselves who we are and how to live.

Recently a friend who doesn't do yoga but knows that I do caught sight of the gold OM pendant I sometimes wear round my neck. "Oh," she said in surprise. "Why do you wear that? Is that part of yoga? I thought yoga was just a way of keeping in shape."

I was hesitating about how best to answer her questions when a mutual friend joined us, and the conversation moved off in other directions.

But I found myself reminded of my friend's remark when I bought myself a copy of the latest book by prolific yoga writer and teacher Georg Feuerstein. In the preface to *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga*, Feuerstein (p.xiii) points out that:

"Possibly 30 million to 40 million people around the world practise yoga today. By and large, they approach yoga as physical fitness

training.... While any approach to yoga practice is a potential gateway to the real thing, there is clearly a continued need to emphasise that yoga is a spiritual tradition, which seeks to bestow happiness and inner freedom rather than merely physical fitness and health."

Although I agree with Feuerstein's comments, I found it much harder to explain to myself (as preparation for one day explaining to my friend, perhaps) just why 'the real thing' about yoga is its spirituality. I imagined my friend challenging me with questions like: What is spirituality? Do you have to get 'into' spirituality to do yoga? If so, how? And why does spirituality matter anyway?

Stuck for clear answers, I turned to the yoga books – particularly Feuerstein's – and reflected carefully on my own stumbling progress with yoga and spirituality over the years. If my friend

should ever give me a chance to resume our conversation, here are some of the answers I'd now want to share with her.

Why we do yoga: the reality of spiritual experiences

Although you can practise yoga for many different reasons and at many different levels of intensity, all the great yoga teachers have always maintained that it's not until the motivation is a spiritual one and the practice regular and sustained that you are really touching the depths and the benefits of yoga.

But most of us don't start yoga as a spiritual practice. In fact, in Australian society, most of us are embarrassed to even talk about spirituality, let alone admit that we just might have had spiritual experiences. And yet many ordinary people do have spiritual experiences, often to their own surprise and in very mundane situations.

Here's how it might happen to you: perhaps during a quiet moment alone in natural surroundings, or when engaged in some solitary creative activity, or while performing a simple repetitive task such as sweeping a path, you may suddenly feel a surge of bliss. More than the physical sensation of wellbeing, more than the transitory elation we call 'happiness', this bliss may feel like a wave

of connectedness between your physical self and the environment around you. You may suddenly find you are seeing your surroundings with clearer vision, that there's a sharp freshness to objects in your sight. You may become unusually aware of sounds – the cawing of the currawong, the shrill hum of the cicadas, or even the distinctive grating of car tyres rolling over bitumen. You may feel a sense of integration, of expansiveness, or an intuitive grasp that this awareness and connection is at least as real – if not more so – than the tangible, physical world around you. Your day-to-day concerns will drop from your thoughts as you rest fully absorbed, unrushed and calm, in a moment when your mind is still and silent.

An experience like this might be described as the beginning of spirituality. What you do to develop your spirituality depends on whether you value the experience or not. If you do nothing, such experiences may happen to you accidentally now and again, infrequently across your life. But there are well-established methods and techniques that we can use to cultivate our spirituality, so that we can, eventually, live more of our lives in that heightened state of consciousness, a state of integration, awareness and bliss.

Yoga is just such a method. As Feuerstein (p.279) suggests, "Yoga is a kind of technology or, if you prefer, counter-technology. It is the technology of consciousness transformation."

When we practise yoga, we are seeking to free ourselves of our usual limited consciousness of our self as a separate entity and the only one that really matters. In its place, we're learning to experience that we are inseparable from a larger, transcendent reality; what is sometimes called the Universal Self, Universal Spirit or Universal Being.

This means that yoga is not fundamentally about health and fitness at all, but about liberation:

"Yoga is what is traditionally called a liberation teaching (*moksha-shastra*). It seeks

to liberate us from our limited notion of who we are. Who we are in truth is something or someone beyond our particular body, mind, possessions, and relationships. From a yogic perspective, we are immortal, supraconscious Being. As that singular Being, we are unlimited and free. All of yoga's teachings aim at helping us to realise this fundamental truth". (Feuerstein p.21).

What if I don't feel 'spiritual'? Awakening your spirituality

If your experience of yoga so far consists of a class a week squeezed in between work, chores and parenting, all this talk about transforming consciousness and spiritual liberation might seem complete fantasy. Many of the structures of contemporary life work directly against spirituality, robbing us of our time and deadening our spiritual faculties. As a friend of mine put it: "When have I got time to feel spiritual?"

But in this life, time is all we've got. You have to decide where you want to spend it: being rushed around and tossed up and down by desires you can never satisfy and a void you can never fill; or quietly exploring an alternative that just might give you some lasting peace, insight and contentment.

If you do choose to make a modest investment in awakening your spirituality, there are two practical steps to take.

Firstly, you should (of course) keep doing your yoga practice – gradually incorporating all eight limbs of Patanjali's method into your daily life. But with your *asanas* and *pranayama* you must develop a home practice. A yoga class – even the best – is rarely a spiritual experience. But then, it isn't meant to be. You go to classes to learn the techniques, but your progress in yoga as a spiritual discipline depends on the quality of your independent home practice and your willingness to structure your life in ways that facilitate spiritual development.

Secondly, while you can't make yourself 'feel spiritual', there are many 'spiritually-

conducive activities' that you can build into your daily life. Spiritually-conducive activities (SCAs) have some common characteristics. SCAs are usually:

- not goal-driven but process-driven: SCAs are activities you do simply to be doing them, not in order to achieve something at the end
- largely non-verbal: language, especially rapid chatter, is a barrier to spiritual experience
- completely absorbing and enjoyable: you don't notice how quickly the time passes as your awareness and concentration are focused on a single, pleasant task
- non-competitive
- repetitious and rhythmic
- experienced alone or at least individually

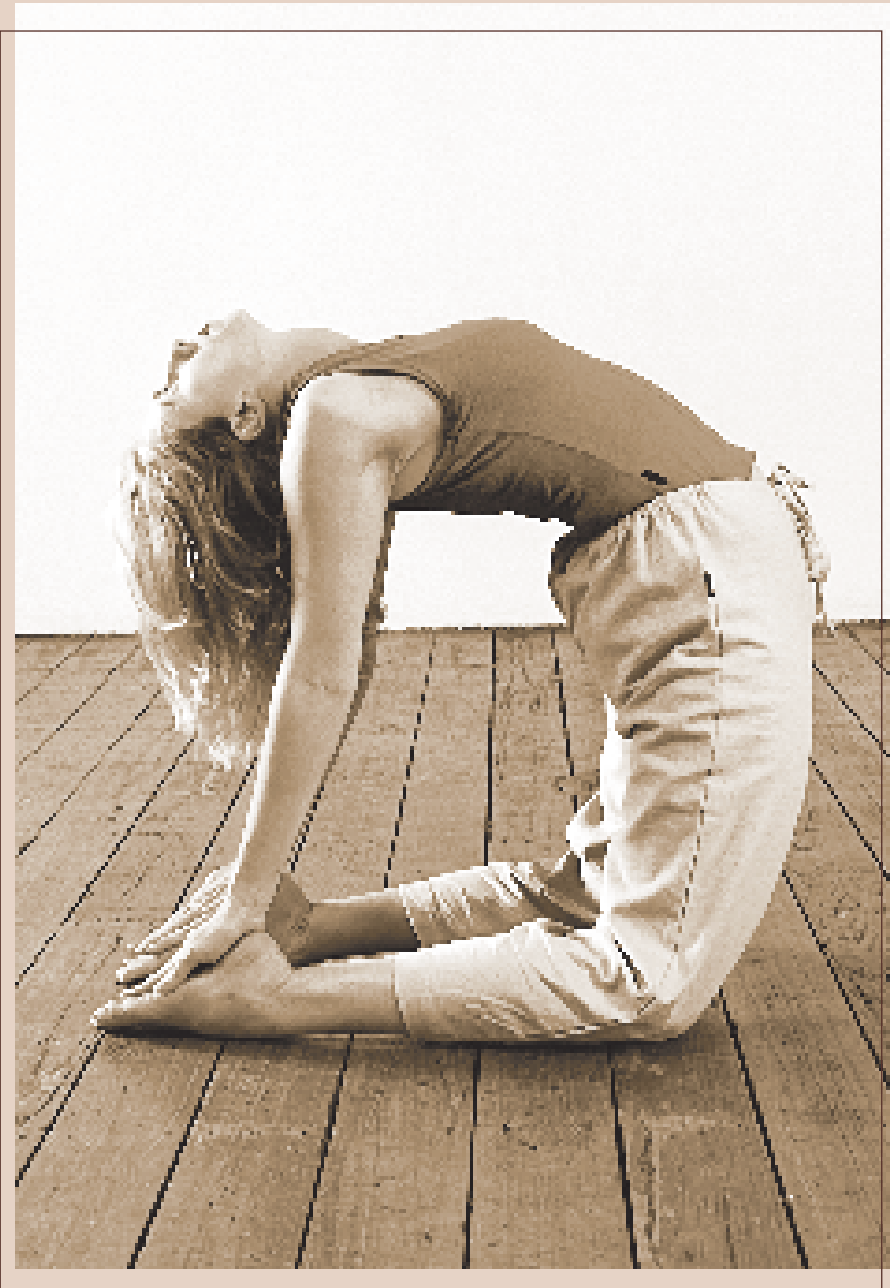
As you'll have realised, yoga has all these attributes, which is why it's such a powerful spiritual discipline. But many other simple activities have some of these characteristics. Finding time for some SCAs can help awaken your spiritual capacities. Here are a few I recommend:

Spend time in natural settings and let your senses soak it up – take a walk in the bush or the park, and concentrate on identifying all the sounds you hear; sit on a beach and watch the waves; enjoy a beautiful sunset without rushing inside to cook the dinner.

Meditate daily – if you don't know how to meditate, go along to a class or buy a book. You can surely squeeze in just 10 minutes when you first wake up and before you sleep at night. Because meditation works directly on our consciousness, even a simple meditation practice such as watching the breath is a rapid aid to spiritual awakening.

Take up or return to a craft or non-harmful leisure pursuit – whether it's origami, woodwork or sewing soft toys, you'll be absorbed and relaxed.

Participate in artistic pursuits – play an instrument, sing, read or write poetry, take up



conductive activities, usually you'll begin to feel more relaxed and cheerful. You may experience the paradox of slowing down but getting more done as your mind unclutters and you function more efficiently. You'll also find that the quality of your yoga practice will deepen. It will – inevitably – become less about stretching those hamstrings and more about "peeping inside", as Geeta Iyengar puts it: a deepening awareness of the self and the interconnectedness of mind, body and spirit. You will probably become more thoughtful and aware, less inclined to react than to reflect. You may experience more frequently those moments of intense connection, that shift of consciousness, and these experiences will renew your commitment to this more spiritual way of life.

A spiritual life doesn't mean putting on sack cloth, abandoning family and employment, denying yourself all pleasures and removing to a hermetic existence. It doesn't even mean (re-)turning to religion. For some people, spiritual experience does lead to religious commitment, as they make an association between integrated consciousness and a god-figure. For such people, yoga can deepen their religious beliefs by adding an experiential dimension. But religion and spirituality are quite distinct, and the spiritual practice of yoga invites us to investigate and understand for ourselves who we are and how to live:

"At the heart of all forms of yoga is the assumption that we have not yet tapped into our full potential as a human being. In particular, yoga seeks to put us in touch with our spiritual core – our innermost nature – that which or who we truly are. Rather than being expected to believe in any of the traditional explanations, we are free to allow our personal experience and realisation to shape our understanding" (Feuerstein p.25).

Leading a spiritual life does mean, though, a re-prioritising of our activities. Above all, it means making time for self-reflection, which can lead to self-change. The foundation for spiritual development is clear self-knowledge, and that takes time, as another famous spiritual teacher, Krishnamurti, (pp.12-13 *The Krishnamurti Reader*) explains.

"Before we can find out what the end-purpose of life is, what it all means – wars national antagonisms, conflicts, the whole

mess – we must begin with ourselves, must we not? It sounds so simple, but it is extremely difficult. ... The more you know yourself, the more clarity there is. Self-knowledge has no end – you don't come to an achievement, you don't come to a conclusion. It is an endless river. As one studies it, as one goes into it more and more, one finds peace. Only when the mind is tranquil – through self-knowledge and not through imposed self-discipline – only then, in that tranquillity, in that silence, can reality come into being. It is only then that there can be bliss, that there can be creative action".

If we over-commit our time to external activities – no matter how worthwhile they are – we sacrifice our spiritual development. One of the hardest things we have to learn to say is, 'no'.

Struggle to be free

Living a spiritual life in 21st century Australia is no mean feat. It is to swim against the tide of a materialist, consumer culture. But as Swami Yatiswarananda says in *Meditation and Spiritual Life*:

"Truth cannot be realised without struggle. All life is no doubt a struggle. Everybody is

Yoga seeks to put us in touch with our spiritual core – our innermost nature – that which or who we truly are.

struggling to achieve something or other. But spiritual struggle is a struggle of a higher order. It is a struggle for consciousness. Struggle, struggle, struggle! There is no other way. Let us not be afraid of struggles" (p.8).

So, if my friend and I ever have our conversation about yoga, I would explain to her that I wear my OM pendant to remind me of my commitment to yoga as a spiritual practice. I practise yoga, I would explain, not to be fit, but to be free, because I know from first-hand experience that when we practise yoga, as Feuerstein (p.94) says,

"We open ourselves to the possibility of bliss, the breakthrough of the transcendental reality into our consciousness, whereby the ego principle is unhinged and we fully recover our spiritual identity. Through this awakening the world becomes transparent to us and we are made whole."

Suzanne Eggins is a student of Iyengar Yoga, a Sydney academic, and a member of the board of directors of the BKS Iyengar Yoga Association of Australia. She can be contacted on s.eggins@unsw.edu.au

BOOKS CITED

- Feuerstein, Georg *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga* Shambhala Books, 2003
- Swami Yatiswarananda *Meditation and Spiritual Life* Ramakrishna Math, India, 4th edition 1995
- Jiddu Krishnamurti *The Krishnamurti Reader* edited by Mary Lutyens, Penguin Books, 1970

drawing or painting. No matter what your level of skill, the creative process is guaranteed to calm your mind, heighten your awareness and leave you open to spiritual change. Listening to music or contemplating art are well known as spiritually uplifting pastimes.

Do some non-competitive, non-exhausting exercise in natural surroundings – running along Sydney's eastern cliffs at sunrise always works for me, but walking, swimming outdoors or cycling through the bush will all help loosen up your mind, rather than just your muscles.

Perform simple, repetitive chores mindfully – as writers know, scrubbing the mould off

the bathroom tiles or raking the leaves on the lawn can trigger a shift into a calmer, more creative consciousness, the beginnings of spiritual openness.

No doubt you can think of many other spiritually-conductive activities that are largely solitary, non-competitive, non-verbal and process-oriented. You can make more time for your chosen SCAs by weeding out their opposites: noisy social outings where you possibly eat and drink too much; meetings; 'veging out' in front of the TV; idle web-surfing, and whatever your personal 'time-wasters' are.

What does it mean to lead a spiritual life?
As you make more time for spiritually-