

Emotion in motion

It's often said that yoga calms the emotions and stills the conscious mind. But it can be a confronting experience when the opposite happens and our practice unleashes emotions stored within for many years. How does this process work, and how can we use it as a tool for self-development?

Fiona Marsden investigates.

Thirty-nine year old Donna Johnston suffered baffling back pain for six years. "I would often wake up in the middle of the night with severe pain in my back and hips, and wonder whether it would ever end," says Donna.

"I'd had all the medical tests you could think of, but they hadn't shown anything wrong."

Donna, who grew up in an environment marred by alcoholism, believes her body had internalised her early life experiences.

"About three years before starting yoga I realised my body was holding a lot of anger. I knew I needed to meditate to begin healing, but I kept putting it off. I'd had a traumatic childhood and couldn't let go of its effects."

Then a GP recommended yoga nidra, a form of relaxation using deep breathing and meditation. Under his supervision, Donna began practising twice daily. She also practiced pranayama (yogic breathing).

"Two or three weeks later I woke up at four in the morning. I felt a stinging sensation in my pubic bone, where I believe the hip and back pain originated. I felt a blissful experience of self-love that I'd never had before – and

I felt instinctively that I'd released a lot of anger about my upbringing. The next morning, I got out of bed without pain for the first time in six years."

Following this breakthrough, Donna experienced more episodes of spontaneous emotion. "Some days after practice I'd just cry and cry," she says. "I wasn't sad – in fact I felt mostly joy. It was just my body letting everything out."

Donna believes her yoga practice was essential in her path to healing. "I wasn't able to let go of the emotional and physical pain at a conscious level, but yoga nidra works on a different plane. Perhaps the deep breathing enabled me to connect with the higher part of myself that knew what was going on, so I could really relax and let go."

Not every yoga student encounters an emotional response as dramatic as Donna's. However, her initial healing experience and the episodic tears that followed demonstrate the body's capacity to store emotions, and how yoga in one of its many forms may help release them when the conscious mind cannot.

How does this process work?

Jacqui Brumley, who teaches at the Hawthorn Yoga Centre in Melbourne, believes part of the answer lies in the way

yoga brings our attention away from our conscious mind and into our bodies.

"In their everyday lives, most people exist in their heads," she says. "Their attention is caught up in external things like work, music or television. When you practise yoga, you exist in your flesh and bones. If you're breathing deeply and rhythmically and lifting your chest, you open yourself up emotionally. In this setting, feelings you haven't dealt with are bound to come up."

Professor Marc Cohen, Head of Complementary Medicine at RMIT University, agrees. "Pent up emotions can be held in the organs, influencing the production of stress hormones and creating muscular tension. They can also create 'loops' in the nervous system characterised by repetitive patterns of negative thought processes like guilt or worry. This can bring the body into imbalance."

"When you do yoga, you're not in an emotionally charged situation. By sitting quietly with yourself and having no agenda, you allow your body to unravel what's been happening to it, and come naturally to rest and peace. Yoga gives the body the space to bring itself back into balance."

In Donna's case, repressed emotions manifested as back and hip pain. But each person internalises their experiences differently. One person's back pain may be another's headache or stomach ulcer.

"Emotions are an energetic phenomenon; they move through the tissues of the body," says Dr Shaun Matthews, a Sydney-based GP who uses yoga as therapy with patients experiencing chronic physical conditions.

"When someone's emotional body gets stuck, the energies don't flow evenly through the physical body. Sometimes they get caught in one of the body's diaphragms – at the base of the lungs, the urogenital area, or the skull above the eye."

Once this happens, emotion that's been stored in our system begins to move around the body, coming to the surface for release.

This can help bring about a condition Professor Cohen refers to as 'homeostasis', or a state of balance between the body and mind.

The key to homeostasis is the breath

"The breath is the link between the mind and the body," he says. "Becoming aware of the breath during yoga helps focus the mind and the body and bring them into balance."

To put this into more concrete terms, Professor Cohen describes the role of the breath in practising asanas.

"The difference between doing a

yoga, the flow of prana opens blockages in the body so energy can move. With the inhalation, we breathe in prana, and with the exhalation, we release manifestations of blockages such as fear, resistance, or stress."

Tchobutaru says that to help facilitate this release, the student must combine conscious breathing with a willingness to be open to the way they feel during practice.

"There's no room to be sceptical in yoga," he says. "You have to surrender to what may occur. You need to listen to your body, not your ego. If you do that, you can find balance."

Is there a typical point during practice when the release of blockages occurs?

"Not really," says Tchobutaru. "With some students, it happens in the early weeks or months of their practice. But occasionally, even students with years of experience can find themselves unexpectedly in tears."

When it comes to asanas, the poses that trigger a spontaneous release of emotion also differ from one student to another.

"If someone has blockages in their organs from relationships where they have been hurt, they may be unconsciously closing the chest and dropping the head to protect the heart," says Brumley. "Then they do a standing pose, and here's this teacher telling them to open the chest and lift the head! Standing poses have an exposing and expansive quality that can enable stored emotions to surface."

In other cases, forward bends may be the trigger. "A student who is somewhat egocentric or overconfident can find forward bends very confronting," she says, "because they're forced to look at themselves."

When a student experiences a sudden release of emotion during yoga practice, their mind may kick into overdrive as it tries to rationalise what has happened. This is an understandable response, though it's not always productive.

"If my patients are doing practice and experience an intense emotional response, I ask whether they have a sense of what's behind it," says Dr Matthews.

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For example, if you are angry at someone and you don't (or can't) express it for a long period of time, the pent-up energy may manifest in a lung problem or an ulcer. In other cases, the anger may move up from a diaphragm to lodge in the throat, manifesting in a chronically sore throat.

"When suppressed emotions result in chronic physical conditions, we become less vital and gradually shut down," says Dr Matthews. "Yoga counters this effect by encouraging us to breathe more, to feel more, to open up."

Michael de Manincor, a registered psychologist and teacher at Yoga Sanga in Sydney says, "As we move through life we carry 'samskaras' – deep imprints or patterns created from accumulated thoughts and actions. Yoga helps create the space to look at ourselves, including our samskaras, and notice things we haven't seen before."

stretch and doing an asana is that with the stretch, you're not focusing your mind or breathing with awareness. With an asana, you could be doing the same physical movement, but you're consciously integrating the mind and breath with the movement. This helps bring about balance."

Jacqui Brumley explains the role of the breath in terms of a yogic concept known as 'prana'.

"Prana is believed to be a vital life force stored in the body's channels, and derived primarily from air," she says. "Practising yoga is thought to increase pranic reserves and render you less susceptible to imbalance, tiredness and disease."

Shimon Tchobutaru, who teaches with Jacqui, elaborates on this idea.

"It is believed that by breathing consciously and rhythmically during

“They look at me somewhat puzzled, and say, ‘Honestly, no.’”

“This is because most of the time, their tears or anger aren’t related to something that’s happening in the present or the recent past, but something from years earlier, or in childhood. All they know is that they’re feeling highly emotional, which their rational mind may find scary and overwhelming.”

This is where the response of their teacher can make a big difference.

“Although emotional release through yoga is a perfectly natural process,” says Professor Cohen, “the situation requires careful management by the teacher so that the student understands why it is happening and that it doesn’t mean they’re going crazy.”

If the student is practising in a class situation, the teacher’s response will vary according to the nature of the student’s emotional release and what the rest of the class is doing.

Michael de Manincor uses what he describes as a ‘containment policy’ to make the student and the rest of the class feel safe about what has happened.

“For example, if they’re in a forward bend and having a quiet sob, I might leave them there,” he says. “But if it’s a stronger emotional release, I might take them into another room for a while and talk them through it.”

Tchobutaru and Brumley say that if the emotional response occurs during a backbend, they generally put the student into a forward bend like forward Virasana (Hero pose) over a bolster. This softens the abdomen and chest, and soothes the sympathetic nervous system.

Brumley believes that, while it’s the teacher’s responsibility to be sensitive to how a student is handling a pose, it’s also their role to move them through fears and blockages. This role requires some delicate choices. “Do you take someone who’s becoming emotional into a forward bend and out of the class practice,” she asks, “or do you keep them in the practice and hope they’ll work through the emotions more actively?”

Tchobutaru points out that students also need to take responsibility for how they are feeling. “They have to show some maturity and ask, ‘How far should I take this pose? What is my nervous

system telling me?’ It’s important to be reasonable with yourself.”

Emotions may also erupt during yoga not because the student is releasing past patterns, but because they are not doing the right practice for their needs.

“People often say that yoga is a

panacea – but we can’t assume that it will automatically be good for us,” says Michael de Manincor. “I know of numerous students who come to yoga with no expectations of any emotional effect, only to find the practice highly confronting. In these cases it’s possible their practice is inappropriate and is creating a problem that would not otherwise have been there.”

He cites the example of one student who was referred from her GP, suffering anxiety. Before coming to de Manincor, she went along to her local yoga class and things got progressively worse until she started having full scale panic attacks. It turned out that the class practised a lot of backbends, which stirred up her anxiety instead of calming it down.

By this stage some of you may be thinking, “Hold on, I’ve never experienced intense emotion as a result of yoga – usually I just feel good!” If so, don’t feel you’re missing out.

“Many people simply feel a sense of wellbeing, of enjoying their body,” says Dr Matthews. “They feel better after a yoga class than beforehand. They may still be releasing emotions; it’s just that they’re not manifesting dramatically.”

This observation is borne out by the Yoga in Australia survey conducted by Stephen Penman, a yoga teacher and researcher in complementary therapies at RMIT University. (Preliminary results were published in Issue 14 of *AYL*).

While 57.5 per cent of students cited stress and anxiety reduction as a reason for beginning yoga, more than 75 per cent cited it as a reason for continuing. It seems that for many people, the simple fact that yoga makes them feel better is a form of emotional release.

This article has focused mainly on asanas, primarily because most yoga students have practised them at some stage. But it’s important to realise that no matter what form our yoga takes – asanas, pranayama, meditation, chanting – the practice that suited us in the past

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may not be the one that’s right for us now or in the future.

Donna Johnston, whom we met at the beginning of this story, remained free of her debilitating back pain for two years using yoga nidra. Recently however, the pain began to occur again.

It became apparent that yoga nidra wasn’t appropriate this time around. She needed something more grounding. At her GP’s suggestion, she began practising power yoga.

“The poses are connecting me with my body instead of spending so much time inside my head, worrying about the next episode of pain,” she says. “They’re activating my core and strengthening my spine. I can feel my back clicking into place.”

At the same time, Donna recognises that there are more emotions to process, and has started psychotherapy as an adjunct to her asana practice.

Ultimately, no matter how you experience emotional release through yoga, or whether you use it alone or with other therapies, a core truth remains: when you practise with awareness, maturity and sincerity, that all-elusive balance is easier to attain. As Professor Cohen points out, when we release the energy that is unconsciously invested in pent-up emotions, we can consciously divert it into other areas of our lives. This is how yoga helps us become free.

Spiral image by Kellie Walker.

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