

Teaching Therapeutic Yoga

Stephanie Quirk

In 2003 I was asked to develop a training course in therapy for teachers. It was an interesting ask and it turned out to be a big ask! I have been teaching a systematised way of learning yoga therapy since then. To begin with I had to ask myself 'how did I learn this?', because I really wasn't 'taught' it. I was never instructed, I was not led through and told the information I should know, but there came a point where I realised I had learnt. So I don't teach what I was taught, I teach what I have learnt over the years. I began to look at a way to organise a learning approach that brings the student to a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of the subject.

In any learning situation we all have a starting point that is not actually empty. We come to learning with an amount of experiences and impressions. The various streams of life experiences everyone brings to yoga teaching may appear random and varied and yet we arrive at the same place. I love hearing stories of how people started. Not everything is random though and all of our experiences lead us to do what we do now, on account of the intention that we form, that intention is what unifies us all.

Let me share some of my apparently random life experiences that are now significant. I once used to ride and teach others how to ride horses. Funnily enough, this skill came about after first ending up in plaster casts more than once from falling off horses (watch this pattern repeat itself later!). I also studied textile design for a year or two, but it was along with partying all day and all night. I finally left that life in the



knowledge that I needed to get myself some sort of qualification.

Nursing training was next. I did mine in the old era of training on the wards; nowadays nursing training commences in universities. I began to nurse in what had once been officially called a 'lunatic asylum'. What did I learn from this? We are all in this together, this maze of life. I am surviving, others would get lost and most importantly when it comes to mental illness. We fail to mourn that loss from amongst us, it is the institutions that aid or enable that. As soon as the exams were over, I left nursing, apart from the odd holiday cover.

Next was art school. My partner and I sold our house, sold all the motor cycles, vans and cars and we moved from our native New Zealand to Australia. It was 1979. Ahhhh, art school, perhaps the first experience of sadhana (a discipline undertaken in the pursuit of a goal, ed). Art is best

described with *sa tu dirghakala nairantarya satkarasevitah drdhabhumi* (Yoga Sutras I.14: *Long, uninterrupted, alert practice is the firm foundation for restraining the fluctuations,* translation by BKS Iyengar) This meant hours and hours of observing and drawing. It was mostly through drawing that I learnt to ignore outer appearances and observe the structure and appreciate the space around things. I learnt to wait and watch and to watch again to see how a volume waxes and wanes or is shining in stable, clear lucidity; like someone who has attained maturity in their poses. Drawing taught me that there is a process in which you come to understand the deeper pattern of what you are seeing.

It was the last week of the month, and I had come to my first Iyengar yoga class. What made me go? It was a friend who enticed me with the information that it was an easy class, that it was the end of the month and the teacher did resting poses and some breathing. This meant me lying over all those props! I was so astonished. I caught my own reaction. I knew I had to go and find out what was in that for me. The next week I went to two classes, the week after to five classes, the river of yoga swept me away.

Three months on I was in hospital with my leg in a cast. There is a pattern and a synchronicity of events, a new beginning and an injury, so life is never the same.

Here is a secret: I was teaching within 8 months. My teacher said, 'I think you should teach', and handed me a telephone

number. So I began. Two years later I was in another cast. Same foot. It was that same teacher who later said, "I think you should go to India to see the source".

I left Australia intending to go to the UK to practise Buddhist meditation. On the way I went for my first visit to India. It was December 1991 and I was booked for a month, but stayed for a further two. Finally I continued on to the UK. In hindsight, it was really that I went to India and on the way I lived and taught yoga in the UK.

In the UK I used to teach in the East End and studied with Silvia Prescott in North West London. I have vivid memories of Silvia. That memory made vivid by the aroma of her studio at the top of the stairs. Silvia, yes, we all appreciated her for her exactness, her integrity, such grit, yet at times it is her voice that I recall – light and humorous, and very perceptive. Oh my goodness, when she lined us up along the floorboards, in that room at the top of her house. Those floorboards with beeswax, linseed oil and what was it: frankincense, myrrh or was it English rose oil?

In 1994 I returned to Pune after I had won my court case (for the injury to my foot). With the compensation money I had now the means to do the incredible – to stay in Pune. I asked 'May I stay to study for a long time?'. Answer 'Yes'. I thought a long time would be one or two years. So now 20 years on I have left India but still visit regularly. India is a land of the most extraordinary deep, rich traditions, yet with each return it is never the same. India is a huge flowing river that teems with life

that moves on and on and on. It is home of all life forms, it is home of the self.

Initially I stayed continuously; it was an immersion. I would only leave for the shortest time to get a new visa. There was a period of time where I was studying (Ayurveda) on a student visa; during that period I didn't leave at all for years.

It was after the time Geetaji did a series of tours to USA, Europe and down under, I began travelling and teaching myself. It was on those very trips where I was assisting somewhere in the back of a vast hall that I realised that I had learnt. Up to that point, as a student in RIMYI (Institute in Pune), I had the constant sense I knew nothing; it is actually a very important part of learning, but people are mostly uncomfortable to dwell in that place for too long. Everyone experiences it when they visit Pune. When in the sphere of the Iyengars, one knows nothing. So somewhere, on a convention on those trips with Geeta I discovered what I knew – or that I knew something. For me it then became a search to work out 'how did I learn that?'.

It is that enquiry that is the base of the structure of the course about to begin in London this November 2017 at the Institute at Maida Vale. It is based on how we learn.

The first of Stephanie's six annual courses will take place on 11-14 on November 2017.



Stephanie with Guruji and Usha Devi