

Making Space

by Elizabeth Irvine

"What is the binding force that holds the many worlds together and with its intensity also attracts us to each other? Can we call it gravity, energy, Love? To re-establish contact with our body is to be in contact with nature is to be in contact with the Cosmos. Balance is restored, space is around us and that tremendous power arising from the earth in unison with these universal forces, will become part of us."

These words spoken so eloquently by Vanda Scaravelli.

Vanda studied individually with Iyengar and Desikachar and developed her own way of working with gravity and the breath to free the spine's powerful natural flexibility.

I have been studying yoga with Scaravelli influenced yoga teachers (some her direct pupils) for the past five years and they have all guided me in the understanding of this approach to yoga. But it wasn't until just recently when the opportunity unfolded to work with two direct pupils of Scaravelli, Diane Long and Sophy Hoare. Their approach in this style of yoga has influenced my understanding and made accessible an avenue that I had no idea existed.

At the end of last year I began working on a regular basis with a teacher named Sophy Hoare, a direct pupil of Scaravelli. She has opened up my understanding in this way of yoga, and it has really struck a chord within me.

In a word I feel the biggest message about this approach to yoga is 'attitude'. It's all about being awake and paying attention to our body: listening to the body's inner intelligence and then letting the 'inner knowing' take over, guiding one... it knows what to do. It's like a spark that ignites. It is coming in unison with the body, re-establishing contact. Things begin to 'kick in' and one can catch a glimpse of the endless possibilities and knowledge that the body instinctively holds within. We all have the capability - it's just about opening oneself up to the opportunity.

Making that connection opens up a whole new inner confidence, enabling one to recognise that the capability lies within. The ability is innate. One can be given the guidelines but the destination is found on one's own.

Diane Long (a student of Scaravelli for over 25 years) was extraordinary to watch as she moved into postures as instinctively as an animal. She appeared almost 'creature like' in her approach to yoga. Through her, I realized that the only way to understand this approach was to allow my instincts to take over. The feet or hands become very strong and feeling alive, sensing the gravity from the earth.

Within the breath, one 'makes space' for the spine to be free and move in ways one didn't think were possible. I refer to Vanda's quote 'to re-establish contact-space is around us and that tremendous power arising from the earth in unison with these universal forces, will become part of us'.

Diane used the example of practicing yoga in a very natural instinctive way, just like a flower grows from the earth. The attitude is all important. It's like seeing yourself as a natural growing being that, when given the chance to be free, can respond with amazing clarity. Diane explained, "It's so important to keep it simple and clear so work can become 'play' in expressing itself."

Diane's movement in any posture was really extraordinary and it was so obvious that her body was able to express the message. A fundamental approach to yoga is that all poses are ultimately practiced in the same way. It's really a very ingenuous, natural way of working. It doesn't matter if you're in Dog pose or Headstand, the same principles apply. Diane made a perfect analogy when she described this approach to yoga as 'a natural expression.' "Think of your posture like a burp or a yawn, it's strong and forceful and then it feels really good!"

Since my sessions with Diane my practice has been much more intense with regards to my focus and attitude. I have been using my feet and hands strongly.

Using my body intensely causes me to be more intelligent within the pose. Let's use my back bend as an example... I begin by spending a lot of time preparing myself. I then use my feet strongly as if the ball of my foot is being sucked into the floor. My pelvis begins to lift off the floor, as it is light and free. My thighs slip into the hip sockets. My hands are positioned on the ground next to my ears ready to allow my chest to move freely. As my chest opens, my arms follow, supporting me (my arms feel as though they are coming out of my shoulder blades almost like wings). I focus on my breath which creates space up and through my spine. I keep my chest and tummy soft. The backbend feels very natural, effortless, but strong. It has become a much more natural feeling instead of an effort. I come down and rest, staying alert and focused on the positive responses which my body has instinctively created. Being still, watching, waiting and listening to what I feel is such an important part of the practice.

Another aspect of Diane's teaching was to give attention and focus on the smallest little point of a muscle, or a tiny space such as in the middle of your shoulder blades, a place that we use so regularly in our daily tasks without paying it any particular attention. It is an amazing feeling to be able to release tensions from those minute, very important places. You don't think you feel anything and then later you realise how much your tension has eased. It feels as though you've been working from the inside out.

Working with Sophy Hoare on a regular basis has been such a treat. She has given me 'basics' to take away each lesson and pay attention to during my daily practice. One of the most basic poses she began working on with me is standing in Tadasana. Again, the

important message of 'attitude' and with that clear, focused attention, creating space in the body becomes very apparent.

I remember to focus on the natural, instinctive rhythm of my body, trusting it to guide me. Bearing this in mind, I'll give you an example of how I practise. I begin something like this...I am focused and ask my mind to begin with awareness on my feet, next my legs feel as though they slide up into my hip joints. I once remarked to Sophy, that it feels as though I were a turtle gathering in it's arms and legs into it's shell.

This drawing in of the extremities gives the body space and the limbs responding to their natural instinct then seem to follow along quite happily. The back of my knees open up, the back of my waist is level and open, and with attention I wait for the breath to make space in my body. There is lightness. A wave like feeling is apparent. I feel space, width inside me, shoulders slipping softly into shoulder joints and my head resting proudly on top of my spine. I focus on my breath and my body feels in harmony. I feel strong, secure and very peaceful.

Working with Sophy, I feel as though I can begin to sense the layers of tension in my body, layers that went deeper than I had every realized existed. Only patience and time can help to dissolve them. This is a slow process of 'undoing the body' so it can respond, readjusting itself to harmony. Sophy said, "As we reach closer to the core, there is a magic in the process. It's so healing and therapeutic if we stay close with our attention".

The effects for me in practicing Yoga in this way are a feeling of increased energy and a very peaceful confidence in my daily routine. Another very tangible effect of Yoga for me has been the disappearance of my eczema. Five years ago when I hadn't discovered Yoga and all it's benefits, I lived with chronic eczema. Over the past four years, my eczema has become almost non-existent. My steroid cream has been thrown away. I now refer to my eczema as my magic mirror. When it starts to flare up, the most helpful remedy is a good dose of Yoga!

Sophy made such a good analogy to me one day when we were discussing how Yoga can change and how it becomes a continuous journey of self-discovery. This example really made sense to me and I should like to share it with you. In Yoga, when we are working deeply and moving further, we might look at instructions or images as signposts.

When taking a trip in the car, for example heading up north, we look for the road sign to Oxford. Once we pass Oxford, we don't follow that signpost anymore, we disregard it and now we look for another sign (such as York), to take us further north along our journey. It's really the same with Yoga. When you begin to work deeply, the context changes and broadens. Naturally, the signposts change and something which initially helped us may no longer be needed. What we might have clung onto to get us where we are is now discarded, and we look to the new and constantly changing path on our journey.

I guess what I'm trying to say is although it is human nature to put things in an instruction book and list steps one, two, and three to help us understand, for me Yoga isn't that straightforward. It's like trying to put something in a box and expect it to grow. To grow one needs nurturing, love and guidance. But, most importantly, one needs space to be free and expand. Then one really develops something intrinsically natural to oneself, something that we can marvel at... our own remarkable ability to discover how to grow.

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