

Chapter 22:

The Power of Yoga

“Change is not something that we should fear. Rather, it is something that we should welcome. For without change, nothing in this world would ever grow or blossom, and no one in this world would ever move forward to become the person they’re meant to be.”

BKS Iyengar¹

¹ Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja Iyengar (1918-2014) was the founder of the style of modern yoga known as ‘Iyengar Yoga’ and was considered one of the foremost yoga teachers in the world. In 2004, Iyengar was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by Time magazine.

The Power of Yoga

If you wish to improve your ability to cope with and embrace change – it is pretty damn hard to find a better solution than yoga.

Yoga helps to release tension in your mind and body. It helps us to put things into perspective and calm our mind - for it is only when our mind is calm that we can work out how we are going to react to the change. And, as we have discussed many times throughout the book, how we react to change is the secret ingredient that can make all the difference.

I have engaged the assistance of an expert to help me with this chapter – my wife, Jane, who has been a qualified yoga teacher since 2005 and a qualified yoga therapist since 2012. She holds yoga classes and yoga therapy sessions from her yoga studio in Oxfordshire and runs yoga retreats several times a year in several locations around the world including Kerala, Marrakesh, Mallorca, Bali and Cornwall. She is also an examiner at London's Yoga Campus.

Jane helps her clients become physically and mentally stronger. She helps people to help themselves to recover from, or manage, any number of big, dramatic, 'Burning Platform' changes - anxiety, depression, death of a loved one, cancer, physical injuries, ...

To find out more about yoga and Jane, visit www.janemacphersonyoga.co.uk.

The following few pages are the summary of my interview with Jane about the power of yoga to help us embrace even the most challenging changes in our lives.

Yoga is based on two core principles:

1. Abhyasa; the need to practice and become adept at achieving a state of complete tranquillity; of being in a stable place, and

2. Vairagya; non-attachment; the letting go of aversions, fears, false identities, the need for material things – as these provide a veil over our true self.

The actual purpose of the physical postures, the yoga poses, the asanas, is to help us to become strong and free from physical distractions, so we can calm our breathing and reach a state of tranquillity.

Then we can start to detach; to realise that our thoughts are just thoughts – and they don't define us. We can just observe them without getting emotionally attached to them.

It helps us free ourselves from identifying with 'attachments' – both physical and mental. It frees us from our in-built 'conditioning'. We are all conditioned through our memories, our upbringing, our education, our experiences. Yoga can help us identify our true self within a still, quiet, tranquil place. It can help us discover the true essence of who we really are.

I often start an evening class with a simple practice to help people calm the "chattering of their minds" as Patanjali² put it. My students have been busy all day and their minds are still busy - thinking about their day or the row they had with their partner or the mayhem of their kids' dinner time - their brains are buzzing. So I say: "You might be here physically but you're not here mentally. Your mind is not here. It is either in the past or the future. And yoga is about being in the present moment."

² Patanjali is the author or one of the authors of the definitive text on yoga theory and practice, the Yoga Sutras, sometime between the 2nd century BC and the 4th Century CE.

During the first few minutes of a class, I invite everyone to “arrive on their mat”. I ask them to lie down, focus on their breathing and connect with how their body feels. Enabling the mind to focus on the physical brings the mind into the present and helps the body to calm. An amazing transformation occurs in just a few short minutes; their breathing slows, their bodies unwind and I can almost feel the buzzing in their minds start to fade.

If our mind is agitated, our breathing tends to be rapid and shallow and our body starts to tense up. It is impossible to calm the mind if your body is feeling tight, tense or uncomfortable; if your breathing is shallow or fast. To calm the body we must calm the mind – and vice versa. The mind and the body are two sides of the same coin.

When we worry, we tend to ruminate; our thoughts going around and around in our heads incessantly. Sometimes we can't switch our brains off at night and we find it difficult to sleep, which of course only makes matter worse. It can even get to the point where these ruminating thoughts induce anxiety or panic attacks. Sometimes we reach for alcohol or sleeping pills to try to stop the incessant rumination. But that is only a temporary fix. Sometimes we reach for material things; we buy a sports car or a boat in the vain hope that these things will make a difference. But they don't. Often they are just big, expensive Band-Aids.

Separating you from your thoughts

Our thoughts aren't us. They are impermanent. Yet too often we let them define us. The solution is to be able to see these thoughts for what they are and to do what we can to calm the body, calm the mind and detach ourselves from them; acknowledge their presence and observe them - without judgment. In this simple act of observation, we realize that our thoughts are not us. They are separate entities entirely.

Thoughts creep in to our minds all the time. Don't fight them. Let them in. By all means, welcome them in the front door but open the back door so they can leave as quickly as they came. If you don't give your negative thoughts your attention, your energy - they will fade. They may even leave completely.

I learnt a simple yet powerful technique from an excellent Michael Stone mindfulness course³. Instead of giving our thoughts labels such as 'anger' or 'fear', his suggestion was to simply label them "thinking thinking" or "reaction reaction". Doing this will take the sting out of them; take the emotion out of them; stop them from being personal.

A negative thought is not your thought. It is just a thought.

Separating the person from the pain, ailment or disease

The concept of detachment is fundamental to yoga therapy. If someone is very ill and has been in pain for a long time, they tend to identify with the pain; they tend to identify with the ailment. The pain or the disease starts to become part of their identity: "I am someone with chronic back pain. I am someone with cancer." What I help my yoga therapy clients to do is to turn those thoughts around.

I love the way Hippocrates⁴ phrased it almost two and a half thousand years ago: "It is more important to know what person has the disease than what disease the person has."

As a yoga therapist, my job is to try and separate my client from their ailment; separate themselves from their pain.

³ Michael was an incredible mindfulness teacher whose life was cut short in 2017. His teachings live on through the web site michaelstoneteaching.com. To quote his web site: "He continues through his teachings, his children, the three people who received his organs, and those who loved him. He is loved immeasurably."

⁴The 'Father of Medicine' and the Ancient Greek physician after whom the Hippocratic Oath is named, the oath still taken by doctors worldwide today (460-370 BC).

Often, clients have been exhausting themselves thinking over and over again about their ailment. So, I first help them to practice poses that might help their bodies feel better – focusing on what they can do not what they can't do.

Once they start to feel better physically, they can then focus on their breathing. The breathing of someone who is caught up in pain tends to shallow and quick. Anxious breathing expends so much energy without getting a great deal of energy into our body in return.

When we sit quietly and breathe deeply and slowly, we are able to find that lovely still point. So I help my clients to focus on exhalation (people tend to forget about the exhalation breath); to breathe using their diaphragm; to breathe in through their nose and out through a little hole in their lips, visualizing that there is a little golden thread extending from their mouth - all techniques to refocus the mind away from the pain and be in the present moment.

The aim of mindfulness techniques such as these is to help someone in chronic pain to live with the pain; to live with the disease. I can't get rid of pain. I'm not a painkiller, I'm a yoga therapist. I ask them to: “Look at the pain. Sit with it. Watch it. Walk around it like you're walking around a beautiful piece of sculpture. Look at it from above. Look at it from below. Look at it from the sides. Then start to observe it as it is. Don't give it the status it craves.”

Doing this, we can start to look at it objectively and begin to think, “Yes this is pain but actually, it's all right.”

People not only feel different after a yoga therapy session, they can look physically different as well - they look calmer, the color has come back in their cheeks, they are smiling. They are often a very different person to the one who walked through the door. But they need to keep practicing, which is why as yoga therapists we provide our clients with a written

practice to use at home. Regular practice can help them achieve a permanent shift in their state of mind and body.

Parinama - recognizing things are always changing

Yoga teaches us to use our energy, our intelligence and our awareness to recognize that things are always changing and then make choices that help us either cope with or make that change.

It helps us to say: “OK, this change is happening to me. I might not like it but let's just come back to the fact that change is inevitable. It's how I react to the change that is important.”

If I am caught up in anger, fear, resentment or negative thoughts then I am not going to react very well to change. I'm probably going to push it away, perhaps even saying and doing things that I shouldn't. When it comes to big change that has been forced upon us, negativity can take control.

Yoga helps people take a little step back; to take a couple of deep breaths, pause, and then take another look at the situation. Maybe it isn't all bad. Maybe some good will even come from the change.

Yoga helps us to view our thoughts and emotions objectively and see the bigger picture. It helps us to approach the change as an independent observer; not as someone who is a victim of it.

It helps us to welcome the change.

About the authors:

Jane Macpherson, after a successful marketing career for the likes of Ogilvy & Mather, Pepsi, Westpac and Barclays, has been a fully qualified yoga teacher (IYA 500 hours) and yoga therapist who has been helping her clients for more than 15 years.

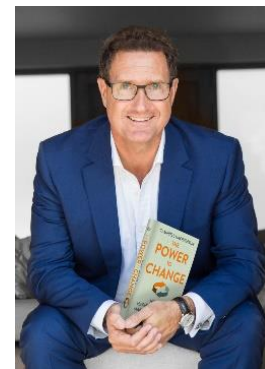


Jane runs yoga retreats worldwide and conducts classes in Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire, one-on-one yoga therapy sessions in person and online from her studio in Cheltenham – or wherever in the world she happens to be at the time.

Jane and Campbell met in Sydney in 1991 and were married in 1992. They have two remarkable adult children and live in Cheltenham, England.

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Campbell Macpherson is an international business adviser on leadership, strategy and change via his consultancy Change & Strategy International (www.changeandstrategy.com).



He is a keynote speaker, Executive Fellow of Henley Business School and author. His first book, *The Change Catalyst* (Wiley 2017), was the 2018 Business Book of the Year. It was about leading change. *The Power to Change* (Kogan Page 2020) is about embracing personal change and making it work for you.

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