



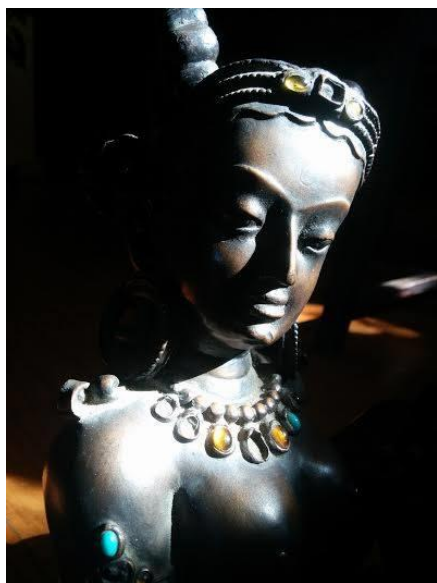
Yoga: Pop Culture Push-ups

By Cassidy Millar

Yogis and Yoginis did not come to their mat to find that hot summer body they had fed cupcakes all winter. It is **almost** well understood that yoga is more than asana, more than a series of movements to strengthen and stretch the body, however, due to popular demand it has been marketed that way. So, when the person looking for fancy pop culture push-ups arrives on their mat and the Yoga Teacher starts to guide them to connect with their breath, feel into their body and calm their mind, what happens?

In the culture of fast and dirty, anger and blame, depression and criticism, getting calm and centered can be fundamentally terrifying and undeniably liberating. Fancy pop culture push-ups become a doorway into the longest human conversation on record – “Who Am I?”

‘Who am I?’ contends with ‘What am I doing here?’ and ‘Who are you?’. We are walking around on a paradise rock (give her a break- she’s had a rough couple hundred years), hurling through space (infinite, vast, un-known) orbiting a giant fireball (that flares and causes all kinds of mortal struggles) and when we come to the mat, get quiet and connect with all this phenomenon- our Hearts break open and our



minds are blown. Who knew? Who knew that our human potential was simply waiting for our attention, waiting for our mind to link with our breath and release all those thoughts about what happens next or what happened yesterday. Who knew such inner richness, personal fulfillment, joy and peace could be rendered by the mere vibratory brilliance of an OM? Who knew that moving our bodies could be more than just exercise, that movement could mean the unfurling of our souls, the inspiration of our passions, and the doorway into unimaginable possibilities.

The Yogis and Yoginis knew. The ancient sages and ascetics knew. Those now ancient people, who lived outside their modern cultural frameworks, and I’m sure some who lived within them, they knew. I would not have known if my teachers had not chosen to study this, if their teachers had not done the same and

so on and so forth all the way back to who knows when and who started what. Meditation, chanting, self-less service, self-reflection, these are not concepts privy to a select country, culture or deity. These are Human qualities, universal and interconnected.

Many, if not all, Yoga Teacher Trainings in America require Teachers to learn about, and work from, the 8 limbs of Patanjali Yoga. The eight limbs are:

1. Yama, broken down into five pieces that are pointers for social conduct.
2. Niyama, encompassing five modes of personal conduct.
3. Asana, described as a 'step toward the higher practice of Yoga' with spiritual as well as physical benefits.
4. Pranayama, the regulation of the breath and thus the mind.
5. Pratyahara, preparation for meditation, a withdrawing of the senses.
6. Dharana, concentration or absorption of the mind.
7. Dhyana, meditation.
8. Samadhi, the state of ultimate conscious awareness.

I don't know about you, but these were not concepts that I was introduced to before yoga. I did not come onto my mat expecting to work towards enlightenment, and the vague idea I had about personal liberation was bound by layers of self-rejection and doubt.

So, what happens when the person looking for exercise arrives in a yoga class? I can tell you one story of what happens when someone who comes for fancy pop culture push-ups realizes they have stumbled into a Namaste-Om-Chakra-Breath 'workout', because that was me. I was that American girl who went to yoga for exercise. When I came out of my first class the realization of what I'd been exposed to wasn't clear. My intellect couldn't put words to it. I just knew that I felt good. I felt really good. Being calm and breathing into my body, feeling into human experiences I hadn't yet discovered, captivated me.

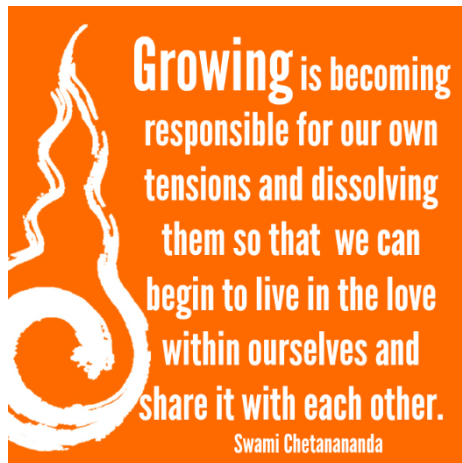
Years later I met The Movement Center Community and Swami Chetanananda. I began practicing meditation regularly at the center and at home. I learned about breath work and chakras in a new way and as I added that to my yoga asana practice something shocking happened. I had a complete spiritual breakdown. My breakdown lasted for almost a year and completely destroyed my concept of who I thought I was and what I thought I was doing. Now, more than ever, I needed help answering these critical human questions because patching them over with 'I am Cassidy and I will have a job and a house and a dog' wasn't cutting it.



During my recovery journey I learned that trauma – crystalized in powerful images, feelings, and sensations – gets stored in our physical being, in our bodies. Deeply imprinted, these traumas are shaping and patterning who we are and how we express who we are. Yoga exposes, touches and begins to tamper with these structures and wounds. Yoga invites a natural process of self-realization and that is an invitation into a process of becoming self-aware; aware of not only the beauty and majesty of being who we are, but also the unresolved, restricting, and limiting structures that stand between us and our greatest potential.

“Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.” Rumi

Each time I came to my mat I came face to face, or rather Heart to Soul, with myself, as I was in that moment. It wasn't so easy to reject myself or hide my state or pretend to be something I wasn't, when I was mindfully participating in a practice that required I be present. There was a moment I felt lost in all of this tumult and that is the moment I realized the value of a Teacher, the amazing blessing it was that I had connection with people who had walked this path and could offer me a hand as I dangled off the cliff of my own bewilderment.



I picked up a book called 'Choose To Be Happy' by Swami Chetanananda and his teachings began to illuminate the darkness.

Gratitude is something I did not understand before hitting my yoga induced 'Spiritual Crisis' and reading Swami Chetanananda's teachings on gratitude launched me into a new understanding entirely. He talked about the importance of *feeling* gratitude. I knew what this word meant, but I had no deep experience of the *feeling*. Swami Chetanananda's teachings on gratitude included essential elements of forgiveness and acceptance. Through yoga, I began to see

myself as I was, both as a living expression of my suffering and patterns, as well as a deep mystery of untapped potential. I began to see that I had become a bitter and resentful person, angry at my parents and anger at my world, not a person who felt grateful for the blessings. I was feeling embarrassed and ashamed of my struggle. Self-acceptance was not a skill I had developed. Accepting the world seemed impossible with so much pain and corruption happening. I could not truly *feel* gratitude for myself or the circumstance of my life and my anger and bitterness were poisoning me from the inside out. I was in crisis, trapped between the feeling of my circumstance and the teaching that spoke of peace and happiness. I needed a light in this abyss of infinite darkness.

Most memorable of Swami Chetanananda's gratitude teachings was this quote:

"Gratitude is the enzyme that digests everything."

Several years later, I can say, it has been my experience that regardless of the circumstance or event, if I can muster the courage and humility to breath into my heart and really *feel* grateful for the lesson or the blessing, the whole event is transformed. I am transformed. My perspective shifted from 'poor me' to 'thank you for this opportunity to grow'. Understanding that I am in this world to grow made the transformation possible. Swami Chetanananda was the one who introduced me to this idea, continually reminding his students for the past 40+ years,

"We are in this world to Grow."

This shift within me was a process, sometimes painful and sometimes beautiful. When I first came to the mat, it was almost blissful ignorance. I was not aware that I had stumbled upon an ancient practice that would bring me into contact with an unimaginable possibility that is available to each one of us. As I started to explore my breath, my body and this experience of yoga, I, like any modern day Indiana Jones of the Human Condition, had to wade through serene rivers and roaring rapids. The easy things we can

handle, and some of the moderate struggles we can google, but when we embark on the path of true yoga we are heading into a jungle. The human condition as it stands today is a jungle tangled by centuries of human delusion and suffering, crawling with venomous personal and corporate agendas, and the environment is becoming toxic – from the air, to the water, to the soil. It is no wonder that when we come into focus with ourselves and our world great confusion and great heartache can ensue. For this journey I suggest finding a guide because although authentic Yoga is a path that cuts through this jungle, an authentic Spiritual Teacher is someone who has walked this path, knows the pitfalls and isn't afraid to be there with you. An authentic Spiritual Teacher is a light that dispels the darkness.

There is an undeniable magic that happens when we arrive in a space dedicated to this ancient map of human exploration. The simple act of following our breath, quieting our minds and feeling the vibration of our living awareness will leave us transformed, transfixed and ultimately take us on the journey of our enlightenment and liberation. This experience is available to everyone, absolutely everyone.

We were never in it for the fancy push-ups. All along, we wanted something deeper and just couldn't put our finger on it, until now.

Namaste,

Cassidy Millar



Cassidy Millar is a student of Swami Chetanananda's and a TMC community member. Cassidy graduated from the TMC Yoga Teacher Training in 2015 and now teaches Present Moment Yoga every Wednesday. An artist of many mediums, she feels passionately about human expression, creativity and the exploration of human potential.