

YOGI WRITINGS:

Making the world a better place: Jessi Snyder

I've sort of dreaded the day that Brenda would finally ask me to compose a "yogi writing." I've never had any idea what I would say. How do I describe yoga's gifts without resorting to platitudes?

Fortunately, my partner Dina handed me something the other day: an assignment she was working on about Yoga Sutra 1.33. Other than Sutra number one, "now the practice of yoga begins," I'd never read a sutra. Dina wanted help parsing this one, so I spent an hour or so with it. It intrigued me enough that it hooked itself into my brain, where it's been stewing around. This column, it turns out, is a chance to explore and share this sutra. (Sutras, by the way, can be defined as Indian aphorisms, culturally based teachings in the form of maxims.)

The translation is: In relationships, the mind becomes purified by cultivating feelings of friendliness toward those who are happy, compassion for those who are suffering, goodwill toward those who are virtuous, and calmness toward those who are wicked.

At first the words slid past me as another admonition to practice kindness and goodwill toward humankind. Yeah, yeah. Namaste.

Then I realized: Wait. Goodwill toward the virtuous? Friendliness toward the happy? Shouldn't that be goodwill toward the less fortunate, friendliness toward strangers?

Patanjali, apparently, was describing locks and keys. The locks are situations in which we're bound to find ourselves; the keys are the practices of mind we use to unlock the situation. So:

To the lock of happiness, the key is friendliness.
To the lock of suffering, the key is compassion.
To the lock of virtuousness, the key is goodwill.
To the lock of wickedness, the key is calmness.

I loved the idea of locks and keys. This seemed like a system worth learning.

To unlock happiness, I need to be friendly to it. When I see happiness in the world, or in another person, I need to give it a big smile and a hug and thereby bring it into my own heart. To unlock virtue in myself, I must rejoice when I see virtue in others. (The text notes that virtue can also be cultivated by silent study and

contemplation, but really, it's quicker and easier just to absorb it from others.)

When I meet suffering in the world, the key is to hold it gently while it cries. When I meet wickedness, I must not rush to anger because anger can impede good solutions. Instead the key is to regard wicked people calmly and maybe something important will be revealed.

These aren't just instructions on how to deal with the world; solve some problems and alleviate some suffering. They are also instructions on how to make myself happier and healthier. To see the beauty the world offers and take some for myself, because once I have it, I can nurture it and grow more to give away. (Like cuttings of a jade plant.) Fortified with all that beauty and virtue, I am able to confront the suffering and the wickedness of the world with grace, calm and love.

Asana, the physical part of yoga, is like that. To my mind's eye, my body used to be more or

less a blob of tissue, which I vaguely disliked. To me, my body didn't have much in the way of distinguishing characteristics or landmarks. It just was.

Gradually the practice of asana revealed morsels of anatomical detail in my concept of my own body, and showed me bits of the marvelous ways the pieces of me fit together and work smoothly to give me movement, balance, agility, strength, oxygen in my blood and lubrication in my spine.

I must be friendly to happiness in my body and also to the happiness that asana brings to the bodies of others. If I embrace and celebrate the virtuousness that others gain from their practice, then my own virtue will grow. There's a self-perpetuating cycle of growth there.

Suffering and wickedness are everywhere, too—even within my own body. Part of yoga's gift to me is the strength, happiness, and yes, even virtue that I possess, which gives me the calmness and the compassion to observe those difficult parts of life with interest, not anger. With that clarity of mind, I'll be able to recognize and implement solutions when they appear, and that's how the world becomes a better place.

