Postures and Practice: A Yoga Student's Reflections

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When I stepped into the Bikram yoga studio for the first time in 2009, I did so as a timid, disbelieving student.

As the room filled with people of all ages and sizes, unified only by the 105° room we shared, I looked in the mirror and thought to myself, "What am I doing here?" The advertisement said that the series of postures combines skills of concentration, patience, determination, and self-control, leading to increased mental clarity and reduced stress. That sounded good to me!

My interns stepped into the simulation lab for their first session with wide eyes and timid steps. As I invited them to relax and to understand that THIS is the place to ask questions, to make mistakes, to correct bad habits, and to try new things, they seemed to take a collective sigh and a heavy gulp.

They were about to collectively begin their obstetrics-gynecology training together, and I was their leader. I wanted them to do well, progress rapidly, gain confidence, and come to work each day hungry to take care of the women of Jacksonville. How would I convey that?

"Awkward pose is next, Utkatasana."

I thought, "You can say that again." Only 3 poses into the series of 26 and I am sweating like mad. The instructor is running through her script, which is part hypnotic, part inspirational, and part corrective.

She only strays from the prescribed language to offer small personal reflections for each of the students to consider. "Give what you can today; don't judge your practice here by looking at others in the mirror—only your reflection counts."

As the situation grew more frantic in the room, the resident looked at me over his mask and said, "Do you want to scrub in?" I stepped over to his shoulder and replied in a whisper that only he would hear, "You can do this, calm down, take control of the room, and talk me through what you're doing." In a matter of minutes the sound of a screaming newborn filled the air despite the sweat beading on the brow of this patient's surgical team.

After the case was over, the resident asked me how I knew that he could do it. He asked me to summarize something that many of us in medical education know by intuition or gestalt but are called upon to put in writing or to quantify by degree or scale.

I merely answered, "I have seen you do all of the component parts, you just needed someone to guide you through putting them together." He replied with pride, "Well then, how do you like them apples?" I already knew the answer—now he does too.

"Balancing stick, Tuladandasana. Your heart will race, beating out of your chest, pounding in your ears...it is a quick pose, so give it all you have for 15 seconds, and don't forget to breathe!"

How could something that takes such little time get so much attention in class? What I soon realized was that this posture, this little 15-second posture, would be the cardiovascular equivalent of a good, hard run. Good things don't have to take a great deal of time.

It wasn't a special day by any measure. I came to the administrative office, collected my mail, and sat at my desk waiting for the operating room to call with the next patient. I noticed the return address on the envelope in my hand was from Orlando, Florida. I recognized the writing and tore it open, eager to hear from a recently graduated resident.

She had written: "Dear Dr. Best, I wanted to thank you for all that you have done to help me become the physician I never knew I could be. You saw me through ups and downs in my training but you always stayed focused on how you could best teach me. You said that a little part of you goes out with each of us when we graduate—well, I just wanted you to know that this little part of you is grateful for all you have done."

That little note meant more to me than my paycheck.

I hate Camel Pose, Ustrasana. I hate it not because it is particularly difficult or because it lasts longer than I'd like. I hate it because it is designed to make you vulnerable. I feel my previously steady breath catch in the back of my throat and the tightness in my chest as a wave of emotions suddenly wells up inside me.

Camel pose, because you make your heart so open, often leads to dramatic emotional displays and is well known to release pent-up anger, sadness, and frustration. You must accept it, let it out, and move on. There is more work to be done.

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“I need you to be the program director.” I was still in shock from hearing that she was leaving the institution. I am in no way, shape, or form capable or knowledgeable enough to be responsible for the residency program! It would be like skipping high school! No way, this is a mistake.

The department chair sat in front of the residents for a rare all-hands-on-deck meeting to discuss the change in leadership. I sat there literally holding back tears as he used terms like “capable hands” and “gifted clinician” and “role model.”

As I looked around the room, no one else had the grave look of concern on their face that I did. Not a single eye averted mine as I looked at each of them—my residents.

I had tuned out all of the words being said, and I just listened to the calm in the room. It had quieted the doubt in my head.

I tuned back in to my department chair in enough time to hear him say, “I’m sure we have more faith in her than she does in herself.” True. I knew it was time to embrace the discomfort and fear and move on. There is a lot of work to be done.