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Learning to Fall Down...so I Can Get Back Up

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By Lynn Medow

It took 10 years of kicking my legs in the air, leaning against a wall, falling on the grass and getting back up before I could do a handstand in the middle of a room. I was 58 years old, and I'd been teaching yoga for more than a decade but I felt like for the first time, the stars were aligning.

Sometimes I can hold the handstand for a breath; occasionally for a few breaths. That's the beauty of yoga: it is a journey with no destination, a practice with no perfection. I am continually telling my students what I tell myself: one step at a time, one moment at a time, until you have a series of meaningful moments that add up to something you previously thought improbable.

So many times in those 10 years I could have fallen on my face, broken a bone, crumbled my arms into my shoulders, if I wasn't aware of how to construct a pose. If I didn't know how to safely build something I'd never done before. If I did not know how to fall.

I'm lucky; I've trained with teachers in the Anusara Yoga discipline and master teacher, Doug Keller, who are sticklers for alignment and knowing how the muscles work and how to stack bones in a pose. But there are so many forms of yoga, so many people teaching, it's impossible to tell if every person taking a yoga class has had the benefit of learning to do it safely.

According to the Yoga Journal's 2010 Yoga in America survey, 14.5 million Americans participate in some form of yoga. Doctors and therapists have referred some 14 million people to take a yoga class. And the numbers are growing – yoga is on par to rival golf and running in market share before the end of the decade.

That's a lot of people doing yoga.

Unfortunately, it's common in our current exercise landscape to step into a class, look around, and compare ourselves to others. It's the antithesis of yoga and a tendency that can, unfortunately, lead to injury.

Why? Because if we try to attain the look of someone else's pose, we're not paying attention to ourselves, to our own strengths and limitations.

Yoga at its core is a journey to the Self. It's the practice of being in the moment, of remaining aware.

In the late 1990s, I injured myself doing yoga. "Don't do yoga again, ever," my chiropractor demanded, but I knew I couldn't keep away so I made it my mission to find a safe way to practice.

Yoga injuries happen when people go too deeply into a pose or push themselves beyond that crucial balance of ease and effort. It's like everything in life – when you're breathing hard, when you're over-extended, when you are tired, creating the perfect conditions for injury.

Teachers are important, to guide us through a practice, but the ultimate teacher is that little voice inside each of us. As a teacher, I cannot know every condition and concern of the 25 students in my class as hard as I may try. So I have to empower my students to know themselves.

It's really quite simple. Start with the foundation – if you're standing, that's your feet, and if you're sitting, make sure you are sitting correctly on your sitz bones. And all the while, it's the breath that truly guides you – even, fluid, one to the next, telling you that you are exactly where you should be -in balance, working at your edge but not jumping over the cliff. When you can't breathe easily, you've gone too far.

Yoga is the practice of living life. It's the art of awareness, of knowing yourself, of rising to the challenge but not pushing beyond your edge. It's ultimately about equanimity.

Safe stretching emanates from resistance or stability – if you move in one direction, you need to resist equally in the opposite. It's the teacher's responsibility to keep bringing her students back to this awareness.

Yoga is empowerment. One of my responsibilities as an instructor is to empower the teacher within each student, and continually guide them back to themselves, to pay attention. We are each our own best teachers and when we look outward, attempting to achieve the perfect pose or mimic the model on the cover of a yoga magazine, we forget that the real learning occurs within.

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