

My YTT experience at Gratitude

This training impacted my life in ways I never imagined. My expectations coming into this training program were mostly to gain flexibility, better mobility, and to be able to give classes at the end of it. Never did I expect that it would affect me in such profound way.

Probably one of the most helpful concepts I learned in this program is that of *identification*. I heard Roman talking about it, and we read about this in *The Power of Now*. Specifically, the ego identification with several aspects of our lives. Personally, I realized that my ego identification corresponded to personal and family history.

Since I was very young, around the age of eight, I suffered from my first severe depression. Not sadness, but debilitating depression. My family's had a long history of depression, and three suicides. Therefore, due to my symptoms, my mom rushed to look for professional help, which confirmed that I suffered from clinical depression. Later on, in my twenties, the diagnosis was narrowed down to chronic recurrent depression. At this time, I was medicated and have been medicated ever since with different types of antidepressants and anxiolytics.

I attempted to quit taking said medicines over four times throughout the course of my treatment, but the results were less than desirable. I would feel really good for a period of time, sometimes for several months, only to have a strong rebound effect afterwards.

During the training, I started hearing, reading, and understanding some concepts that made me become more of an observer, or witness of my thought process conditioned by the identification of being a person with clinical depression. I realized my own tendency to defend that mental position I have identified with during almost my whole life. But also, I was able to see that there was a degree of family loyalty, in which I was holding on to this mental condition because my family had identified me with it as well.

One of the concepts usually brought up by Roman during the classes, that is beautifully explained in *The Power of Now* is the *unconscious fear of losing one's identity*. Such fear can be so strong that we resist any kind of change or disidentification. *"You would rather be in pain, than take a leap into the unknown and risk losing the familiar unhappy self."* (Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*).

And the resistance was great. The intensity of the program, especially the pranayama exercises in the morning, stirred and brought up strong emotions that I knew very well, but that I've always avoided feeling. Especially when I didn't understand where they were coming from. My first reaction when I start feeling overwhelmed with emotions and the depression lurking in my mind, I would contact my psychiatrist and let him know my symptoms; then, he would adjust my medication to a higher dosage; within the period of two weeks my symptoms would've disappeared.

However, at the beginning of the YTT, Roman's email and phone call were crucial for me to understand where these feelings were coming from, and to decide following a different

path. I noticed that the feelings of sadness, emptiness, the lack of motivation, and the overall feeling of not finding joy in anything were somehow more tolerable than before. There was something missing this time; the anxiety that always accompanied all those emotions was not there. Therefore, I decided to sit with these emotions and try to understand a potential deeper meaning to them.

Hundreds of thoughts came to mind; I don't feel I belong here, in Raleigh, Sweden, not even Mexico for that matter. I have been travelling and living away from my homeland for so long I lack a sense of belonging and roots. I have gone through all kinds of therapies and re-adaptation programs in new countries, but it always felt as if I was missing a step.

Yoga has helped me realize I never really faced those emotions, but always run away from them. I jump to whatever makes me feel better to cover up the sadness, frustration, anger, etc. In all honesty, I think I might have even jumped the North Atlantic Ocean to avoid facing some of those feelings. My fight-or-flight response was almost automatic and I would often flight. This is the first time I acknowledge this and force myself to look and listen to those feelings; to look and keep looking until I can understand what they have to say.

Close to the fifth weekend of the program, I started feeling some physical symptoms related to the medication I was taking. As I talked to my doctor, he suggested to start reducing the anxiolytic I had at the time, since the symptoms corresponded to an excess of the components of the formula. This meant that my body was no longer in need of this medicine. Around four weeks later, I was able to completely stop taking the anxiolytic,

which I firmly believe was thanks to those intense weekends of yoga, meditation and pranayama. But this was not the only change I started noticing in my life.

As the program progressed, I found myself being able to do certain things I couldn't really do before. The most noticeable, I was able to sit still with myself without having to look for an escape route, or a distraction. I could sit in the car for long drives without suffering it, nor inflicting my suffering on my companion. I was able to focus better on my activities and get things done more efficiently. These are only examples of the changes I started noticing, along with having the extra noise in my mind quiet down, leaving room for me to listen to what was really worth listening to.

However, I cannot leave out the physical aspect of the practice and its rewards. Simply learning, or being reminded of the importance of breathing was incredibly helpful. It almost sound obvious to say that breath is crucial for us to live, but it becomes such an involuntary part of our existence that it is easy to take it for granted. I have heard countless of times how we can modify emotional, and psychological states by regulating our breath, or focusing on it, but I never really took it seriously. After experiencing it during practice, during meditation, and especially during pranayama exercises, I am much more aware of my breath and how to use it to calm myself in moments of stress.

I have a feeling of more space in my lungs, as if I could breathe even deeper than before. I can also feel more strength in my legs and back, which has helped my posture and gotten rid of neck pain and lower back pain. But one of the things that shocked me the most was

the absence of the cravings to smoke. When I'm in the middle of emotional turmoil, I tend to smoke at least one whole cigarette a day, and with all the emotions the practice was stirring up, I was sure I would start smoking again. However, the cravings were minimal, and whenever I tried to smoke it would taste so disgusting I just decided to not do it.

When it comes to the readings we did throughout the program, and some of the narratives that Roman, Melissa, Jane and Sue used in their classes, I can say I remember specific quotes from each that had an impact in me. Little by little I started understanding the metaphor that our yoga mat is a mirror that shows us who we are. I could see this relation in the struggle to hold some poses, having to deal with the fight-or-flight response as my body would start to ache and my limbs were getting tired. I could relate it so easily to my life, as I'm sure we all could. To do uncomfortable but necessary things, to focus on activities, and to carry on tasks to completion. I understood the meaning and value of having a stronger discipline than motivation so that I could, not only hold a challenging pose, but also face challenging situations with strength and grace.

Now that we started teaching community classes and I got to experience it, I know I want to keep on sharing and spreading this gift of Yoga. I do experience fear; fear of not doing it right, fear of not being liked, fear of not being understood. But that is another aspect of the program that was addressed during our lectures of the sutras. My goal to become a Yoga teacher, a good teacher, could be clouded by all those fears and expectations. However, we learned that *"when we let go of any expectations amid full effort, we have balanced*

abhyasa and vairaga... And that is when mind, body, heart and spirit are fully open to the present moment." (Living the Sutras, 1:15. Kelly DiNardo, Amy Pearce-Hayden)

After reading and understanding that statement, I feel a strong will to do what I want to do, despite of the fear, despite of the mistakes or imperfections, and continue doing it until achieving the honest confidence that can only come with practice and discipline, not before. I feel I can be kind with myself when it comes to allow myself to make mistakes as I begin this journey, so that I can enjoy the moment instead of suffering it for not being perfect.

I believe that throughout my life I have lived what Eckhart Tolle refers to as *the pain-body* in the form of anxiety, depression, fear of the future, and even anger. All of it causing me to live with self-imposed limitations I just didn't quite know how to get rid of, not even with years of therapy and professional help. Simply because I didn't know what the source was; I was always attacking the symptoms rather than the root. The more Roman talked about trauma and how our body, our tissues store that trauma I became more aware of the issues I haven't really addressed. I felt the effects of the early pranayama sessions when I would go back home with a lump in my throat, anger bubbling up and finally surfacing in rants over minimal things. Sometimes I would experience a series of images running inside my head; scenarios of my childhood that I later recognized as snippets of traumatic moments I had almost forgotten.

It was as if the pain-body was revealing itself well beyond just the symptoms. It was more than just a hereditary clinical depression, it was all about an identification with the concept, identifying as the only child without a father, as the weird kid that liked to draw and paint, as the rebel child that didn't want to follow the rules, as the girl that would question the religion that was imposed upon her, and therefore, would never win god's favour. I realized I had a long lived habit of living my own life, making my own decisions, and doing the opposite of what I was told, all of it with great guilt. It was painful and difficult to look within to understand this, and more so, to keep on looking to find a way to break through this guilt.

As we were reading the Sutras, we came across what I feel was the beginning of my healing. Kriya Yoga, or Yoga in action, which encourages us to create good habits and break bad ones by taking a good look at what is causing us pain, and *"to work with the discomfort and pain through self-study, discipline and faith, to heal and grow"*. I can't help but linking this work with the practice on my Yoga mat; in Utkatasana, the Warriors, Half Pigeon, and some other really challenging poses that go straight to the limits of my comfort zone and expand it. To find comfort in the discomfort, to acknowledge and accept the discomfort of a pose and hold it, to use our breath to still our minds and sit with these emotions rather than getting out of the pose. These were some of the words said during practice that transformed the Yoga class into a deeply cathartic moment.

When I compare the way I felt before the training and how I feel now, the biggest difference is that I no longer need anxiety medication. I still take antidepressants, but I feel positive

about a future where I can gradually reduce the dose until I don't need them anymore. My thoughts are not as scattered as they used to be, and my fear of the future and not finding a path to follow has now disappeared, leaving a blank canvas in front of me where I can create freely without the intervention of external screenwriters (family, church, society). Even when I didn't quite understand what my true self was or what was my purpose in life, little by little I start to grasp that it is not a straight answer what I should expect, but an everyday feeling that I am on the right path, a feeling that that tells me I'm taking the right steps to honour my true self.

One of the concepts I learned in training, and that I have put into action in my life is being the observer of my thoughts, and acknowledging that I am not my thoughts. This was an incredibly liberating feeling, especially coming from a Latinamerican culture where most of our identity concepts come from a conservative, religious, macho culture that reduces women's individual complexity to a series of roles that need to be fulfilled or else our value as women is reduced. The pressure of getting married, to have children, to find a career that complements the family and the provider (husband) without surpassing his contributions. I have always felt strongly against this paradigms, and have lived my life mostly against them. However, it was until recently, as I mentioned before, that I realized I was doing it with a baggage of guilt that weighted heavy on my inner peace. Finding my true self by observing these thought processes, imposed to me since I was a kid, have been a breath of fresh air into my soul.

The other concept I have put into practice in my life is trying to be present in the moment. Not rushing over to anticipate what will happen, not being stagnant in the past regretting old bad decisions, but to really live and appreciate the present moment. I find it easier to do by taking deep breaths, and feeling aware of my body. I finally understand why in other yoga classes I took throughout my life it was mentioned that yoga was all about the here and now. I never really got it before, but this training was so well rounded, both in practice and readings, that the concept finally sank in.

I feel extremely grateful for having found this community of people that are so passionate about Yoga. I used to think of Yoga as a discipline to stay flexible and healthy. Never did I think it was going to have such profound impact in me. The physical benefits that I was looking for in Yoga took second place when I started experimenting the emotional, psychological, and spiritual changes.

If there is something I wish would have been different is the organization of the weekends. Avoiding scheduling the training on holidays so that we could have the full benefit of the weekend. Other than that, I found great value in the training program, in the community of teachers. Their support and dedication was remarkable and so appreciate it. My fellow YTT students are also such a blessing. I have struggled trying to find a place where I could feel that warm belonging feeling that has eluded me for over 10 years. I can now begin to feel it in Gratitude.

Thank you, Roman for your dedication, energy, attention, time, enthusiasm, and leadership.

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