

MINDS SWARM UP: SHIP BUILDING AND DESIRE

ON THE YOGA MAT WITH CHILDREN AND ELDERLY PEOPLE

By Eva Hager-Forstenlechner

Working with children

For some time now, my work with children has been focussing on the mediation of yoga. After 20 years of practising yoga and several years of teaching it, I began to be interested in how to create an approach to yoga for children, especially since my own daughter showed an increasing interest in yoga practice. When she was little I often noticed that she spontaneously integrated *yoga asanas* (body positions in yoga) in her movements – for her, they were part of her natural movements. Often I simply observed how she moved for a long time: another adventure from my “spiral dynamic” point of view. Natural movement coordination. What are our anatomical parameters, how efficiently and economically do we use them? Children are absolute specialists in this field. There are no uneconomic movements.

“If you want to build a ship, then don’t round up men to get wood, assign tasks and deal out work, but teach them the desire for the wide, endless sea.” (Antoine de Saint-Exupery)

Now, then, mediation of yoga for children: They have the positions down pat, but how do you get a group of children to practise together at a previously determined hour?

The fascination: Their liveliness, their creativity, their frustration and their unwillingness which they readily show when they cannot stand a position because they simply find it stupid, boring, ugly, or because they can’t do it or it pulls and pinches all around. Their zeal develops from joy in the thing. The ridge between lust and frustration is narrow – they give everything to attain a position, and if they can’t do it then the position is “dumb”. So, how to make children aware of the fact that some things develop slowly, that they need time? Where to fetch them without curtailing their lust for life, without breaking the energy of their forward drive?

Namasté. At the beginning of each lesson we all take a bow: I towards the children, they towards me and each member of the group. Eye contact, “namasté” – inclining one’s head as a sign of esteem: “I’m greeting the light in you.” Do we still do that in our everyday life? Do we take a bow in front of our competitors or co-players before we begin our day? Fair Play? What makes a team unsympathetic? Fouls. Why? Because we’d actually like them to treat each other fairly. Honest victory, earned victory, the better team ... In yoga, namasté means: I

see you in your best way.

Kids love rituals – nothing new there. If I'm not yet fully there at the beginning of a lesson, involved in daily matters, detached, and whenever I forget to namasté, I can be sure that it's going to rain protests. No lesson without namasté!

Every child has its strengths and weaknesses. Positions which are more easy to do and others which present more of a challenge. Strength, stamina, flexibility, balance and centering, quickness, concentration. I frequently let the children select what they want to do in that lesson from a set of cards showing the asanas. They spontaneously choose their favourite position or one that looks relaxing or intriguing, that's supposed to be difficult or where you "don't have to do a thing". According to how they feel that day. A profile of the whole group develops in that way, the programme is intuitive and adapted to the current energy of the group. The only task that's left for me is to determine a meaningful sequence.

This method has shown good results. Learning to respect the wishes of others and to articulate one's own. Training in democracy, too. And sometimes I guide them through a lesson which I think appropriate – quite authoritarian.

At the end of a lesson I mostly read them a story. Stories from the life of Buddha, buddhistic tales, allegories one can think about. After the story we sometimes have discussions about what it wants to express. Here's one of their favourite stories:

The death of a teacup

Once upon a time there was a great teacher of Zen philosophy. (Zen is a very down-to-the-ground school of the teachings of Buddha which explains how things really are in life.) This great teacher's name was Ikkyu. Even when Ikkyu was little he was very sharp and always knew how he could evade trouble. One day he pushed a teacup off the table while playing. It fell to the ground and broke up in a thousand pieces. Now this teacup belonged to his teacher who was very fond of it because it was old and valuable. Ikkyu was very worried! And there he already heard his teacher coming. Quickly he hid the shards of the teacup behind his back. When the teacher entered the room, Ikkyu asked: "Why do people have to die?" His teacher replied: "Oh, that's perfectly normal! Every human being and every thing has a certain life span, after which it must die." And then Ikkyu showed his teacher the shards of the broken teacup.

From: Sherab Chödzin et al.: "Die Weisheit der Krähen. Buddhistische Märchen" (*The wisdom of the crows. Buddhist tales.*)

We only skip the story when they want to do an asana which has four lotus flowers – highest degree of difficulty – *savasana*, the posture of the dead: five to ten minutes of lying in silence.

For children that's an eternity, but sometimes they're longing for just that silence.

As in the beginning, we take a bow to say good-bye before we part. There is no yoga lesson where I'm not moved by their tenderness, their courage, their power and the brilliance in their eyes. *Namasté.*

Working with elderly people

Work with elderly people takes on a different shape. Their energy is calmer, pulsates more slowly. Zeal still plays a role, but much less than with children. They have a history. Each one has made decisions which have led them to the point in life where they are now: On the yoga mat with me.

In the beginning, insecurity – can I still do that at my age? Experience has shown that yoga is especially good for elderly people. Nearly all of them have more or less restricted movement abilities due to injuries, sickness, or simply stiffness. Yoga exercises are soft, not very exhausting and yet invigorating. Mobility is kept up or regained, the joints get unburdened, blood pressure regulated. Spiral dynamics allows me to give understandable explanations of anatomic conditions in yoga training by example of a skeleton model. Recognising logical connections in anatomic structures through which the exercises take an effect on us gives the participants security and spontaneous insight.

Yoga tradition takes a different view of life's rhythm than the West: Life is divided in four phases, all of which have a special meaning: The first one is that of learning, the second transfers responsibility for home, work, family, the third is about self-realisation, and the fourth one's main object is the search for spiritual enlightenment. Yoga adapts to the requirements of the respective period.

Our western view of getting older is not very reassuring. It seems to be concerned with supply and disposal rather than with recognising the wealth of knowledge and experience which a person has gathered in the course of his or her life. The feeling of being a special treasure, a wise man/woman, hardly ever arises in people who are old in our current western society.

My approach to yoga with elderly people is marked by respect. As with children, As with children, it is important to feel the "group energy" with elderly people. Each lesson stays spontaneous and immediate, orientates on the abilities and requirements of the participants. From a pool of experiences I select the focus points for a lesson. I mostly start the lesson calmly – lying on the back on the floor, focussing on one's own breathing. Flowing. Prana, life energy, is distributed throughout the body. After that, we're getting more lively. Standing positions which require balance, strength and direction, sitting positions which mainly train mobility, careful backwards bows which open the heart and strengthen the back, easy reverse

positions facilitating blood flow, relaxation lying down.

Every age has its own wisdom. This may sound a bit illusory, kitschy, generalising – but let's savour it and feel its taste. After a good yoga hour with old people, it becomes a certainty.

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Eva Hager-Forstenlechner presented at the [website of ImPulsTanz](#)