

While studying with Sheshadri I was taught the chant “I thank the knowledge that came before me”. I connect strongly with this chant and am immensely grateful to all the great minds that lived before me and left their insights behind. The posts below include selected quotes followed, by a few lines sharing my experience of them in the yoga context. Most of these pieces fall into the ‘often quoted/everybody’s favourite’ category.

Abraham Maslow Considers Normalcy

“All the evidence that we have... ..indicates that it is reasonable to assume in practically every human being, and certainly in almost every newborn baby, that there is an active will towards health, an impulse towards growth, or towards the actualisation of human potentialities. But at once we are confronted with the very saddening realisation that so few people make it. Only a small proportion of the human population gets to the point of identity, or of selfhood, full humanness, self-actualisation, etc., even in a society like ours which is relatively one of the most fortunate on the face of the earth. This is our greatest paradox. We have the impulse towards full development of humanness. They why is it that it doesn’t happen more often? What blocks it?

This is our new way of approaching the problem of humanness, i.e., with an appreciation of its high possibilities and, simultaneously, a deep disappointment that these responsibilities are so infrequently actualised. This attitude contrasts with the ‘realistic’ acceptance of whatever happens to be the case, and then of regarding that as the norm, as, for instance Kinsey did and as the television pollsters do today. We tend then to get into the situation in which normalcy from the descriptive point of view, from the value-free-science point of view – that his normalcy or averageness is the best we can expect, and that therefore we should be content with it. From the point of view that I have outlined, normalcy would rather be the kind of sickness or crippling or stunting that we share with everybody else and therefore don’t notice. I remember an old textbook of abnormal psychology that I used when I was an undergraduate, which was an awful book, but which had a wonderful frontpiece. The lower half was a picture of a line of babies, pink, sweet, delightful, innocent, lovable. Above that was a picture of a lot of passengers in a subway train, glum, grey, sullen, sour. The caption underneath was very simple ‘What happened?’ This is what I am talking about.”

By Abraham Maslow (famous for Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs)

Source: Maslow, A. (1971) The Further Reaches Of Human Nature p.26-27

In many ways this piece encapsulates the reasoning behind my approach to practicing and teaching yoga postures. I consider the shape of the posture to be a suggested line of enquiry rather than a particular shape the body has to be forced into. I try to encourage my students to leave the ‘one shape fits all’ approach and explore what the posture feels like in their own body, so that the shape the body takes emerges from the bodymind’s continued journey into the posture. My experience is that this form of practice supports the development of bodymind awareness. Over time this awareness becomes a way of being that is guided by intuition rather than impulse, habit and the prevailing views of our time.

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crown of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out
for a new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

By Rumi, Selected Poems, Translated by Coleman Banks, p.109.

The journey of self-awareness is an odd kind of journey: it leads to a lighter, easier, more fulfilling life. This lightness comes as we become aware of the things (behaviours, habits, impulses) that weigh us down. We are only able to let go of the things we are aware of. But those moments of insight can be incredibly uncomfortable. So one of the most important skills to learn is the ability to accept one's self as it is. Otherwise the process of self-awareness becomes another way in which to beat one's self up and reinforce a negative experience of the self.

On my journey I found the ability to de-stress invaluable. 'Rebooting' on a regular basis helped me to accept what I found inside. I have been using Swami Pragyamurti's deep relaxation script for years¹. While I was involved in the counselling world I did it every day. Now I listen to it less frequently. For me it is a nearly fire-proof way of reducing stress and increasing acceptance of what *is*. You can try it yourself, or dive into the self-development toolbox and find the practice(s) that work for you.

On a completely different subject – the *beyond* can be understood as the unconscious. When difficult experiences are repressed, their 'energy' is often released through emotions (general anxiety, depression, projected anger...). So every emotion can be considered as messenger. If we welcome the emotion it becomes less poisonous and everything, even difficult experiences, become easier.

Somebody, Rick Hanson² I think, said "stress is corrosive". If this is not a good enough reason to establish balance then I don't know what is.

¹ <http://www.syclondon.com/cd/index.htm>

² Rick Hanson Phd owner of <http://www.wisebrain.org/> and author of Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of happiness, love & wisdom.

We Shall Not Cease From Exploration

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

By T. S. Elliot from the Four Quartets

These four lines capture the liveliness of a life that is guided by awareness. We start somewhere, we let go of everything we 'know', and we experience everything as it is right now.

We get on the mat, we sit for meditation, as if we have never done this before. We aim to reduce the mind's ability to park the bodymind on autopilot and drift into fantasy. We are fully awake and present in our practice. We are fully awake and present in our life. Free from habit and boredom, our experience and actions are fresh.