



DISCOVERING FORGIVENESS

By Beth O'Brien, Ph.D.

Take your problems to the mat. Yoga teachers often emphasize this message to their students. It is a reminder that yoga is more than a physical practice; it is a place of welcome to sort out life's challenges.

Recently I had the opportunity to apply this recommendation. I had confided to a close friend a secret I held near to my heart. To disclose such confidences to a friend demonstrates our willingness to take a risk, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. I did so willingly, believing that my friend would treat our discussion as a private matter as agreed. Within a few days, I found out that my friend had “spilled the beans” to another mutual friend. I felt hurt, angry, and betrayed. Why did she treat my confidence so lightly?

These reactions were spinning around in my head, but I had other commitments needing attention. I managed to find a way to contain the thoughts and accompanying distress. I went to the yoga studio to attend a restorative yoga class. Restorative yoga offers active relaxation—a chance to balance out intense activity and movement with quiet activity, rest and stillness.

The class began with mindful breathing. Structured breathing exercises enable one to release anxiety and stress, creating a shift from the demands of the outside world to a peaceful, inner focus. The participants were encouraged to identify an intention for the class. Surprisingly, I heard my own voice silently say “please let me find the space to let go of anger and forgive my friend.” I knew finding forgiveness would be a challenging task, one I wasn't sure I was emotionally ready to take on just yet. But the yogini in me decided to be hopeful, and I saved my work on forgiveness, however brief or small, for savasana. In yoga, savasana is the period at the end of class reserved for quiet meditation.

“please let me find the space to let go of anger and forgive my friend”

Most of the restorative yoga poses that day centered on opening the chest and the heart. One such pose is Mountain Brook Pose, in which you place a bolster under the knees, a single folded blanket under the shoulder blades, and a long-roll blanket under your neck. Then you lie back on these props. In doing so, I brought my attention to my heart. I began to notice a myriad of feelings radiating from heart, and I just opened myself to receiving them. From here we moved into a reclining twist with a

bolster, and my thoughts began to quiet down. Then the class gently shifted into a simple supported backbend. I noticed my heart softening, and the tension melting away.

It was time for savasana. I moved into Corpse pose, ready to see what I could do on forgiving my friend. I dug deep, and I discovered that the anger and the hurt had diminished. In its place I found space for joy and love. Lawrence Kohlberg, a psychologist who wrote about moral development, said that the highest stage of forgiveness is forgiveness as love: “I forgive unconditionally because it promotes a true sense of love.” In those few moments, I glimpsed a sense of forgiving enough; not completely, but enough.

I forgive unconditionally because it promotes a true sense of love.

— *Lawrence Kohlberg*

With class over, I biked home, my burden lifted. In the basket by the front door, I found a letter from my friend, apologizing for her behavior, and inviting me to discuss ways she could mend the broken trust. By taking my problem to the mat, I found a way to forgive, re-opening the circle of love.

Beth O'Brien, Ph.D., is a registered Hatha Yoga teacher and licensed Psychologist. She teaches vinyasa yoga classes in Fort Collins. Are there ways yoga has made an impact on your health or your personal life? Your comments are welcome!

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