

The Edge

Playing the edge involves exploring the fine-tuning that takes us even deeper into the experience—in yoga and in life.

By Michael Lee

When I first became interested in yoga, I bought Richard Hittleman's little book so I could learn it all in 21 days. As I explored various postures, I noticed how incredibly inflexible my body was and how much it hurt. I began to doubt if yoga was really for me. I had absolutely no idea how to coordinate my body and breath, or how to use my awareness and focus it internally. I was in pain, not ecstasy. Nevertheless, I dutifully bumbled along on my own for some time.

I found the breathing exercises and began practicing them. Soon I discovered how, when I used my breath to relax my body at the threshold of discomfort, my body would somehow open up a little more until it didn't seem to hurt so much. Then I discovered the most significant single concept that not only changed my yoga practice but has greatly transformed my life. It was my discovery of the edge.

By now I had been practicing for two years and was in search of more. Resisting the temptation to go to India, I chose to explore ashrams in North America, looking for my teacher. My search led me to the Berkshire Hills in Western Massachusetts in the winter of 1983. Shortly after I arrived at the Kripalu Center, Yogi Desai initiated morning practices for all ashram residents consisting of hatha yoga for one hour, followed by a guided meditation and chanting that he often led. I was totally committed to these practices, faithfully arriving for them each morning at five. As was the practice in Kripalu yoga, certain postures would be held for a longer time. It was during these



longer holdings that I experienced the most difficulty.

One morning, I found myself experiencing intolerable levels of discomfort, even in postures we held for only a short time. I was falling out of them ahead of the group and feeling as if I was bouncing off myself. I would go into my body and it would throw me out. I was trying to be willful, and my willfulness was not working. Ever the pragmatist, I decided to conduct a little experiment. I chose trying not to try so hard, letting myself ease into postures until there was mild, tolerable discomfort. But after do-

ing this a while, I began feeling guilty. My mind rushed in: I was not doing my best. I was taking the easy way out. I felt so terrible, I went back to trying again, only to find guilt transforming into frustration, anger, and pain.

Then I had another flash of inspiration: What lay between trying and not trying? Excited by this new possibility, I moved into the next posture and tentatively sought out that in-between place of not too much and not too little. Initially it was hard to find. First I had to resist my tendency to try harder, then the temptation to back off too much. After practicing a while, I was effortlessly holding postures at this new edge with amazing results. I was able to enter a state similar to what I had previously experienced in meditation. As I became the witness to myself, I was able to feel the uncomfortable yet inviting feeling of entering a void where images, sensations, and even new awareness would come to me. I was not the doer of the posture, I was the receiver.

Within days, my yoga practice took on a whole new meaning. Things really started to happen at the edge. I began connecting with myself at a much deeper level, becoming aware of things in my life that were in the way. One day, right there at the edge, I saw how my fear of fatherhood got in my way both as a father and as a human being. I was able to let my body and myself soften into being an inexperienced, imperfect, sometimes insecure, yet loving father. Tears of bliss ran down my cheeks. Another day I saw how my identity was tied to my work. Being at the edge this day had produced the uncomfortable feeling of

“not doing.” Not being in a “doing” mode left me feeling naked of my identity. I stepped into that feeling and through to other side, again with the experience of profound bliss.

Soon I began to see amazing connections between the edge in yoga postures and the edge in life. I saw my propensity to get things over and done with and my desire to get a result or reach a goal. I saw my tendency to hang back at times when my mind allowed me an excuse. Until I had discovered and accepted my edge, I was bouncing between these opposites, uncertain of where to be and being uncomfortable wherever I was. For many years I had tried to achieve something worthwhile in my work, often exhausting my-

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self in the process, then needing ways to flee from disappointment. Once I accepted the edge, my need to get somewhere seemed to disappear. Everything I needed to “get” was, in fact, right here. Paradoxically, the more I accepted my edge, the more I was able to achieve anything I set my mind to. As I let go of struggle, the process of achieving something became simply a direction, then being with the experience, moment-by-moment.

I have discovered that success is always based on an edge of some sort or another. Without an edge there is no growth, no learning, and no change. Too far back from the edge is boredom and atrophy. Too far out from the edge lies self-destruction. The edge, in both body and life, is always moving. It is always expanding outward into unknown areas.

As I’ve explored the edge in my body, I’ve learned to explore the edge in life. During the past eight years I have learned to ski, both cross-country and downhill;

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to create, practice, and teach Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy; to focus a rapidly growing organization; to fly an airplane; to marry again and become a father twice more; to write a book; and to travel around the country 200 days a year with minimal stress. I have done all these things with the relative ease that comes from knowing the edge in each and every moment, playing that edge, and growing beyond.

My yoga practice and the focused awareness that has come with it has taught me all about my edge. Putting it into life was really the easy part. Once an awareness comes through the body it has already started to happen in life. It is not just a thought. It is an experience of a different way of being and so the learning is almost automatic. Those changes have been much easier to take fully into life than anything I may have read or heard or thought about.

Finding the edge requires presence. I can’t find it if my mind is somewhere else, which means I have to be willing

to be with what is happening in every moment. I also have to be willing to stay present long enough to discern and make necessary adjustments. I must also accept whatever I discover. It doesn’t work to become aware only to use the awareness for denial or self-flagellation. Knowing when to back off—when the edge is too great—is just as important as being willing to go into it more deeply. Only when we accept what is happening—no matter what it is—can we choose where to go next or how to be with it. Playing the edge involves exploring the fine-tuning that takes us even deeper into the experience, be it in a posture or in life. This, I believe, is what fuels the process of transformation, for those of us who have chosen the yogic approach to that path. ♦

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E X E R C I S E

PLAYING YOUR EDGE

Drop your head down to the left side bringing your ear toward your shoulder. Notice the stretch this creates on the right side of your neck. Feel the sensation. Breathe into it and let the exhale fall out. Play with the stretch by extending the left arm downward. Imagine you are using the middle two fingers on that hand to reach into a deep pocket for a dime buried inside it. Find an edge in the stretch. The edge is a place where any more stretch would be too much, and any less would be not enough. When you find the edge hang out there for two or three more breaths. Just be with the edge. Notice if it shifts, and go with it if it does. Come out of the stretch with your eyes closed, and take your inner awareness to both sides of your neck. Check in with yourself physically. Check in with your total awareness of yourself in the moment. What do you find?

Try finding the edge in other body positions. A good one is to explore the edge in the hamstrings by hanging forward in rag doll position. Use many breaths for this one. As you get better at finding your edge, take it to your yoga practice, and then after a time see how it translates into your life. How do you tend to play the edge? Do you prefer to push or to hang back? How does that serve you? What does it keep you from discovering? How do you choose to be with the edges in your life from here on?