

It Is Precisely For These Times That We Practice

by Cindy Berliner, CIYT

In these times of Covid-19 there are few of us who have not felt a sense of disruption, of fear, of isolation, of unease, of *not knowing*. Quite naturally, many of us may have felt that our *citta vrittis* (fluctuations of the mind) are on steroids. As students of yoga, we may find ourselves asking what the purpose and place of our practice is in these unsettling, destabilizing times. I know that I have thought a lot about my practice and how it supports me. And I believe that it is *precisely* for these times that we practice.

Archilochus, a Greek poet, wrote that when we are challenged, we do not rise to our expectations but fall to the level of our practice. I have pondered this sobering observation and its significance. Does it simply mean that it is preferable to learn to swim before there is a flood? That we should be practicing equanimity before chaos arrives? If so, does this mean that if I currently am struggling, my accumulated practice was somehow insufficient and that I cannot now rise to the task? Is it now too late? The answer, as discussed below, is a resounding “no.”

Just What Is the Level of my Practice?

I understand Archilochus’ statement as more than a mere truism about the benefits of accumulated practice and attendant preparation for challenging times. His words also are a call — and a tremendous opportunity — to use these times for robust *svadhyaya* (self-study), an essential element of *kriya* yoga (the yoga of action) and one of the *niyamas* (individual disciplines).

We may usefully question our practice and examine its effects on what we are going through. Has my practice changed over these last months and if so, how? Do I feel supported by my practice or do I find it difficult to practice? Do the *klesas* (ignorance, ego, attachment, aversion, clinging to life) have me in a death grip? Am I experiencing one or more of the obstacles identified in Sutras 1.30-31 such as doubt, lethargy, backsliding or despair? Am I struggling with the loss of control of my daily routine and/or environment? Or am I able to relax into each moment and feel gratitude for, and contentment with, “what is”? How skillfully am I navigating these waters — am I sinking? Treading water? Swimming?

How we answer these questions can not only hone our ability to see more clearly, but can inform our practice going forward. Far from berating ourselves because we suffer or struggle, we can and should welcome what we learn. Attentiveness and awareness often are the first steps toward change.

While awareness may be all that we are capable of for now, we might also be able to move on to addressing what we see as unwholesome or unhelpful habits. For example, in the last few months I found myself checking the daily headlines before I did my sutra study. I concluded that my “doom scrolling” was nurturing my monkey mind rather than nurturing a concentrated mind. I reflected on my priorities and have committed to re-ordering my mornings.

Yoga Takes the Long View

Archilochus’ statement also reminds us that practice is something that we do over a long period of time. In the case of yoga, ideally we build up *viveka-khyati* (discriminative discernment) to the point where seeing clearly and acting skillfully become second nature and we become more equanimous.

I will never forget being on a retreat with my teacher, Patricia Walden, in August 2014 when news of B.K.S. Iyengar’s death reached us. Many of us were emotional; even if we had not studied extensively with Guruji, we knew that Patricia had been a devoted student since 1976 and we grieved for her. However, she was a model of *samatvam* (equanimity) and *vira* (strength). I could not help but conclude that I was witnessing the manifestation of the long, uninterrupted devotional practice that Patanjali describes in Sutra 1.13.

Yoga takes the long view, not the short one. As B.K.S. Iyengar has said, there are no free lunches with yoga — although some benefits of a yoga practice are immediate. The real and most profound gifts reveal themselves over time. Yoga is hard work, as is the case with most worthwhile things in life.

Faith: Practice Now for the Future

In the last several weeks, I have noticed myself becoming agitated or angry when people do not wear face masks in grocery stores despite the signage. There was a time in my life when I would not have been able to notice in real time these rising emotions — but now I do. This “sacred pause” has enabled me to draw upon what I have learned; and in this case, it is the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita* to see ourselves in the other. In that pause, I was able to recognize that my anger really is no different from the anger that some people feel about being told to wear masks.

Science and the merit of wearing masks aside, I believe that it is my years of practice that have enabled me to see that clenching my own fist is not the most skillful way to respond. And it is in such moments of clarity, that we realize we are making progress in our *sadhana* (yogic journey). When we are able to string enough of these experiences together, we develop *sraddha* or faith and are compelled to forge on with our practice.

The pandemic undoubtedly has taught us many things about ourselves and the world we inhabit. Above all, we have learned a tangible lesson of impermanence: there is the very real possibility that public health, the economy and social unrest will get worse before they get better. Surely, then, isn't there an urgency to our current practice? There is a saying that the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago; the second best time is today. Whether we are beginning a yoga practice, recommitting to our practice, or deepening our practice, the time to do this important work is now. In the words of my teacher, "if not now, then when?"