

The Poetry of Movement

By Cara Bowen

Movement is the song of the body
Vanda Scaravelli, *Awakening the Spine*

Vanda Scaravelli was a musician as well as a yoga teacher, whereas poetry is closer to my heart. Many of my favourite writers on yoga and meditation also share an affinity with poetry, including Thich Nhat Hahn, Sandra Sabatini and Paramananda.

As in music, where every note is considered and forms part of a harmonious whole, in poetry each word counts and is chosen with focus and deliberation. The same can be said of yoga practice, in which each nuance of movement is practised with attention, not as an end in itself, but to bring us via the body more fully into the present.

A haiku is a moment of pure awareness: the cognitive mind quietens and we are plunged into the immediate sensory experience of the poet:

Twilight - the only conversation
on this hill
Is the wind blowing through the pines.
(Ryokan)

Bringing the hands into jnana mudra has a similar effect. For a moment, our thoughts still, we sense the shape of the hands, the point of contact of thumb and index finger, the ever-shifting play of sensations on the skin and deeper within the tissues and fluids of the flesh.

For me, the relationship between poetry and yoga has a particular resonance, as it was on a poetry writing retreat that I finally stopped resisting the pull to become a yoga teacher.

I discovered Vanda Scaravelli's approach to yoga when I returned to live in Brighton more than 20 years ago. It was an exciting time to be discovering Scaravelli-inspired yoga, with Gary Carter's Natural Bodies at the centre of a vibrant community. Within six months the practice had resolved ten years of lower back pain, and I also discovered a powerful way of feeling more comfortable in my skin.

Yoga was increasingly important in my life, but my main focus was on developing as a writer. However, on a weeklong poetry workshop in the former home of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, I found myself doing more yoga than writing. I still remember the feeling of the old polished floorboards under my feet as I practised ardha chandrasana in the grey morning light, although I have little recollection of anything I wrote.

Whether some of the despair in the lives of the previous inhabitants was leaching out of the walls, or poetry attracts those with a dark turn of mind, many of the other participants on the course were in various states of emotional distress. Realising that yoga could help ease the situation, I started to lead daily sessions. I found that teaching gomukasana legs is more difficult than it might appear, but also

that sharing my love for yoga with other people could help them feel better while deepening my own understanding.

In his foreword to *Overcoming Trauma through Yoga*, US yoga teacher Stephen Cope talks about the power of yoga to help us 'acknowledge, experience and bear reality'. In providing the means to cultivate an inner sense of stability, yoga gives us a way to bear reality, and perhaps offers more than poetry in terms of practical tools for dealing with distress. It can provide a source of light in the face of the 'threat of all-day night', as Elizabeth Jennings describes depression in her evocative poem *Fragment for the Dark*.

Inspired in part by the Upanishads, TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* captures in its opening lines the essence of the existential difficulties that yoga addresses:

*April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire...*

Attending to the sensations of the body roots us in the present moment, weakening the compulsion of the mind to become ensnared in memories, regrets, daydreams and plans.

Poetry also speaks to the heart, another means by which the constant activity of the mind can be stilled, as Patanjali says in sutra 1.33:

The mind becomes clear and serene when the qualities of the heart are cultivated (trans. Alistair Shearer)

My current favourite volume of poetry is *The Lives of the Heart* by Jane Hirshfield, an American poet and Zen practitioner. Sometimes in a class or workshop I will read her wonderful poem *Standing Deer*, even though the following lines tend to reduce me to tears:

*Beloved, what can be, what was,
will be taken from us.
I have disappointed.
I am sorry. I knew no better.*

Or perhaps it is precisely because it makes me cry that I choose to read it.

Cara Bowen is a yoga teacher based in Brighton. She trains yoga teachers as part of the BWY accredited London Yoga Teacher Training Group. She will be teaching a IST day on integrating meditation into asana teaching in Pulborough, West Sussex on Saturday 18 February 2017; it may contain some poetry.