

Would You Rather Be Right, or Would You Rather Be Happy?

By Carolyn Reynolds

Dr. Timothy McCall, a board-certified specialist in internal medicine and Yoga Journal's medical editor, has studied yoga since 1995. Dr. McCall states, "Although medical knowledge is constantly being refined by ongoing scientific investigation, the basics of what we know about how to get and stay healthy haven't changed much in recent years. Pretty much everybody knows that you should eat lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, get some kind of regular exercise, and work on keeping your stress levels from spiraling out of control. The difficult part isn't in knowing what to do. It's how you make it happen."

Creating new habit patterns is the hard part. The study of Yoga offers the tools (practices) that teach us to understand the mind and the illusions and tricks that it can create to maintain comfortable, though dysfunctional, habit patterns. You may have taken some yoga classes and be thinking, "How do sun salutations, balancing postures and standing on my head do that? I never learned about creating new habit patterns in a forward bend. It just makes the backs of my legs painfully stretch." Actually, you can learn a great deal about yourself while holding a posture. You do it by observing your reactions to being at the edge of your comfort zone. Developing the skill of observation rather than a knee-jerk response to being at the edge can be a great teachable moment. Observation, however, is just the beginning of training the mind.

Want to have some fun observing your mind? Simply stand in Tadasana, the mountain posture. Stand with your feet positioned below the hips. Look down at your feet. If they are not parallel to each other and facing forward, adjust them so that they are. Some may find this to be an unnatural stance if you are used to standing with toes pointing outward for example. No need to do anything about that, just observe the feeling and then be aware of your mind's reaction to the feeling. Now lift the shoulders up to the ears and drop them down your back, adjusting your posture to be straight and tall. Imagine a helium balloon is attached to the top of your head, lifting you up. As you take a full breath in, raise the arms out to the horizon on either side of your body. Breathe out slowly. The next full in-breath raises your arms up to reach for the sky with palms facing each other, keeping the shoulders as relaxed as possible. Continue to maintain full, even breaths. Now just stay here and observe what is going on in the body and in the mind. It won't be long before the show begins. You can't hurt yourself in this posture but it is fertile ground for self-observation. It is also fun to ask a few friends to join you in the experiment. We tend to think that our reactions are the only ones that exist. You will find some surprises when you share experiences.

The more you repeat a habit pattern, the deeper the grooves (neural pathways) become. The only way out of an undesirable habit is to create a new neural pathway with a new behavior. And then you must repeat that behavior over and over until it becomes a new habit pattern. This is good news. You CAN teach an old dog new tricks. The brain is much more plastic than once believed.

Get in the habit of conversing with your mind, “Mind, my dear friend, is this behavior useful or is it not useful?” And no matter what else the motivation (revenge, comfort, pride, etc.) if it is not useful to your higher good, ditch it. Replace it.

Once a friend confided in me that she would continue to live in a house that she hated and not marry a man who she loved because she knew her ex-husband wanted the house and she was going to make him continue to pay alimony. If she married and moved out of the house she would no longer get the alimony check and he would get the house back as was in the settlement. She insisted that he *deserved* to pay her forever for the grief he caused her. I asked her if she would rather be right or would she rather be happy? She opted in that moment to drop that ton of revenge and bitterness she was carrying around and go for the bliss of her new relationship. It can be that simple.

The simple fact that you can observe your behaviors and then appraise them is a colossal step toward physical health as well as spiritual growth. Dr. McCall continues to state, “The more I’ve studied yoga, the more I’ve become convinced that it offers the piece doctors and public health authorities are missing; a way to implement the changes people want to make. Along with offering direct health benefits, the various yogic tools, including the physical postures, breathing techniques, and meditation, are part of a systematic technology for life transformation, a step-by-step method for changing bad habits.” And so much more.