

## **Yoga Talk: The Power of The Spoken Word to Transform Dark Feelings**

By Elle Garfield, ACSW

Shhh.... Yoga class has started. You're a little late so you tip toe in, carefully rolling out your mat so you don't disturb anyone. As you find your comfortable seat you glance from side to side to see your neighbors sitting tall with their eyes close. So you close your eyes too. Next you hear the teacher's instruction to deepen your breath. You know the teacher will let you know what to do next. There is no need to ask any questions or comment on what you are experiencing. So starts the journey that is a typical Hatha yoga class.

It's no secret that silence is golden in yoga. Yes, there may be music playing and hopefully you can hear the instructor's voice as she/he calls out the flow of postures and inspires you to get the most out of your practice but generally speaking students are not expected to talk during class. One of the main features of a yoga class is getting practice in listening and paying attention to what's going on inside us. That takes being quiet.

As we take deeper breaths, we are naturally able to relax. As we relax, we feel more. As we feel more we are encouraged to observe with compassion. As we observe with compassion we have the opportunity to allow feelings to flow and to go deeper into them. If you have been practicing for awhile you know this is an exploration, a discovery of sorts. In it you are able to glean the many benefits of awareness of self and our connections to the world around us.

So what happens when we tap into an uncomfortable feeling? Our muscles and tissues hold on tight to stress from our past experiences so that lots of sensation comes up as we go deep. As we begin to open up and relax more sensations and feelings may emerge like an unwelcome guest. Dark feelings like fear, anger or sadness come to the surface where we have access to them. Our tendency may be to back off, run away or tune out at that point, but staying with them offers us a chance to learn and grow more conscious. If you can stay with it you may just tap into a gold mine of information about your behavior off the mat. Your yoga practice is a great place to gain awareness about what makes you tick *and* sometimes the information you get calls for another way to process or make sense of the information you are receiving especially if the feelings are overwhelming. You may decide to find someone to talk to about your experiences after class.

One way to continue to transform your feelings is to put words to them. Talking about your feelings can be an important part of getting clear and letting them go. Although we may use general terms ("Wow, that felt amazing!") to describe our experiences, most people are not all that comfortable talking about their specific feelings. This is especially true of our darker feelings. No one wants to feel out of control and stepping into the messy bog of feelings can sometimes be unfamiliar territory and feel beyond our control.

So how does talking about feelings help? First, there's the dynamic of being listened to. Knowing you are not alone and are understood can be a big relief. We have all heard that talking about something distressing can "lighten the load" of the person in distress. Secondly, talking is a way of diffusing our tendency to react. Just saying the words, "I'm afraid" can create a shift in our perspective. Third, talking about our feelings is a way to get clear about what we need to do next with the information our

feelings give us to take good care of ourselves leading to perhaps heal old wounds of past experiences.

It's important to find someone who can and will listen without interrupting or judging you. Someone who won't add to any fear you already have. Someone you feel safe with, who offers a compassionate presence. After all you're opening yourself up to this person, you may feel vulnerable. It could be someone who knows you well although it's better if they are able to be objective so that you are free to explore without someone else's agenda interfering. A counselor or psychotherapist is specially trained to listen and notice nuances in our speech and demeanor. A therapist trained in both cognitive and mindfulness therapies can help clients explore their inner world and assist them in integrating their experiences, feelings and stories; helping them make sense of their lives, transforming dark feelings into gratitude and joy.

If you feel anxious at even the thought of talking about your feelings you're not alone. Many people feel that bringing attention to our feelings or talking about them will make us feel worse, not better. What I have found in my own experience and working for many years as a psychotherapist is that the light of our awareness combined with finding someone who can witness, listen and give feedback on our experiences is a powerful transformer of feelings. Bringing attention and talking about feelings does not cause harm. The real harm is caused when we push away, run from or ignore these feelings. That's when symptoms of anxiety, depression and addictions start to show up and wreak havoc in our lives.

Jon's (not his real name) remission from cancer ended in the spring of 2006. He was known for his sunny disposition and always looking at the bright side of life even throughout the harsh treatment he had endured. When his cancer came back he decided to take a private yoga class to help him relax. Not used to talking about uncomfortable feelings, when fear came up as he closed his eyes in corpse pose the last thing he wanted to do was talk about how he was feeling. Gradually he was able and wanted to talk about those feelings. As he did they shifted and changed. He was able to honor the grief that was just below his feelings of fear. His grief turned into gratitude, as he was able to live more fully in the present, noticing and appreciating the beauty around him. Jon had tapped into a keener awareness starting with yoga and continuing as he put words to his experiences. As he went through the fear and grief he found joy and gratitude on the other side.

Yoga class gives us a great opportunity to increase our awareness and our ability to learn from the feelings and sensations in our bodies. As you learn more, darker feelings may arise. Talking about those feelings is a wonderful way to process and make sense of our troubling emotions. Find someone who will really listen, not give advice about how not to feel but who can be confident in your own ability to explore, face and transform your angst, going from fear to joy, from grief to gratitude, and from despair to a resilient faith in life.

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