

JOURNEYING AND RESISTING

Recently I read three books. For all I knew, within each of these books – whether print on paper or glow on screen – there were potentially illuminating stories. The first book, about dance and different ways of moving, was given to me by my partner. But I felt resistance come up: didn't I already know enough about movement? A friend encouraged me to read the second, but from a cursory glance it appeared to be an esoteric-style text, and my instinct was to reject it. And the third? Well, I chose this one myself and it's a great read that I highly recommend.

Seeing life as a journey is a common perspective – there's a poignant description of that in Colin Thubron's *To a Mountain in Tibet*: "I will finish when the journey of my life is over, that is when I will end." But some of us find these journeys harder than others: there can be many barriers and blocks on our paths – some of us are more stuck and prone to resistance than others. Am I one of those?

My partner and I had agreed to give each other a book that we particularly liked. We both believe that this is a good practice as it helps to broaden our vistas. She suggested Emilie Conrad's *Life On Land*, and up came that resistance. Was it that I felt those books on yoga that I read because of work and personal interest are enough: why should I read a book that comes from a dance background? But she gave it from a place of love...

It took me a few weeks to make time and start reading it. It is what I would call one of the more whacky works, with talk of spirits and different dimensions. It's a beautiful book that invites the reader to let go of standard perceptions: to enter the world of a person who embarked on a voyage of self-healing with great courage and determination, a person who is not scared by being open to all the different possibilities of this existence. As Conrad herself says, "sensation is not just the messenger of pain, discomfort and other emotions but is the link to an extraordinary aesthetic landscape that is our birthright... Stress and speed will rigidify tissue, compromising flow and adaptability, the very nutrients required to enjoy a healthy life and vibrant society."

From an abusive childhood, to the joy of voodoo dancing in Haiti, to helping people heal from crippling injuries - this was Emilie Conrad's journey, and it was astonishing to read about her ability to stay open. To read about her healing powers: not only the capacity to heal herself of emotional traumas and physical injuries, but also to heal people with significant degrees of paralysis. Her belief is in our own potential and how much we restrict ourselves by the way we move, that we need to rediscover our essential fluidity which requires diving into the play of life. In her own words "becoming aware of the primordial-cosmic flows of information can be instrumental in diffusing our cultural inhibitors, helping us to move beyond our stifling adaptive patterns, ultimately becoming a resource for

health and creativity.”

Next I tackled the book recommended by a friend: *Sivananda Buried Yoga* by Yogi Mammoyanand – a provocative title in itself, though having done a short stint in that system I can appreciate its sentiment. One criticism of Swami Sivananda is that he emasculated the essence of yoga practices – as in his translation of *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. But at a quick glance I could feel hackles rising: personally I am not a fan of the esoteric explanations and have a tendency to dismiss them as deluding – maybe that’s my mistake and I’m too quick to judge. (And I spend so much time saying “let go of judgement”: ah, the contradictions of this human life.) I didn’t particularly like the famous *Autobiography of a Yogi* because I found it far fetched. Perhaps I’m too much of a rationalist, which is then irksome to my self-image considering the degree of effort I have put into upholding ideas of magic and mystery to the scientifically minded.

Mammoyanand’s book is essentially about his journey by way of various teachers and communities that are presenting yoga in India. He doesn’t pull any punches: “Over several years of experience I had learned not to believe in such crap...” One amusing story recounts his intense vision of Krishna – “I continued to sense his divine presence all around me” – later revised as a result of the realisation that this was “a neuro-psychic reaction triggered by some kind of hallucinogenic substance that was in the biscuits I had eaten”.

He walked 2,600 kilometres across India “in less than two months” – which might sound unbelievable but averages out to about 50 kilometres a day: definitely doable. Contemplating events beyond accepted understanding – like materialising money (very useful in this age of austerity) – Yogi Mammoyanand then concludes: “Yoga is like an ultra-modern spiritual technology...the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali is undoubtedly the first book on quantum physics...physics is only the little brother of spirituality. Physics constantly follows and endeavours to prove all that spirituality is talking about”.

Despite my doubts, I got a lot from this book. And despite some tall tales, I felt there was a voice of authenticity and some interesting perspectives, like those of his life, his pranayama practices, his interpretation of santosha. And there are moments of insight: “In my opinion, the greatest misfortune that can happen to a yogi is his followers. Followers inevitably raise the status of a yogi to a level that is difficult to resist. The more people praise and raise him, the more he gets carried away with the glory of his own false image”.

And so to the third book, a collection of articles edited by Michael Stone *Freeing The Body, Freeing The Mind* – writings on the connections between Yoga and Buddhism. When these disciplines first crossed continents to the Western world, they were seen as having quite divided approaches. In fact, what they share is much greater than their potential to divide. In the words of Stone, “there is a

fundamental affinity between mind practices and body practices because they are both simply curves in a grand concentric circle that continually spirals in, on and through itself with no beginning or end... Buddhism and Yoga: it's important that we understand these traditions as shifting descriptions of reality and not fixed truths untouched by cultural traditions”.

There are pieces from meditation teachers who practice yoga and yoga practitioners who meditate: looking for what is shared, what there is in common in this inward and outward practicing. Whether this is about a search for inner meaning or an experience of mystical moments, what could be called the path from suffering (those age-old expressions of dukkha and sukkha) – towards resolving difficulties of this human condition. This is an excellent book that is helpful in aiding our understanding of what it means to practice.

Life is, life is – I am often reminded of how far there is to go on journeys towards places of peacefulness and experiences of ease that are among the inevitable storms. Each of these books can be illuminating for our journeys, and reading them has helped me to see some of my own barriers and blocks. I hope that by reading them there might perhaps have been a slight lessening of the boundaries I've built over the years of this life. Perhaps these books might be helpful on the journeys that we are undertaking.

There were three students. The first boasted, “My teacher is the best – he can go days without eating.” The second, not to be outdone, exclaimed, “My teacher has so much self-control, he can go days at a time without sleeping!” But the third simply said, “My teacher is so wise that he eats when he's hungry and sleeps when he's tired.”

Good luck!

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