

# **THIS BODY**

Titles can be tricky, especially in this society of speed, sound-bites and stimulants. Other options included 'What happened in the summer holidays' and 'My appendix, the NHS, sangha and sustainability'.

It began on the first Saturday of August. A busy day with many commitments. In the afternoon I was feeling a bit unwell – nothing too serious. I mused to myself that perhaps it was too much cake and too many cappuccinos. The Sunday was also full. In a morning training session, I remember saying "I am feeling pretty ropey". In the afternoon, there was a workshop that I was leading.

If it had been an ordinary class, I would have listened more to the messages of body and got it covered. But because it was a workshop, I felt that I had to go – even though it was the other side of London. An emphasis in my teaching is the arrive and the centre, where there is allowing and including of where we actually are. An embracing of nowness, whether that is a breaking heart or unexplainable joy or an aching back or anticipations of relief. As the workshop commenced, I remarked that I was "not feeling my brightest". That was my checking in.

After a while, that description began to sound distinctly optimistic. My belly was hurting, I was feeling sick, my energy was ebbing, I struggled to find words. Then it was really kicking off: physical heaves and dry retching. I am still trying to keep it together and continue teaching. Then there is the realisation that this is untenable and I have to get to the toilet.

Fortunately at this studio, the toilet is some distance from the yoga space. With the participants in something like child's pose, I head for the toilets to throw up. Now this is a first for me: throwing up in the middle of teaching a yoga workshop!

Somehow – with a combination of stubbornness, stupidity and strength – I get through the rest of the workshop (though we do end ten minutes early). I am feeling dreadful yet still I am 'stuck'. The agitation of illness causes a closing down of possibilities. I don't think of getting a taxi, I find it hard asking for help. The journey home is challenging. I throw up on the street, I throw up on the train and eventually I see some sense and get a taxi for the last third of my journey.

## **BACK HOME**

Back home – phew! Sitting at home definitely not being at my best but at least being back in safety and security. I remember saying to my partner as I staggered through the front door, "I can't give anymore to anyone..." That giving of teaching the workshop had demanded a lot of a body that was tumbling down to the ground.

The next morning – after a night of throwing up – it was my partner to the rescue. Her diagnosis: "I think you've got appendicitis." As well as the throwing

up, my abdomen was in unremitting discomfort, my energy levels had collapsed (I could barely get up out of bed), I felt a lot of nausea – and now I could distinguish distinct sharp pains on the right side of belly that were sensitive to pressure.

I protested – I have aversion to hospitals and modern medicine. She insisted. I demanded a second opinion – a good friend of ours is a health care professional. There was an exchange of texts and a confirming of my partner’s diagnosis. If I had been on my own, I definitely would not have gone then. I would have toughed it out, fuelled by my resistance to hospitalisation. Thank god that I listened to her and that she was here to make me listen!

We got to the North Midd hospital by 8am. I should have realised that there was something seriously wrong when I was lying on the floor of A & E curled into a ball. But one distraction – they come in many shapes and forms of course – was that the next day (Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup>) we were flying to Crete to teach a week at YogaRocks. Even then I was still determined to go...

The staff were great in the hospital – thank god for the NHS. More proddings, more questions, a CT scan. “Yes, you’ve got appendicitis and we have to operate now.” By 5pm, I was being wheeled into the operating theatre.

## **APPENDAGES...**

There are descriptions of appendicitis from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and I am sure that other forms of medicine identified it much earlier. There are a variety of different causes and often there is not any particular reason for it to happen. Stuff happens! It is another “disease of civilization” with much higher incidence rates in the developed world. Thirty years ago, appendicitis in this country meant a couple of weeks in hospital. Even now rapid diagnosis is essential as delays can cause increased rates of appendix perforation and thus higher levels of mortality. In 2013, it resulted in more than 70,000 deaths around the world.

It is funny because I do prioritise health of gut. I know how important gut health is to our immune system. I know that over 95% of serotonin (a ‘feel good’ hormone) is made and stored in the enteric nervous system. This is the essential nervous system of the gastrointestinal tract. The tract runs from mouth to anus and includes the stomach and the intestines. It has more than 100 million nerve cell bodies (neurons) which is more than the spinal cord and it is in constant communication with the brain (via the vagus nerve). For every one signal that the brain is sending to the gut, nine are being sent from the gut to the brain.

There are increasingly common descriptions such as ‘the belly brain’ or ‘the gut brain’ and it is widely accepted how vital this area is to our emotional states. In Chinese, there is a word for belly that also means “mind palace” - and in Japanese culture, there is *hara*. This means “belly” and can represent mind, heart, vitality, power and the seat of understanding.

I have been vegetarian for more than thirty years. Gut issues and illnesses are higher amongst those who eat meat. I drink a good amount of water every day. I

have a daily glass of kefir. In my own practice, I do a lot of *vajrasana* (sitting on heels) – this is helpful for the stomach energetic channel and the *manipura* chakra. And when I am doing *baddha padmasana* (bound lotus) I visualise my heels massaging my intestines. And yet of course things happen.

I know of a yoga teacher who was thrown from a horse, badly breaking her wrist. Another one having a serious bicycle accident. And I know plenty of people with cancer diagnoses and there have been deaths. This is the stream of life with beings continually stepping in and out of its flows.

There is ongoing debate about the appendix's function. For a long time in the West, it was regarded as "a useless evolutionary artifact" but recently that established opinion has been questioned. Some researchers argue that in fact the appendix is a safe haven where good bacteria can stay until they are needed to repopulate the gut after, for example, a severe case of diarrhea.

Whatever: I was now wrapped in the wonderful care of the NHS. The rupturing of appendix had less effect because of my partner. This is a great lesson in the importance of relationship. In these hyper-individualistic days, we too easily avoid how incredibly important relationships actually are. We like to pretend that we are each an island of individual and that we can do it all on our own. The reality is that we are interconnecting and interdependent – and this 'sangha' (or community or net or web) is what sustains us.

An illustration of that is another teacher straightaway stepping in and covering for the week that I was due to teach in Crete. We all need support, we all need helping hands. Another example is the NHS. Too often taken for granted, too often neglected, obviously there can be criticisms. But to have a health care system that is free and available is so valuable – and in these times of austerity and privatising, it is under significant assault. If we let it be further diminished, one day it could be too late.

## **TWO NIGHTS AND THREE DAYS**

After two nights and three days, I was out of hospital. Fortunately the operation had been done with keyhole surgery. Back home, minus appendix and feeling weak and wounded, I was also full of appreciation. Appreciating my partner, appreciating modern medicine (like that keyhole surgery), appreciating this body, appreciating sights and sounds and scents of life. Everything was greatly slowed down. I could only walk slowly and gently, not as upright as usual. Experiencing many bodily discomforts, my mantra became "I accept this discomfort and I do my best to deal with it". A different version of this is from Louise Hay: "I am safe, I relax and let life flow joyously."

Just this acknowledgement of acceptance was easing for the discomforts – strong sensations of body contracting, the abdomen recovering after that trauma of surgery, difficulties around basic bodily functions. The truth is that regularly we make things much harder for ourselves. Often the emotions and the thoughts that we attach to discomforts actually make the discomfort much worse. When I was able to stay with the tangible sensations of discomfort – it could also be

called 'pain' – and just lessen the thinking around that, then it became more bearable. In the past, I all too readily slid into that 'woeful me' mentality. Maybe the raindrops of practicing have softened that hard ground and helped me to see that there are other possible ways of responding to difficulties.

It was a bit like being on an intense retreat. Certainly the walking resembled that of the meditative slow stepping rather than London striding. Eating small amounts, acute awareness of sensations from food entering body. The breath was fairly shallow as deeper breathing caused considerable discomfort. I could not yawn, I could not sneeze, laughter was uncomfortable. My sense of self shrunk significantly. I became much more amenable to what was around me and I was relaxing habits of outcome. That things have to be done in a certain particular way. This felt good. So much of the time I have so many opinions. To be less opinionated felt freer. Another slight shifting in the sarsens of statements and self-identifying. A lessening of expectations and a greater relaxing into just being this, just as it is. Maybe in these places, I was experiencing distant glimpses of the famous Zen instruction: "a mind that is soft and flexible".

And slowly, slowly, slowly the body puts itself back together again. In this putting back together, I am conscious of the body becoming stronger; by day nine, I was able to go out for a short walk on my own. Each morning after I got back from hospital, I did a brief meditation and some restorative postures. Forget about the ashtanga sequences – my most advanced pose was legs up the wall.

But there is not a smooth curve of becoming better. Two weeks after the operation, I woke up in the morning experiencing such sharp stabbing-style sensations in my right chest that breathing was severely challenged. My partner calls the paramedics – once again in the face of my resistance as I seem to prioritise ego over life! I am carted off to hospital (this time in an ambulance with lights flashing). There was concern that it could be a blood clot. After tests and another CT scan, it was decided that this particular discomfort was more about irritation/inflammation of lung covering probably as a consequence of the appendicitis. I was back on the painkillers.

## **INSIGHTS**

There have been valuable insights from this situation. What I am doing with my life and how can I be ensuring sustainability? What is important? I want to bless my appendix for giving me these insights. How could I continue teaching that workshop even after I had thrown up? How stuck was I in that role of teacher and that the show must go on? How much do I complain about doing too much, how much do I tell other people to do less? We can easily be caught up in the swings of sorting out, breaking ourselves on the wheels of seeming ideals, becoming cogs that continue because that is what cogs do: a carrying on of movement. At times, I have felt like Sisyphus pushing that boulder endlessly up the mountain.

I had known this for more than a few months. I knew that much of what I have written in the last year is "yes, please come to class". I need to look clearly and

closely at what I am doing. Too frequently we are these moorhens: seemingly serene on the surface of life but beneath the water, paddling desperately to stay afloat. Instead, we can learn from the geese: by flying collectively, this increases their efficiency by 70%. If a goose has to go down to the ground, then it is accompanied by another one. No goose is left on its own.

We can work together. We can help each other. Calling for assistance is not a sign of 'failure'; it shows that we are fallible human beings. And in our fallibility, there is the beauty of this being. How easily do we take all this for granted, continuing as though everything will be fine. And yes, everything is fine in its own way – and also anything can happen and some things that happen are traumatic and tragic. Things do happen and the key is: how are we relating to what is happening? Could we perhaps – as a simple example – become more able to perceive emotions as a bundle of thoughts plus a few physical sensations rather than being dominated by the dramas? One formula that has been of value to me is the pause and the relax – so there can be opening and softening. It is like a tender puncturing of my cocoon, a dream punctuation that clarion calls greater alertness to now.

There are other ways of embedding sensations of well-being. Like what we are eating, encouraging gratitude for these gardens of abundance, properly resting and relaxing, exercising, breathing steadily, spending quality time with good friends, acknowledging that we are human – that mistakes are made, that things which are unpredictable and outside of control happen. These can be paths towards a being happier and being more harmonious.

And life does rolls on. This life. This body. It requires immense effort to be breaking free of our sleepy patterns. To consciously see all that there is to be seen. To appreciate the webbing of this existence, the relationships that maintain and sustain. And sometimes what we need is a loving tap on the shoulder. A smiling hand that reminds us about this joy of life. For time is limited. It is uncertain what and when what will happen. Breathing, feeling, releasing, softening ... this can be a way for us to better be, this can be a way for us to be waking up and more fully connecting to all that is.

Norman Blair

[www.yogawithnorman.co.uk](http://www.yogawithnorman.co.uk)

20 August 2015

Thank you to the NHS; thank you to Maitripushpa for her wonderful caring (and also skillful editing); thank you to the teachers and the sangha on this path.