

Lessons from my big toe, plus some

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A yoga teacher and practitioner gets detailed instructions from her guru—directions that inevitably apply to everyday life

LINES, CIRCLES, ANGLES and spaces—the geometry of the yogic spiritual path is often described in linear terms as a road, a journey giving us a visual image of distance, length, curves, bends, gradual ascents, sharp descents and flat planes.

Less frequently, though, is the idea of a circular spiritual path ever mentioned. This is what I learned from my Guruji, my teacher BKS Iyengar, one hot mid-morning last March, as he called my attention to “circularize” the heel of the palm of my hand in the pose Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog).

It was my annual visit to learn at my teacher’s feet in Pune, India, and he would often interrupt the students in the institute’s large practice hall to give pointers or render instruction.

So here I was doing my Adho Mukha Savanasana when I heard his voice directly above me say, “Rinah, circularize your palm... ha! What do you feel? Is there a break in the energy now?”

I have heard that instruction many times before for other poses, intellectualizing it but never actually feeling it. But this time, it was different.

It felt as if the heel of my hand, rooted firmly on the floor, did not only broaden, but transmitted the idea of wholeness to the rest of my body. Iyengar yoga teachers speak often about “grounding” yourself to Mother Earth, and even the seemingly basic concept of standing up straight gains a whole new meaning in this practice.

I thought about the notion of circles for many days. I keep bumping into circles all around me. Healthy cells are circular, the ripples of a pebble splashing into water are circular, atoms are circular, planets and stars are circular, even the abdomen of a pregnant woman is circular. Full stops are circular.

I started to think about life and this journey as being circular, as opposed to linear. Where did it really begin, in this life or the last one? If within this one, then at what exact point?

And, as if on cue, just when one thinks one’s learning is complete, it begins all over again—only this time, with more clarity, less angst and more compassion than one thought possible. Like a ripple in the water, each time broadening, widening, covering more surface and space.

Circle of life

Spiritually speaking, circles and spirals are not unfamiliar to us. Disney, through its feature film “Lion King,” introduced us gently at an early stage of life to “the circle of life.”

As Christians, we have faith that hinges on the belief that Jesus died for our sins so that we may be born again. So when I came across the Hindu belief of Moksha (freedom from the cycles of life and death), it was not

remote.

It made me curious. I looked at science. There's the "Golden Ratio," which had within it the Golden Spiral. Great artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, the mathematicians Pythagoras and Euclid, musicians, even architects of the Parthenon, used it as a means for creating symmetry, proportion, balance.

Researching further, I came across Adolf Zeising who, in 1854, wrote: "The Golden Ratio is a universal law in which is contained the ground principle of all formative striving for beauty and completeness in the realms of both nature and art, and which permeates, as a paramount spiritual ideal, all structures, forms and proportions, whether cosmic or individual, organic or inorganic, acoustic or optical; which finds its fullest realization, however, in the human form."

It was all I needed to know that circles as well as lines were definitely part of the anatomy of a spiritual life.

Balance and anchor

With these thoughts, I ventured back to the mat and started with Utthita Trikonasana (Triangle). Pressing the ball of my big toe brought me back to the bull's-eye of this circular exploration. Contact of the rounded mound below my big toe allowed me to balance, and created an anchor from which I could extend and expand the base of my foot all the way to my entire leg, hips, torso, arms and head.

This ball below my big toe, small as it is in comparison to the rest of my body, gave me equilibrium from which I could work the rest of my body with more intelligence and awareness.

I have come to accept and embrace this circular yogic journey. After practising yoga for some 10 years now, I've become a little more aware that each new opening, each new high, can come with a deeper new low that keeps the ego in check.

At times it may even feel as if one is starting all over again. Yet the fear of the fall can be addressed as one builds up inner strength during the discipline of practice.

In the process of molding the body, we can broaden the consciousness and illuminate the conscience—a conscience often numbed by our current circumstances and the stress of modern daily life.

This light given us by our practice enables and empowers us to listen to our conscience and act upon it. Like a child's game of connect-the-dots, conscious—connected acts learned on the mat create a momentum of will, discipline and insight that can be integrated into our daily life, until our entire day becomes the practice of yoga.

And that much I have learned from my big toe.

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