

# Soften into Intensity

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YOGA CHANGES US INDIVIDUALLY and collectively. It may not be right away, but it is a practice of self reflection, discovery and growth that brings us closer to who we are.

It is a journey of great courage, and it requires softening, strengthening and letting go.

We step onto the mat with everything we are; past, present, future, the to-do lists, anxieties and insecurities. On top of all that, we morph our bodies into these crazy shapes. There are lots of layers to unravel and discover.

We start to create a union with ourselves, looking in rather than out. We start asking new questions, feeling new parts of our bodies, and touching parts of our souls we never even knew existed.

So how do we work with, rather than against, the shift taking place? How do you treat the person you face day in and day out? The relationship we have with ourselves is the most important, and is the most difficult. While we may love to point fingers at partners, colleagues, friends, and family, the truth is we must look deep within our own hearts at the relationship we have with ourselves.

For many years my practice was filled with intense struggle. Why can't I do this or that pose? Before I knew it, my jaw clenched, my breath was short and I was struggling at the edge of every posture.

Looking back, these were elements of internal struggle, too much effort and not enough letting go. I finally took the advice of some amazing teachers to work compassionately and patiently with myself.

This was the first time I actually felt what it is to soften into the intensity. I became my own ally in the practice; and pretty soon my jaw relaxed, my breath deepened and my practice became somewhat struggle-free and more enjoyable.

I'm not saying it's easy, and I'm still constantly challenged. But creating a space to allow the intensity to flow, and create softness around it, rather than hardening is what helped me become present to the experience taking place.

Life is about staying open to the experiences we like and dislike. I never quite realised this until I had to deal with death on a personal level. The overwhelming emotions of losing someone close to you shine some of life's most valuable lessons.

It was the loss of my father two years ago that taught me this; my first reaction was seclusion, shutting down, and ignoring the experience. Not until much later did I realise to live and heal, I would have to soften into the intensity of this experience. For me, it was a matter of softening into intense grief and sorrow, holding the space and breathing into it, allowing the feelings to flow rather than shutting down. Only then did I move towards healing and life.

Being present just takes stopping for a moment and taking the time and space to feel.

Many yoga teachers talk about experiences on the mat being parallel to those off the mat. This is true if we are willing to feel in our practice and daily life, work compassionately with ourselves and move our focus inside. This takes a conscious relaxation and letting go. We really can't realise the parallels on and off the mat if we aren't conscious and present to what is going on. If we are jumping from thought to thought, working unconsciously in daily

life or on the mat, it's difficult to see what's really taking place before us and within us.

Conscious relaxation and letting go can be one of life's most challenging experiences. But the experience is worth the challenge.

When we are focused on looking inside - be still, quiet, and relax into the present moment of a pose or life challenge - we may not like what we see or feel.

Nevertheless the focus is about being present to exactly what is in front of us and inside of us. If we soften into life's intense moments whether joy, sorrow, worry, or laughter, then we can work compassionately with ourselves and ultimately with others.



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