

yoga perspectives

finding balance & resolution

by Mia Forbes Pirie

PART 9



“Real change and balance come from making small but consistent changes and building on our successes.”

New Year, New You? But, how do you avoid tripping up in the same places as last year? Simple. By being resolved and finding balance – or at least searching for it! The strange thing about balance is that it is always moving, never fixed. So the secret is to hover closer and closer to a balance point and always be open to change.

Physical balance equals mental balance. So, focusing on balance in Yoga postures will help to develop the stability and resolution to achieve the heart's desires during the New Year.

setting appropriate goals and resolutions

The New Year is a time for making resolutions. After the excesses of the festive season, people often feel the desire to compensate. But we must be careful not to aim too high or over-promise lest we get disappointed and give up altogether. Ambitious resolutions are often not followed through and by February or March people are back normal, feeling that they have let themselves down.

Breaking promises to ourselves has more serious consequences than most people realise and is worse than not making any promises at all. Caroline Myss Ph.D, medical intuitive, explains if people negotiate even to themselves, they are chipping away at the strength and endurance that it takes to develop a strong and honourable spirit. She believes that breaking promises to oneself is the cause of many people's depression and inability to love themselves.

Real change and balance come from making small but consistent changes and building on our successes. When you are making resolutions this year, ask yourself, how sustainable they are. Set realistic achievable goals – even smaller goals than you think you can achieve – in order to build strength, resolve and self-esteem and in the long term achieve far more than you thought possible. Allow yourself to succeed and build on your own success.

Building good habits towards your long-term goal is more important than pushing yourself hard in the beginning and risking burning out or becoming discouraged. Even if you achieve your goal in the short-term you are unlikely to be able to maintain it unless you have built the habits to support it. There is a balance to be struck between strong discipline and gentle loving kindness. Both are important.

Discipline: 'Please Stay on the Path'!

Recently, I attended a 3 day silent Vipassana meditation course (silent, with the exception of the possibility of one conversation a day with the teacher). The first day, feeling unwell, I had trouble focussing. At one point, we were meant to simply observe the sensations in the area between our upper lip and our nose but thoughts kept entering my mind and distracting me. I became frustrated. Sharing my concerns with the teacher, I explained the solution I had found. I could observe the thoughts and if I did that, they went away, allowing me to return to focussing on the area I was supposed to be focussing on! I asked the teacher what he thought of its merits. Smiling, he told me that it was 'a' practice but not 'the' practice. He suggested that I should keep returning to the technique and allow the thoughts to continue to be in the background.

Later that day, I went for a walk. Just off the path at the meditation centre was a sign. It read: 'Please Stay on the Path'. I walked the track a few times and, each time I saw this sign, I began to smile and laugh softly to myself. That sign and the teacher's words reminded me how easy it is to get side-tracked with colourful thoughts, pains and feelings. Perhaps our greatest challenge every day is to keep our eyes on the ball and avoid being distracted. The practice of Yoga and meditation, balance and resolution, and any other practice that leads us to balance – mental and physical – demands that we maintain our resolution. In order to stay balanced, we must maintain our focus and, with judicious, gentle and loving discipline, we must remind ourselves to 'Please Stay on the Path'.

During my next meditation, with great discipline, I kept returning to the technique. The path was cleared, and eventually, I settled and became peaceful and balanced.

control, is our primary means of controlling balance, explains David Gorman, Alexander Technique, Learning Methods and balance expert. The 'contact' sense, ie the sensation of contact with our supporting surface, is one of the 5 main inputs to our balance and co-ordination mechanisms. David teaches a workshop called 'Standing on Top of the World'. He shares with us an exercise in learning physical balance which can be used in our Yoga practices and out on the street (See practice: Learning Balance)

Balancing on one foot is based on the same principles as balancing on both feet. Although the smaller the surface area touching the floor, the more important concentration becomes. In any posture standing on one leg, make the foundation leg the main focus and priority. Make sure you press into the 3 key points in the foot (base of the big toe, base of the little toe and heel) and that the pressure is evenly distributed across the foot. Make sure the leg is strong and focus



finding physical balance

Samasthiti, Mountain pose or *Tadasana* as it is also called, is often considered the most basic posture. After all, it merely involves standing on a mat. Undertaken correctly, with proper awareness, it is the foundation for all of the other standing poses and the place where we can safely learn strength and balance which will serve us for all postures.

In the 'Yoga Matrix', Richard Freeman, Yoga and Philosophy expert, explains that some of the basic Yoga practices reveal the profound process of Yoga: the process of observation and constant readjustment which can reveal all of our patterns and assist us in the realisation of constant change and impermanence.

Samasthiti is one of these. It involves standing with your feet together and tuning in to the central axis of the body. 'Sama' means equal and so, eventually, we end up with the weight distributed equally across the roots of the toes and between the 2 heels. Freeman compares Samasthiti to standing on top of a flag pole! Just to maintain the pose, you have to pay close attention, but the attention has to be very intelligent or flexible because we start to sway off the central axis and automatically the body and the mind begin to create a compensatory pattern which generally becomes an overcompensation.

The sensitivity inherent in the feet and toes, plus the fine motor

on your gaze point. I sometimes like to imagine a white light shining through it which helps intensify my focus. Once you are set up, all you need is discipline and perseverance.

All Yoga practices teach you discipline and balance. Maty Ezraty (Iyengar and Ashtanga expert) explains that in Iyengar Yoga, the alignment principles of Tadasana/Samasthiti should be taught and reviewed before teaching almost any other posture. This helps us see how they live in every pose. Fine-tuning and refining our understanding of the pose will lead to a healthy Yoga practice. In the Ashtanga method, alignment usually is not emphasised as much. We use the time in Samasthiti to come to attention and bring our awareness to our breath, coming back to our centre. Although Yin Yoga does not contain any standing postures, Yin and its longer held poses teach you to 'stay' and persevere gently when the going gets tough.

Stay focused, but do not lose your sense of humour! Happy New Year! I wish you great resolve, compassion and a lot of fun playing with balance!

In 2011, the Yoga Perspectives Series will continue on a bi-monthly basis. Mia has recently launched a new website www.WordsUnite.org, which complements her current website www.SustainYourself.co.uk. She would greatly appreciate your feedback and there is a chance to win a FREE coaching session.

learning balance

by David Gorman, Alexander Technique and Balance Expert

Come to standing and notice where the contact is between you and the floor. Is it more to the front of your feet, more to the back of your feet, or more to one side than the other? If you are not sure, move slightly backwards or forwards or sideways, so that you can feel the contact change. If you are like the majority of people, in your normal standing position, you will have more contact with the front or maybe more contact with the back and, additionally, maybe more to one side than the other. If so, then you are standing somewhat out of support ... not falling, of course, but enough to be forcing your system into various reactions to support you.

To see what this means, adjust your standing so that you have an even distribution of contact (near as you can tell), that is as much contact to the front as you have to the back and as much on one foot as you have on the other. Now give yourself about half a minute to let your system adjust and for you to notice what this feels like.

Now lean a little bit backwards, just enough that you can feel the contact shift back on your feet. And as you move backwards see if you notice anything else happen within you. If you do not notice much, come back to the even distribution of contact and then go back a little bit more, noticing what happens within you as you go back. You will probably have noticed one or more things. The most common is a grabbing and tightening in the thighs just above the knees. If you want to directly experience what this tightening reaction is doing for you, just do the exploration again but ask that tightening not to happen (ie stop it from occurring). If you succeed, you will notice that you begin to fall over just as soon as you start moving back.

Depending on your postural habits, you may also notice a tightening around your abdomen, or interference with your breathing. These will be more apparent if you make the exploration again but this time go back a little further. If you go even further back you will notice your arms reach out forward to 'save' your balance, and your whole middle thrust forward as a compensation.

The point here is not the specific things that happen but rather that as soon as you go the slightest bit off that even distribution of contact, your system automatically jumps in with some sort of holding, tightening, distorting compensation to protect you from falling over. There is no way to avoid this.

Try the same thing by returning to the even distribution of contact and going forward a little bit, then a bit more, and then even more, and you will find the same sorts of automatic balance reactions occurring but in the opposite direction.

In other words, what started off being called an 'even distribution of contact' is really your 'centre of support'. Luckily for you, it is simply and consciously available at any time.

With these and other simple balance 'experiments', you should be able to directly sense the strain and forces that are added when you operate out of support (and the ease when you are centred). Even in simple bending or standing from a chair, out of support movement can add up to 1,000 lbs of force on the lower spine or hip joints. Imagine what can happen to some Yoga uncentred poses!

So, if you want to be as free and flexible as possible, it is well worth playing around with this, noticing how often you use yourself 'out of support' in any of the movements of your daily life and in your Yoga practice, and how big a difference it makes when you take a moment to come back into a centred support.

If you want to try further explorations from David Gormley's 'Standing on Top of the World', visit: <http://bit.ly/iaDOEG>.