

Down, Dog!

How yoga tamed one man's baser instincts.

By Michael A. Stusser

THE ONLY OTHER GUY who ever comes to my noon yoga class is a gentle, long-limbed, jazz-playing family therapist named Paul. Paul doesn't realize it, but I really detest him. Why? Because his handstand is far better than mine. Petty perhaps. But I just can't help myself.

I know yoga is not a competition. If anything, it's a battle of wills: my own mannish ego against the better half of me. Perhaps it's some inherent competitive spirit that's messing me up, the all-American "need to succeed"—part Horatio Alger, part Terminator, part "Go for the Gold!"

My patient yoga instructor of 14 years, Dawn Jansen, does her best to convey the principles of non-attachment and grace to my overly competitive mind. She understands my weaknesses—both physical and psychological—calling them "limitations," probably so as not to hurt my delicate feelings. "Yoga is indifferent to moods," she says. "So, when you feel competitive or angry or self-critical, become aware of your ten-

dency and bring yourself back."

I think it's hard sometimes for men like me to separate the testosterone from the tantric. We get embarrassed doing Oms or mudras of any kind, would rather die than do happy baby pose, and especially dislike it when a teacher tells us to "make sure not to place the strap over the bra strap area." And speaking of straps, I have hairy legs. Why is that relevant, you ask? You try pulling a yoga strap across your furry shin with maximum force in fire log pose and see where your mind takes you.

Don't get me wrong: It's not only Paul's practice I'm envious of. There are plenty of perfectly posed women in class whom I'm also at war with. I see a student seamlessly flow from squat (I

can do that) to crow (I can sort of do that) to side crow (I cannot do that), and I want to give her a little nudge, toppling her onto the next person doing some bind I *also* cannot do.

If truth be told, it's not even just people who annoy me—I can't stand all the props used in yoga. I don't need no stinkin' bolsters; straps are for sissies. Blocks? For blockheads, maybe. And eye pillows? Puh-lease. Well, OK, I actually love the lavender-scented ones. Even the term "prop" implies needing to be propped up somehow—clearly a sign of weakness. When it comes to props, I'm a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps kinda guy.

"Seriously. *Look* at that guy!" I moan, staring at some lean stud on a poster for an upcoming celeb-yogi workshop. "He makes my warrior look like Sméagol from *Lord of the Rings*!"

Dawn smiles and lets me in on an obvious secret: mastering a pose—the picture perfect shot in a magazine—isn't the goal. "You're striving for something outside of yourself: that guy's warrior, Paul's handstand. The reality is that everything we need we already have."

OK, then, forget mastery: "Why can't I even do a basic jump back into *chaturanga*?" I ask for the umpteenth time. Dawn patiently reframes the no-



tion. My goal, she suggests, should not be to leap into a pose I do not currently have the strength for (ouch!). “Next week we’ll concentrate on your core, and then we’ll fine-tune your balance in the pose, too,” she says. “Eventually you’ll jump from down dog into handstand and then float your legs down into chaturanga!” Ever the show-off, she demonstrates this new notion, either to tick me off, or more

the happiness of others? Is it a form of attachment or aversion or grasping at something outside of yourself? Is it about goal setting or achievement? Whatever the reason, they’re outside influences, taking you away from your enlightenment practice.”

Recently I’ve found peace in my non-pure state of being. Dawn’s been working with me on the concept of equa-

RECENTLY I’VE FOUND PEACE IN MY NON-PURE STATE OF BEING. I CAN RECOGNIZE MY DESIRE TO COMPETE OR JUDGE AND LET IT PASS.

likely to allow me to visualize the pose in its ultimate expression.

Yoga, it turns out, has a bunch of teachings—beyond just stretches—that pertain to me, and my teacher is slowly but surely pulling me deeper into Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* planet, nudging me toward concepts like *ahimsa* (non-violence—lucky for Paul), *saucha* (purity), and *santosha* (contentment).

Dawn mentioned the Buddhist concept of “hindrances” in class the other day—restless worry, anger, doubt, and desire—all states of mind that fall into my competitive pattern of distraction. She encourages us to name our thought-flashes (my desire to wrestle a bull or Paul, for example) and then let them go on their merry way. “All these practices we’ve been working on,” Dawn repeats in her calming tone, “your asanas, your focus, your meditation, your returning to the breath, all allow you to gain control of your mind. They are designed to eliminate distractions and achieve enlightenment.” If patience is a virtue, this woman’s endurance of my persistent and restless worry must have her nearing sainthood.

“When you’re staring at Paul’s forearm balance,” Dawn tells me, “ask yourself why. Is it because you’re indulging in jealousy and not taking delight in

nimity (not to mention stretching my hamstrings): an exalted mind without ill will or hostility toward myself or others. I can recognize my desire to compete or judge and let it pass, fixating on an inner mantra—and the aching in my low back, kidneys, hips, and pelvis. “Remember, yoga’s about *self*-study,” Dawn bellows from the back of class, after catching me glaring at the perfect warrior 2 being demonstrated in front of me. “If you find yourself being sucked into someone else’s practice or the outfit they’re wearing, sense it, then move back inward—toward the seer. You’re self-contained; you don’t need anything from anyone else. Abide in your own splendor!”

As my great teacher gently adjusts my twist, I concentrate not on yesterday’s twist, or the woman’s twist in front of me, or Iyengar’s theory on twisting, but on lowering my shoulders from around my neck. And breathing.

I saw Paul in class the other day and smiled at the sweating, focused man practicing beside me. “Your handstand’s awesome, Paul. You’re lookin’ strong.”

Progress. Or, should I say, evolution... ■

Michael A. Stusser’s work frequently appears in Mental Floss magazine, the Seattle Weekly, and Shambhala Sun. Visit michaelstusser.com.