

Fred and Ginger and the Dance of Life

There it was, a complete box set of ten Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movies. I can always depend on Costco to bring something to me that I didn't know I wanted. Every trip there is like Christmas morning. "What will be under the tree for me today?"

At last night's yoga class, I played one of the dance scenes from Top Hat, and I told the class that yoga is learning to dance like that, only our partner is life. We all want to be in step with life and to hear the divine music of being alive. We all want to be balanced, light on our feet, and full of grace, so that whatever we are doing we create no burden, no heaviness, and certainly no stress. There is absolutely no stress or tension in the dancing of Fred and Ginger. Stress is being out of step with life.

The goal of yoga in its full practice is to be like Fred and Ginger in life. This is called the action in no-action. We pay money to see this dance as it occurs in other forms; sports, music, acting, any activity by a master of that particular form. When Michael Jackson rose to the basket, it seemed so effortless, like he was flying. When the Marx Brothers broke free of their script, they were magic. When an actor wins the oscar, it is because we couldn't see the actor in the character he played. When the athlete wins the gold, it is because he danced the sport better than anyone else.

In the dance of life we become the action, and the sense of our doing something vanishes. The master, in whatever form, always feels that the art or the craft or the sport is doing him.

When Fred and Ginger dance, the dance is doing them. There is total surrender to the music. The masters of their craft are in a state of no-thought. This is a state of perfection. One cannot be a master and think about what one is going to do next. One just does it.

So this is what yoga means by the action in non-action. The non-action is the surrender of one's will to act for a fruit or desired object, and the action is the pure action of life itself that replaces the action of the individual self. In the dance, there is no sense of "me." In the perfect action of the master, there is no self...there is only action.

When we lose ourselves, only the dance remains.

Creating a hole in time

The sign on the door to our yoga room says “Leave your shoes and worries here.” I remember a sign like that at the yoga house we went to in Cleveland, and I learned there to practice the meaning behind the sign.

When you leave your worries at the door, you are leaving your problematic mind with its story of me along with your shoes. Also, having bare feet is symbolic of being in touch with the earth and our being. In the East one worships the “feet of the lord,” and the master’s feet are sacred objects to the devotee. Even Jesus washed the feet of his disciples as an act of worship. Shoes and worries are covers over the soul.

My intent with my yoga classes is to allow a space or hole in time where we can be in the present moment to arise. The mind can’t create a hole in time, because the mind operated within the structure of time. Just observe how the mind cannot operate without future. Whatever you try to do or try to avoid requires time. Desire is time. Will is time. One is trying to get from here to there, which is a place in the world of through, not in the present moment, which is always here.

Yoga reminds me of ice fishing where a single hole is prepared in a field of ice, and the fisherman hovers over this hole because it is the only place where life can be present. The fisherman meditates on this hole in time in hopes of catching the fish of life. But even hope is a function of time. When one is here, one is not hoping for anything else to happen.

It is a strange, almost impossible concept, this “present moment.” And that is because we try to think about what it is. This is not unlike having an apple described to you. After all the description, would you know the apple? Only a good bite would tell you what the apple is, and then try to describe what the sound and the taste of the apple is. You can’t do it. Neither can one describe the present moment. One can only be the present moment by allowing thought and its world of time to dissolve. We do this in yoga through a gentle shift in awareness from being in thought to being in the body posture.

Entering into a hole in time is to do absolutely nothing.

No more packaging

Yoga as it moves into the main stream of American culture is going through a typical American process of specialization and packaging. The danger of this process, which is a human mind process and not necessarily a cultural one, is that teaching get watered down to a weak soup that has no nutritional value left. Each time a new package is created, a little water is added to the soup. The water in this case is the packaging of yoga as an exercise routine that can be a substitute for aerobics or some other physical work out.

Yoga is a 5000 year-old science and psychology that guides the human soul from a mind dominate egoic self to the full flowering of human consciousness, which is the realization of the unity of all creation and absolute consciousness. The name of this Self comes in many packages; God, Over Soul, Eternity, The Present Moment, Peace, Stillness, Christ Consciousness, Nirvana, Buddha mind, and so on. The mind wants to make truth safe by packaging it into a box of familiar concepts we can then call a belief system. Then, we can know the truth by just believing in the package. And to feel even better about ourselves, we join groups that believe in the same package. And to feel even a stronger sense of self, we create enemies to defend our packages from their packages. A good fight always makes one's own package seem bigger and better.

But the fact is, the goal of yoga and all the other wisdom teachings and major religions, is to arrive at a place where there is no more packaging—where there is no dominating mind, even. Christianity in its essence is the wisdom teaching of Jesus. Religion has become its package, and now we are hard put to find anything but the package.

When we arrive at truth, or God, there is just stillness and no thought. What is allowed to arise in that stillness is an unknown and cannot be packaged by thought. Beauty, insight, love, peace, these are not thoughts. Thought cannot know truth anymore than thought can know the moon. Thought is a package designed by our mind to enhance our sense of self. Thought is the voice of “little me” and all the thoughts of little me are just the words to write the continuing story of who we think we are.

So the practice of yoga in its essence is like the flight of the moth to the candle. The little me is attracted to the light of consciousness, which is the source of its own light, and at some moment just flies into the light and become that light. Where once the little me thought it was an ugly moth, now it doesn't think about itself at all. Light just knows it is light. Light doesn't have to defend its lightness or define itself, or try to become something other than what it is. Light just is.

This is why the practice of yoga in its full teaching makes us feel lightness in our body, and why our mind no longer feels like a heavy pack full of burdens.

Yoga is like Christmas morning when all we want to do is rip off the packaging that keeps us from experiencing the gift of life.

The Not in the garden

Whenever I run my garden hose to the pond to replace the water that has evaporated, invariably the water won't flow and I have to follow the hose back to its source and remove the kink or knot that has blocked the water. Who hasn't had that experience? It's no big deal. One understands kinks in the hose, and one just finds them and removes them. Nothing personal. No tragedy here. "Oh, there's the knot." and we give the hose a yank and the water is free.

Looking at our life from the perspective of watering the garden with a hose, we can see the analogy. The world is our garden, and we are always watering it with our consciousness and trying to make something grow or happen. But many times the desires we water don't grow and we get weeds, some with thorns. We call this stress when we experience our world as being "uncooperative." Stress can run from mildly irritating to catastrophic.

But on examination, we see that stress is not caused by the world, anymore than the loss of water in the hose is caused by the garden. We would think a person mad if he said the garden made his hose run dry. But that is exactly what we do when it comes to our world. We don't look within to notice the kink in our hose, so we try to change the garden to release our stress. Stress is what we experience when our consciousness gets tied up in a knot. Stress is resistance to life.

The practice of yoga and other wisdom teachings show us that the knot we are tied up in comes from our personal sense of self, our ego, which demands by its very nature that it stand against the world. "What about me?" says the ego, and the water of life begins to slow. On close inquiry, we see that our ego with its story of Me is the knot. Ironically, the stronger the stress and the greater the conflict, the stronger the sense of personal self grows.

When we let go of our personal perspective, our knots, if you will, and say Yes instead of No to a situation, we discover that the situation becomes fluid and unties itself without any effort. Whatever we water grows, and we discover that we are our world. The gardener is the garden.

The knot never existed at all. It was just a Not in our mind.

Shall we dance?

The dance of life has been in my thoughts lately, and that brought back the movie we watched last year called *Shall We Dance* with Richard Gere. For those who haven't seen it, I'll proceed to wreck it for you.

The story goes this way. A man sits on a train every day coming home from work, bored and empty in a life that has no meaning, and he sees a woman at the window of a dance studio. He begins to look forward to seeing her as he passes each evening. She is a dance teacher. Finally, the pull is too much and he signs up for a dance lesson. "Teach me to dance," he says. And she does. He become totally captivated with learning to dance. Finally, he wins a ball room dance contest.

His wife, however, thinks he is having an affair, and sneaks into the dance contest to see for herself. She discovers that he now loves her all the more because he has learned how to...dance with life.

This movie blueprints the universal path of the hero: the spiritual seeker whose world has become a wasteland. He knows that something wonderful and frightening is beyond his horizon. One day there is an encounter with an unknown figure who beckons to his soul. The movies are full of these gate keepers who call us to adventure. These beings come to us from the other side to teach us the secrets of life. They can be of the opposite sex, an old man, an alien, nature, a trip, even a movie...anything the mind can imagine. But their function is always the same; they teach us to dance.

Dance lessons are basically the same. First you become aware of your awkward postures and you feel like you have cinder blocks for feet. You overcome this discomfort, and surrender to the instruction, which shows you how to let go of your attachments and follow life's lead. As you begin to follow the music, your joy increases. This is great!

Finally, the teacher steps away and you are on your own. She can teach you no more. You embrace life and waltz away. Whenever life moves, you move in harmony with her. You lead life and life leads you. There is no more separation. There is just the music.

When you return to your old world, it is not old anymore. Everything is fresh and full of possibility. The music is still going, and others begin wanting to learn how to dance. Wherever you go life is dancing, so you are never without a partner. You can go to Wal-Mart, to work, anywhere, and the music is there and you move with it. Life is not just in the dance studio, it is everywhere, you discover.

And everywhere there are people who want to become conscious of the music, to let go of their inhibitions, to step out of their frozen postures, and be free.

We are all Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, but we just don't believe it.

We're all on Star Trek

(Letter to a mail carrier during the Xmas rush)

Sorry the Xmas rush is taking away your time for yoga class. I hope you will be able to pick up a class after Christmas when all the packages have been delivered and your route settles down for a quiet winter nap. Your presence in the class has been appreciated because you are so aware of your surroundings and what is being presented to you.

Driving a mail route is such a great job, especially for a person who is interested in becoming more aware of life and more conscious of their being in life. The two are the same, being and life. Being is what is, unplugged, unlabeled, not judged, not avoided, but just absolutely accepted as it is. What opportunities you have on your route to explore your being.

As I began this note to you, it turns into thoughts on the depth of a mail route. We are all running our personal mail routes, delivering this or that to this place or that, and we all are pressured by time. "I must get this done in so much time.. I am late.. I have too much to do in this amount of time.. I don't have enough time to deliver it all.." We are all mail carriers during the Xmas rush. This is American life now. With all our time saving technology, we never have enough time. And, ironically, the more time we save, the less we have. There seems to be an inverse logic working here. We have become our own Star Trek episode: a people lost in time.

So, since you can't get to your yoga class (where time seems to stand still), let your yoga class come to you. You don't have to put your body in a posture and sit on a mat to practice yoga. Yoga is much deeper and wider than a mat.

The key to practicing "matless" yoga is the idea of time (and it is only an idea). I guess now I am just speaking to anyone who doesn't have enough time to complete their route. If we take the "time" out of our route, what we have left is being present.

If I shift my attention from the end of the route—the place in time where I am supposed to be—and allow my consciousness to just look at the present moment without labeling it wrong or of no value, we will discover that there is no time. There is just now. And "now" is always okay, because "now" is all there is. Life cannot be anything other than what it is right now. To say "now" is not okay is absurd because life will be what it is whether we say it is okay or not. And in that space of no time, of okayness, we discover that the moment will tell us what to do. We will notice everything, the beautiful colors of the trees, the sounds of the traffic, the infinite variety of changing forms that unfold to our eyes as the route happens to us. We discover that we can actually rest in the midst of a rush hour. We are here while everyone else is...there, trying to get to someplace in their mind called time.

Because our mind is not divided, one eye looking at the road, the other eye looking at the future and getting bloodshot with stress, we discover that we have total energy and consciousness for the moment at hand, and our body feels free to do what it needs to do without the mind getting in the way.

The practice of yoga is the awakening of a wider and deeper awareness of being, the being that we already are. Being doesn't exist in time. Being just is. Time is the avoidance of being because when our awareness is trapped in time, it sees the present moment (which is being) as only a means to the end of the route. The end result of this "time bound mind" is that we are never truly alive, because life is being, and there is no time in life....Life is eternal, and eternal is always...right now.

What posture are you in?

We all know what a physical posture is, and most are unconscious so that others can see them (if they can read postures), but we can't. The most evident one is the crossed arms which means a closed mind.

In the practice of hatha yoga there are hundreds of physical postures, and our practice is to make them totally conscious so that our mind does not waver or run with our thoughts. In a hatha yoga posture, our mind should be as steady as a candle in a windless room. In this way, the practice brings our awareness to full power while letting the thinking mind recede into the background and fall silent.

When we take our practice to our mental postures, we are also learning to make our mental postures conscious so that we become aware of them when we are in them. A good example of a mental posture was revealed to me the other day after an Arlington funeral. It was getting late and, for me, time to head back to Blackstone. But my wife wasn't ready yet, so she said, "Let's wait for the rush hour to end."

While I didn't cross my arms, I began to be aware that I was resisting being in this moment at the family gathering. I wanted to be in the future, driving home so I could keep my plan of how life should be. As I began to burn, my mind tried to find some way to make her leave without starting a fight. I observed this posture of resistance, and in noticing it, I became disengaged from it. While it didn't release right away, it lost its power over me, and I struck up a conversation with my niece, which was one of the best I ever had with her. Suddenly, two hours later, my wife said we had to go. I have forgotten the time. There was a time in my life when I would have spent those two hours with my mental arms crossed and a feeling of separation from everyone there.

What is actually happening when we have a mental posture is that we are putting up resistance to the flow of life, just as if we were putting our hand in a stream of water. Life is flowing against our posture, or our idea of what the present moment should be, and we interpret this resistance as stress. A posture separates us from the world so we feel incomplete and anxious to be somewhere else where we imagine we will be complete.

A posture is a rigid behavior, one that we unconsciously invest our sense of self in. "I'm not going to move," the posture says. And it can't move as long as we are not conscious of it. Mental postures are the cause of all our suffering, just as a poor physical posture will cause our body great pain, and after years of bad posture it is difficult to remember or even get into good posture. Our mental postures have been with us all our life and are not easy to see, unless we know how to look.

We can see a mental posture the same way we can see a physical posture. We just notice how we are standing. Am I leaning? Is my back out of line? We just become aware, and immediately we straighten up. When we notice a posture, we don't use the thinking mind, which will label the posture and then think about the label, usually in self-critical terms. There is no judgment or movement of the mind in noticing a mental posture.

Noticing a mental posture is shifting our attention away from the external source of our irritation and allowing our awareness to have enough space to encompass the whole relationship. We become aware of how we are causing the problem by our posture.

Then we discover that by releasing the posture, we also release the object or person that irritates us from their posture, and the stream of life flows on into an entirely new situation that has arisen in the release of our posture.

We can know when our posture is stopping the flow of life because of the stress we feel. Stress is a sign that we are resisting life, that we are out of step with the dance, and that everything that we are experiencing is a result of our blocking the force of life.

Finding and releasing mental postures should be approached as a game, a play of hide and seek we are having with ourselves. When the posture is not noticed, we are hiding. When the posture is noticed, we are found—because only a self that is free can see the posture that we have been hiding in.

Yoga is the practice of finding ourselves in ourselves.

Your best friend

What is it about the present moment that is so misunderstood? When we think of the present moment, that is just it, we are thinking about the present moment. But in truth, we can't think about now. We can only be now. What a profound difference!

We have many encounters with now, and the mind always says WOW! It's as if we have to experience life through an interpreter, who tells us what just happened and whether we want it to happen again, or whether to avoid it in the future. One experience of NOW and the mind has a lifetime of stories to remember it by.

Another way of looking at this phenomena of human existence is that we have to experience God through the medium of a priest, a church, a sacred document, or a ritual. For most, God is just a belief system. I believe therefore I know.

But what if the present moment—which is all there is and ever will be—was God? Wouldn't that blow our house of mental cards down. What if thinking separated us from the present moment...and God? What if life IS the present moment, and all life were one? What if all life were different levels of consciousness? What if life was bliss, just a peaceful joy in being.

The practice of yoga is the process of suspending the movement of the mind, which is thought, and allowing the present moment to rise in our consciousness AS ourselves. We are the present moment, whether we know it or not. The question is this, do we choose to experience it? Or do we separate ourselves from it, experience suffering, and then pray for salvation from that suffering? Or do we say YES to life and become what is? Are we for our life or against it?

When we say yes to the present moment, we are saying yes to ourselves and who we are this moment. If I am washing the dishes, that is all I am, really. If I am resisting the washing in my mind, thinking about the tv show I'm going to be watching next, then I am not in the present moment or in myself. I am separated from my present whole self by thought into a "me", and if I don't get to watch my tv show, "me" will experience suffering. And while "me" desires the tv show I also experience the suffering of not being fulfilled.

Leaving the present moment and living in my thought, which is psychological time, is what Buddha called suffering. It's what is called original sin in this context—original, not in that it was something done by the first man, but that it is being done by us every moment through our choice of whether to be or not to be.

Yoga shows us how to be the present moment by becoming aware of our bodies and allowing the thinking mind to grow still. In this way—as if the mind were a child—yoga just tells us to shift our attention away from our problematic thought forms—the sharp knife that separates life into parts—and into the present moment, which is where our bodies live all the time.

"Hey," says Yoga, "your body and breath are your only true friends. Get to know them. They are divine. You don't have a moment to lose."