GRAVITY How to Awaken

Your Subtle Body
and the Healing
Power of Yoga

PETER STERIOS

FOREWORD BY EOIN FINN



Contents



	Foreword by Eoin Finn ix
	Preface xiii
	Introduction xv
PART 1	TEACHING STORIES 1
CHAPTER 1	Cut Loose 3
CHAPTER 2	Steps to Here 9
CHAPTER 3	Embracing the Unexpected 23
PART 2	THE ENERGIES OF GRAVITY AND GRACE 33
CHAPTER 4	Effort and Non-Effort 35
CHAPTER 5	The Hidden Gift of Obstacles 43
PART 3	SCIENCE AND YOGA MEET 53
CHAPTER 6	Our Skin and Connective Tissue 55
CHAPTER 7	Our Feet and Hands 63
CHAPTER 8	Our Belly and Heart 69
CHAPTER 9	Into the Subtle Worlds 77
CHAPTER 10	Our Hidden Senses— Intuition and Humor 101

PART 4 SUBTLE BODY ANATOMY CHAPTER 11 Subtle Body "Seats of Energy Consciousness"—the Chakras 117 Subtle Body "Channels"—the *Nadis* **CHAPTER 12** The Bhutas, Vayus, and Marmas **CHAPTER 13** PART 5 PRACTICE ESSENTIALS 151 CHAPTER 14 Back-Body Breathing 157 Spine Mechanics 171 CHAPTER 15 Fundamentals of Flow CHAPTER 16 203 Steps from Here 213 AFTERWORD Acknowledgments 215 Subtle Body Guidesheets 217 **APPENDIX** Notes 231 Further Reading 237 About the Author 241

PART 1

Teaching Stories

The principles I offer in this book are the product of decades of exploring yoga and the subtle body, and thousands upon thousands of hours spent on the mat. They are also inextricably linked to pivotal experiences on my yoga journey. At first, some of these experiences appeared disastrous, generating much pain and suffering in me, physically and emotionally. Ultimately, though, hindsight has taught me that they were portals of discovery. These unexpected stumbles led to insights that profoundly transformed my yoga practice—and my life—and they continue to guide my work as a yoga teacher today. So, let me share with you now some stories about the evolution of gravity and grace as they appeared to me, on and off the mat.

I am the teacher of athletes, He that by me spreads a wider breast than my own proves the width of my own, He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.

Walt Whitman



Yoga has many traditional adages. One of the best known is, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." This was so true for me. In the early 1970s, there were few yoga studios in the United States and none where I lived. With internet search engines still decades away, finding a class required effort and luck. Most classes were inconspicuously located in whatever low-cost venues pioneer teachers of yoga could afford: cluttered senior centers, unkempt municipal halls, or, in my case, a windowless, fluorescent-lit space at a university fitness center adjacent to a noisy weight room. My relationship with yoga then was casual, and my practice was often a token effort, unfashionably ahead of its time, done before a workout.

That changed when I moved overseas and met the teacher my yoga path had in store for me, Shandor Remete. I knew very little about the myriad traditions of yoga, but it was clear to me after one workshop that I had found a teacher—a master, actually—who I would end up studying with for the next twenty years. I became dedicated to following him and only him, something rare in today's world of "convenient yoga." He was old school, with a charismatic and at times

fierce presence that I respected. At the time, I felt like I was one of few men doing yoga, and I had never met a male yoga teacher; so meeting him was a refreshing change. He was an athlete, as was I, and I appreciated the language he used. He had an uncanny ability to articulate new ways in which my stiff, male body and linear mentality could move, taking me beyond the limited understanding I had of myself.

With Shandor, I became a master of following, as I understood apprenticeship to be a time-honored rite for students of one of the most respected yoga lineages of India, the Iyengar method. I spent many hours a day practicing what he taught me, doing everything he instructed me to do. My proficiency and skill in following, combined with a body type and mental disposition that resembled many of the teachers in that lineage, gave me special status in the yoga community I was becoming a part of. Gaining that status became a built-in reward system that perpetuated even more following on my part; eventually, this earned me the role of assisting Shandor during his trainings and handling many of the administrative tasks for his North American tours. And when a busy international teaching schedule didn't allow him to fulfill all the invitations he received, I became a stand-in, taking his place in studios he didn't have time to get to.

As my reputation spread, I received more invitations to teach—something Shandor encouraged—at studios that wanted a lighter version of his style taught by someone a little less intense. In this way, I became his top American ambassador during those years. I felt privileged that he was part of my life and grateful for the strong personal connection between us. It seemed everything was as it should be and I was "on the path."

And then, without my noticing exactly how it happened, my long apprenticeship was over. It was an abrupt and unpleasant surprise. In hindsight, I could have seen the signs had I paid more attention.

What was to be my last year with Shandor started with slight feelings of impatience and a longing to learn and experience some of the special practices (*kriyas*) he did when we practiced together privately; these *kriyas* cultivated the mystical powers (*siddhis*) he occasionally spoke about. I had read amazing stories in old yoga texts about these esoteric practices, and I assumed that instruction in them was something only advanced and sincere students "earned" the right to receive.

What I didn't understand then was that I lacked certain prerequisites. It wasn't until years later that I could clearly see the most important prerequisite I had not yet attained: overcoming the limitations of being a "follower." Moving to the next level of any truly important endeavor requires getting rid of some things accumulated along the way—things that may have served their purpose in the moment but will be of little or no use in moving forward—and accepting this as it should be. Being someone else's apprentice was something I had to leave behind.

On the last day of the life I had known with my "guru," he asked me to take a short walk with him. Two months earlier I had left him a long voice message—too long, really, to convey what was essentially a request that we discuss the possibility of his teaching me the practices I felt ready to receive. This prompted what I heard as a hopeful message in reply: "Sure, it's time we talk." Now, after a month of traveling and assisting him with his programs without his mentioning this talk, he was about to catch a flight home to Australia. The window for conversation was short.

As we walked in silence, I had a sense something big was about to happen. We arrived at a small park in the neighborhood where I lived and sat quietly on a bench under the shade of an old, twisted oak, watching kids running around being kids. As I waited for him to speak, every part of me was anticipating expressions of appreciation for my years of service, maybe even a little recognition as one of his top students, and *finally*, his approval to learn what was reserved for those in my position. After several minutes, he broke the silence.

"Peter, there are two things in life you never want to be—a soldier or an apprentice."

His words were a shock, even as their full meaning escaped me at first. My body felt numb. My mind flooded with thoughts as I tried to understand how that statement applied to me.

Shandor turned to me, well aware of the turmoil raging inside, and his next, unforgettable—though not uncharacteristic—words were simply, "It's time to get off the tit."

After two decades of devotion to the teacher, just like that, it was over. We walked back to my house without speaking; the closeness we had shared for years was replaced by a cold, businesslike formality. The taxi arrived for his ride to the airport, and he walked through my front door without a word of goodbye. I stepped onto the porch and watched him approach the cab. Unexpectedly, he paused and turned back toward me. *Is he having a change of heart?* I wondered.

"Oh, by the way, please don't teach anything I ever taught you" were his parting words.

ESCAPE TO INDIA

In the period that followed, my confusion was crippling. Many things in my personal and professional life unraveled. I stopped teaching yoga; I had no idea what to teach. Depression was a frequent companion, and practicing yoga didn't help, especially "his" yoga—so I stopped that, too. Months passed. My health deteriorated, and my body ached. Many of the physical conditions yoga had helped me overcome surfaced again, and a new, more serious affliction came up during a routine physical. Clearly, every aspect of my life was out of balance. I sought help from Western and alternative medical doctors but got nowhere.

Then, at the recommendation of a friend, I put my life on hold and traveled to southern India to spend ten weeks at an Ayurvedic hospital for a holistic medical treatment program (*panchakarma*) to reset balance in my life, both physically and psychologically.

A VISIT FROM HANUMAN

During the first two weeks in India, the medical condition I had been diagnosed with worsened. I felt like I was completely losing control, and a deep despair lurked everywhere my thoughts carried me. I had inescapable feelings of hopelessness—there was nothing I could *do* to help myself.

Then one hot, sleepless night, in a room dimly lit by the other-worldly orange tint of a streetlight, I lay in bed under a mosquito net, considering my own death—this could be the last night of my life.

At some point, I drifted into a restless sleep and dreamed. In the dream, I was aware of watching my body asleep on the hospital bed,

uncovered and naked. I noticed—and it somehow seemed funny to me—that my arms had become extremely hairy, like those of a gorilla; my hands rested gently on my chest; and my fingertips were oddly positioned along the edges of my breastbone, aligned with my heart. Through my past studies of Indian mythology, I knew of the Hindu deity Hanuman, the monkey-headed man/god often portrayed in artistic renditions ripping open his rib cage to expose his beating heart. However, this image did not come immediately to mind—until, in the dream, my fingernails began digging through the skin into the costal facets of my sternum, clawing at the cartilage that secured my ribs to the bone. The witnessing presence in my dream suddenly became anxious, fearing the sight of a soon-to-be exposed heart; it desperately wanted to escape, to wake up out of the dream.

Simultaneously, in what was now a semi-lucid state, I felt a slight tickle on my chest. Curious, I lifted my head to see the face of a monstrous cockroach staring back at me. In a panic, I sat up and slapped the bug off me. I was wide awake and had an angry, flying pest trapped inside the mosquito net, buzzing my head. My heart was pumping, and I was possessed by a maniacal rage to kill. I jumped to my feet, trapped the roach in the net, and crushed it with my bare hands.

As I stood trembling beside my bed with triggers of fear still firing in my nervous system, a heavy wave of despair crashed over me. So alone in that moment, I was ready to die. I lay down on the bare concrete floor, flat on my back, arms and legs spread-eagle, and begged whatever god there was to take me, to end this life that was no longer worth living.

The swarm of mosquitos that turned up nightly descended onto my exposed body in a feeding frenzy. I didn't care; I didn't move. With no urge to resist, I felt each bite. I thought, *If this is the way God is taking me, devoured by mosquitos, so be it,* and I found the thought strangely comforting. Miraculously, I then fell into a deep sleep.

In the morning, I awoke slowly, unsure of where I was, with sunlight streaming across my face. Still lying flat on my back, I noticed an unusual inner calm. I had slept for hours on a concrete floor and expected the worst, but my body felt remarkable, completely free of pain. I was at peace. I realized I was still alive and felt a deep sense that

all of my maladies would heal. Although the mosquitos were gone, my skin was covered with little red tattoos, like a bad case of measles. For days after, they were reminders of the whole surreal experience and of the unforeseen forms that grace takes when it lifts us from despair.



A healing crisis had passed, and it now seemed possible that I could move on from the chaos and disorientation of Shandor's departure. Soon, new twists on my journey—the first of these occurring on that same trip to India—would afford me glimpses of my new yoga path: one that expanded the definition of a body engaged in yoga asana beyond the physical anatomy and into subtle realms.

But the subtle world had spoken to me before, though I didn't recognize it for what it was at the time. For that first discovery, let me take you back to the beginning . . .

And what might seem to be a series of unfortunate events may, in fact, be the first steps of a journey.

Lemony Snicket



How are we drawn to yoga, and what is it about yoga that sticks? The unique circumstances that lead any of us to our first yoga class are some of life's many mysteries. Is it destiny or perhaps an unfortunate event such as illness or injury that brings yoga to our doorstep? In my case, it was a little of both.

I was born in the 1950s, the middle child in a conservative, first-generation immigrant family living a middle-class life in a small agricultural town in California's Central Valley. On both sides of the family, my grandparents had fled war, forgoing the only life and traditions that generations of their ancestors had ever known. The lessons of those wrenching experiences were passed down to my parents. Planning for many possibilities—especially bad ones—was deeply implanted as a necessity of life, and my brothers and I were raised to set goals and make plans. My father talked constantly about the strategies he used to get through life:

- "Always have a plan . . . or two."
- "Prepare for the worst but expect the best."

- "Never be complacent."
- "Always be moving forward and never quit."
- "Obstacles are opportunities."

By the time I graduated from high school in 1974, I couldn't wait to leave home, driven not by those incessant messages or by the teenage angst most of my friends felt while being trapped in what amounted to a real-life movie set of *American Graffiti*, but by a personal curiosity and deep desire to experience life on my own, beyond the comfortable shelter of family and friends.

During my senior year, I applied and was accepted to a university on the coast (far enough from home to suit me), where I would study architecture, absorbing the foundational principles of the field and exploring their edges. Some of those principles, I would later learn, also apply to yoga.

And it was there at the university that I had my first taste of the yoga path.

PEEKING THROUGH A DOOR

I woke up late for class as usual, having stayed up until 4:00 a.m. to finish a project that was due later that morning. True to my father's advice, I was always pushing forward, hard. I had only slept three hours in that past forty-eight, and my whole body ached, especially my neck. As I passed through the rec center on my way to class, I noticed the door to a group fitness room was propped open just enough to peek inside. To this day, I don't know why I had the impulse to stop, turn, and look in. But when I did, what I saw made no sense to me. With no context from previous life experience to draw from, it was as though I'd just landed in another world and was witnessing some strange ritual performed by an alien species of being. Even stranger, I found myself pushing open the door and walking in, entering a room full of girls exercising.

"Can I help you?" the teacher asked, her voice inviting.

"What is this?" I asked.

"It's a yoga class."

"What's that?"

"If you'd like to find out, you're welcome to join."

Oh, no-that was not what I was expecting to hear. Put on the spot, I was suddenly embarrassed, until I noticed that most of the faces focused on me held warm looks of encouragement and welcome.

"Sure," I decided. "When's the next class?"

A week later, I was back, looking silly, no doubt, in tennis shoes, white athletic socks, and basketball shorts, shirtless, with my long '70s hair pulled back with a sweatband for "coolness," like I was ready for a workout in the weight room next door.

The class started with all of us on the floor sitting still, cross-legged. The teacher began to chant Sanskrit, and everyone except me tried to follow—some more successfully than others. Luckily the chanting didn't last long, and soon the instructor had us stand up for a sequence of poses she called "Salutations to the Sun." I thought, *I can do this—I* really like the sun!

My first set of the sequence was humbling. It was a fully selfconscious process, but not in the yogic sense—more in the egotistical sense: Am I doing it "right"? How come I can't touch my toes like they do? Did she say left foot or right foot? Is that my left foot? What is a perineum? Is that sweat on my mat, or am I drooling? Holy crap, this is harder than I thought! How many more of these are we going to do?

After three rounds of salutations, I was dripping in sweat and breathing like I'd scaled a Himalayan peak without oxygen. I felt like I was going to pass out. But then the pace of the class slowed down. We did a short series of floor poses—gentle twists and seated forward bends—which I could only access using straps for clasping my feet and a bolster under my butt to elevate my hips. Each pose inched me closer to the sheer agony of fully stretching my chronically tight hamstrings. The pain was intense; I imagined this must be what childbirth felt like. Fortunately, the instructor came over and adjusted my pose; with her guidance, the pain dialed back a notch. I gained a little confidence that the pain response in my legs could be eased with the help of calm touch.