

Yoga Calm Principles in Action

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Historically, yoga practices have encompassed both physical and mental techniques for calming the nervous system—exactly what today’s stress researchers recommend. And while these techniques are an important part of yoga, they were designed to serve even greater purposes in the individual and the community—those of personal discovery, wellness, and self-mastery. These overarching principles or philosophies of yoga invite creativity and flexibility in responding to needs; empower individuals through self-study, exploration, and discernment; and guide without dictating. The cultivation of these yogic attitudes is at the heart of yoga and a key determinant in its effectiveness, adaptability, and longevity.

Stillness

When I first met Barton, he talked nonstop. He explained that he never cried because once when he cried at his last school, even his best friend laughed at him. His dad told him that boys aren't supposed to cry. "But my dad's not the best person to listen to, you see, because he uses drugs, and that's why I live with my mom now." Then he went on and on about his father's drug use and how scary it was to live in his house because when people came over, you didn't know if you should trust them or not.

I could feel the sorrow in him, and the rage, and I promised him that I would never laugh at him if he cried. I told him that lots of boys cry in my room, and I never make fun of them or laugh at them. He said, "Oh, no, I'm not ever going to cry." Even the thought of it stimulated his need to make a show of his masculinity, so he dropped to the floor right there in my classroom and started doing push-ups—all the while continuing to talk through his heavy breathing. He said that he didn't want to be fat, and he wanted to be strong and taller than his father, who was five feet six inches tall, and he found that the push-ups sometimes prevented him from crying.

One day, Barton came into my room dragging a cardboard box and flying so high that he was frightened of himself. He said that his mom was trying some new medication on him and his heart was racing so fast that he was sure he was going to have a heart attack. We tried calling his mother, but she was unavailable. All the while, he kept getting into his cardboard box and rocking back and forth, then getting out and walking quickly around the room, talking a mile a minute.

I asked him how his body felt. He walked around, moving one hand up and down like a fish, and said, "I'm like the waves of the ocean going up and down." Then he made the waves bigger to demonstrate his feelings to me. He continued talking. I glanced at the clock and realized I had a group of students coming in fifteen minutes. I needed to find some way to help Barton before the students arrived.



"Let's try this, Barton," I said. "Why don't you get in the box and try some slow, deep breaths?" He climbed into the box and pulled his knees up to his chin.

"This is really uncomfortable," he said matter-of-factly. "Sometimes you don't have the best ideas, Mrs. Gillen."

I laughed a little and said, "Well, hold on. Let's see if we can make it more comfortable."

We worked together to cut out the end of the box so his torso could be in but his legs could stretch out. Then I put a pillow in the box and placed a blanket over him. Turning off the lights and putting on some soothing music, I asked him to take deep breaths and see if he could calm his body and be as still as possible. I reassured him that I would stay in the room. From underneath the blanket, he continued to talk, but now he began to slow down. "You know, Mrs. Gillen, I think this is starting to work. That music you're playing is good, you see, and I think it's beginning to calm me down."

I lowered my own voice and worked on keeping myself calm. I talked to him in a soothing, deep voice, and within ten minutes, he had found a route into his own stillness, into his ability to self-soothe.

By the time the group of students arrived, Barton was feeling much better. He named his box his "Soothing Chair," and he demonstrated to the children how it worked. These second-graders were, of course, amazed by his invention, which he continued to use throughout that year. Sometimes he even brought friends into the room to try it. He began attending weekly Yoga Calm classes with me. He took his practice very seriously.

The quality of Stillness is important in developing self-control and self-regulation in students. By learning to still themselves, especially in times of chaos and fear, students gain confidence and become more capable of handling conflict and disruption. They begin to create an inner peace that they can draw on at any time. This quality is developed in all the Yoga Calm physical poses and in the relaxation and quieting processes.

Because children are bouncy and talkative, adults often think that an active, energetic class is what they need. But opportunities to practice Stillness are important for children, as well as for the adults in their lives. When children begin to understand that they can have some control over their own bodies and are able to self-soothe, they gain personal power. Sometimes a few minutes of Stillness can break their negative perception of themselves.

A student who had been diagnosed with severe ADHD told me his mother was always saying that he was never in control. We played a game in which we strove to keep our bodies completely still for thirty seconds. After a few tries, he was able to do this. I told him, "See, you've already proven that you can have control for thirty seconds. Tomorrow, let's see if you can do it for a whole minute." His green eyes shot me a look of surprise mixed with suspicion.

Two years later, he sits still and can listen to a novel being read aloud. Sometimes he begs me to continue, even after thirty minutes. By practicing just thirty seconds of Stillness that one day, he gained a new perception of himself.

When working with children with attention disorders, we must first believe that they *can* be still. We have to check our own perceptions about them and open our minds to their potential. For when a whole community has decided that a child is bad or incapable, the child believes and acts accordingly. But as with the student described above, you can start with simple things to teach Stillness: going on a vacation in your mind for thirty seconds, counting your pulse for fifteen seconds, holding completely still for ten seconds—taking small steps. We gradually increase the time, and before long, students are able to come to Stillness easily. A new world opens up to them.

Stillness also encourages children's innate ability to connect to the natural world and observe the beauty in life. This is also a part of our yoga practice with children. We don't think of it as a practice only on mats, though. It is a practice of life. When children who have practiced Stillness in Yoga Calm classes go outside, they tune in to nature's rhythms, and their bodies begin to respond to, and embody, the quality of Stillness that exists in parks, trees, and slow-moving creeks.



Pulse Count helps to engender Stillness and Listening.

On a field trip to a local farm, the owner invited our class of behaviorally challenged students to visit her pond. She told the students they could feed the fish, but they had to walk very quietly on the dock or the fish would swim away.

I said to the students, "You know how to do this. We practice being still every day." Then I asked the liveliest student to demonstrate how quietly he could walk onto the dock. He walked out on tiptoe, not making a sound. The others followed in the same way. Then each silently took a handful of fish food from the owner. And when they tossed it to the water, the pond exploded in flashes of silver jumping fish. The students' faces registered surprise and delight, yet they continued to manage their excitement, whispering only. The sun emerged from behind a cloud. A great blue heron flew out of a large pine and flapped over their heads. It was a spectacular moment made possible by their ability to be still.

At the end of the day, after they'd all taken their seats on the bus, the owner of the farm entered to tell the students that they were the most polite group that had ever visited her farm! Two of the students looked behind them to see if she was referring to someone else, obviously unused to such compliments.

The Stillness activities are designed to help counselors, therapists, and teachers guide students toward greater self-control and sensitivity. Once children learn to practice Stillness, they begin to develop inner peace that can help them through difficult times, as well as the ability to focus and prepare to learn.

Listening

To develop a strong sense of self, students need to listen to the messages that come from their hearts, minds, and bodies. Differentiating between true warning systems in the body and fears or memories from the past is an important skill that will help them make positive choices in their lives.

Molly, an only child, lives with her mother. She doesn't know her father, and her mother is a wonderful, loving person but has a difficult time finding and holding a job. So Molly worries about her mother. She feels anxious and hopeless about their life.

One day during class, Molly was lying very still in a relaxation pose. This was excellent. She had come a long way since a few months earlier, when she could not settle down. She would spend her time poking and bothering students next to her. She still had days like that, but her ability to quiet herself was getting stronger. Now I wanted to help her listen to her own wisdom and find strength inside.

As the students lay on their mats, I asked them to see if they could find the "strong voice" inside of them. I asked them to notice whether the voice was loud or soft, high-pitched or deep. Did the voice sound like anyone? If so, who? Then I said, "See if your strong voice has something to tell you," adding that it was important to listen very carefully, that sometimes it takes time to hear your strong voice.

Afterward, I asked the students to share their experiences. Molly timidly raised her hand. She said her strong voice told her that even if her mother never got a good job, someday she would be old enough to find a job herself and create a positive life. That seed of positive thought began to move Molly out of her hopeless feelings and gave her a vision for her future.

When students learn to listen to the voices and messages that come from inside, they may start to make healthier choices. They can identify and discriminate between different feelings, and they can listen to the wisdom of the body. Indeed, with yoga practice and the help of supportive adults, children can learn to find the voice within that helps guide them toward health and happiness.

It's as a teacher attending a Yoga Calm training reported: she believed the yoga practice of her teen years had prevented her from ever becoming a smoker. Having practiced and developed healthy breathing habits, she was very tuned in to her body's responses, and therefore was acutely aware of the change in her breathing the one time she smoked a cigarette. She never wanted to try that again!

When children begin to listen internally, it is not uncommon for them to name God or Jesus as a source of strength. Because this is an individual child's personal experience, it is appropriate



for the child to share this in the structure of the class if so inclined. In fact, when children share their personal experiences of God and religion, it gives the class an opportunity to practice acceptance of different paths.

One day after we listened to our inner strength while in Warrior I, Mary, a sixth grader, said that she often thought of Jesus while in these poses. It helped her feel strong, she said. This led to discussion among the students. Some shared their feelings about Jesus. Some said they didn't think about Jesus at all. I listened, honoring each child's experience and modeling understanding and acceptance, very careful in such situations not to give my personal opinion or side with any child.

It's vital to treat religion as you would any discussion and encourage students to be open and express their experience. If children are to learn how to listen internally, it's important to let them speak about any of the things they encounter within.

Judy, a fifth grader with a difficult family life, was gently helping a younger student. I commented that Judy had a kind heart. "No, I don't," she said. "I'm not kind at all. I'm really evil. I think evil thoughts all the time."

It was true that Judy could be very mean. She often bullied other children and said cruel, hateful things. I wanted to understand her, so I looked into myself and asked how I have felt when angry. I, too, have felt out of control, which let me understand what Judy meant by feeling "evil." Also I knew that she had good reason to be angry. Her father was in jail for performing a violent act, and her mother had a severe learning disability, making it difficult for her to manage the details of life. So Judy, instead of being mothered, often had to play mother to her mother.

The next day, I invited Judy into my room. I explained that I understood what she had meant and helped her identify her feelings as anger. I told her that sometimes I, too, felt evil when I was angry. I said, "Your angry feelings are not 'you.' They are just feelings. I am going to help you express your anger in ways that won't get you into trouble." Then we went outside and threw a ball against the wall and growled REALLY LOUD!

I continued to work with Judy on her feelings of anger and gave her strategies for expressing her anger. Meanwhile, I had established a group of adults at the school who would take time during the day to notice Judy's kindness and compliment her when they saw her doing good things. And over time, Judy began to make amazing changes. She was brighter and more optimistic. Others liked her more. She laughed and participated more fully in activities. She still had to work on her bullying behavior and was still easily triggered by other students, but she began to change her image of herself. This started because she had the courage to speak honestly about the things she felt when she looked inside and listened.

When children begin speaking about their thoughts and feelings, they need adults in their lives who are strong enough to listen and understand the things they reveal. If a teacher or counselor has not done the hard work of listening to his or her own sorrows and anger, it will be difficult to stay present with these feelings in a student. An adult who is uncomfortable or impatient with a child's expression may unintentionally communicate this. When there is not time to listen to the student, and the adult feels impatient, it is important for the adult to acknowledge that and either arrange a time to be available or help the student identify someone who can listen (e.g., grandma or grandpa). For when students express strong feelings, it is a dual listening process. The children are tuning into their feelings, and the adult must tune into his or her own feelings. This is one way the adult can positively model behaviors that children need to learn.

Indeed, modeling is crucial in teaching the principle of Listening—a point we will return to later.

Grounding

Fourth-grader Jessica has been diagnosed with severe ADHD. She is emotional and has a difficult time at recess. She tends to blurt things out, and she lacks good social skills. The children often tease her, and this drives her to tears, which embarrasses her.



One day in yoga, she asked what she could do when her peers teased her. We practiced standing strong in Mountain (p. 79) with our feet anchored to the earth. We each thought of someone in our life who believes in us and supports us, and we imagined that person holding our feet to the earth. Then we breathed into our bellies and in strong, deep voices said "Stop!" We practiced looking each other in the eye and setting boundaries without yelling or humiliating ourselves. I encouraged Jessica to try these skills on the playground.

Several days later Jessica came bursting into my room full of excitement. "It worked, Mrs. Gillen! It really worked!"

"What worked?" I asked.

"That thing we did in yoga. I pretended I was strong and that my mom was holding onto my feet. I breathed into my belly and told the kids to stop in a deep voice, and guess what! They stopped!"

She looked as though she still didn't quite believe it.

What Jessica had experienced was the ability to ground herself both physically and emotionally. By teaching children to do this, we help them connect to the earth and feel safe and secure, gaining a sense of control over their environment. By bringing their awareness into both the present moment and their physical bodies through activities like those described above, students begin to learn that they can call on their bodies, the earth, and the people in their lives to support them. The ground is always there.

Many children who have been traumatized disassociate from their bodies and have a hard time being present in the physical world. The fast pace of the modern world aggravates this problem. Children's lives are full of many demands and distractions, and many of them spend a majority of their time stimulated by television, video games, cell phones, computers, and other electronic gadgets. They may live in a fantasy world that is not connected to the physical world. They need to develop a sense of physical awareness and safety in their bodies, and to develop a realistic understanding of their abilities and needs.

For children to develop good habits for self-care, they need the experience of feeling healthy physically, emotionally, and mentally. When people are perpetually unaware of their bodies, they may believe that a lifestyle involving junk food, video games, and lack of exercise meets their needs. One student informed us that he "relaxed" when he played violent video games. When he learned to check his pulse and understand what relaxation really feels like, he began to see that his body did not, in fact, relax while he was playing these games.

When introducing yoga to students, we start slowly. When poses are taught quickly, without time to develop inner awareness, injuries are more likely to occur, and children can develop a practice that is disconnected from their physical awareness—in essence, creating yet another distraction. We want children to practice and to listen to physical cues at the same time. Grounding activities help children come into their bodies and prepare them for learning.

Strength

Strength involves not only muscle power—Physical Strength—but also Mental Strength and Emotional Strength. All three are complementary and may be nurtured simultaneously.

Physical Strength

The yoga poses, of course, develop Physical Strength. And as the body becomes physically stronger, students' sense of self is likewise strengthened. They feel safer and less vulnerable. They become more able to participate in physical tasks and the world around them.

In Yoga Calm, we develop Physical Strength by challenging the body in a reasonable manner. We encourage children to push themselves, but also to listen to their physical limitations, and tune into ensuing emotions and mental processes. As a result, the body begins to grow stronger with encouragement and support—not by being forced into compliance. In this way, Physical Strength grows organically with emotional and cognitive awareness.



Balance poses develop Grounding and Strength.



Mental Strength

Athletes, successful business executives, and individuals in many professions know the importance of positive self-talk and visualizing positive outcomes. Similarly, by using positive self-talk while in the poses, children practicing Yoga Calm can develop Mental Strength. The guided relaxations further support this, giving students practice in focusing their thoughts and using positive images to help them move toward greater health and success. And as students develop a stronger sense of themselves and their own images and ideas, they are less persuaded by negative external images and behaviors.



Strengthening poses with listening and positive self-talk help develop physical, mental, and emotional Strength.

Georgia, a sixth-grade student, has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Highly sensitive, she has a difficult time at recess because she is often targeted by other students who find it entertaining to set her off.

I found Georgia standing in a balance pose in my office one day, looking at the words posted in bold letters on a bulletin board: "I am strong. I am in control. I can do it. I can be responsible." When I inquired what she was doing, she explained that she'd had some trouble at recess and was using the words and yoga to get herself back in control.

She stood in the balance pose for a few minutes before heading back out to recess. Walking out the door, she called to me, "Thanks, Mrs. Gillen. I use those words all the time!"

Knowing some mental phrases such as the ones Georgia used can help children through difficult times. Positive self-talk trains children to focus their minds on their abilities. It helps keep them from being overwhelmed by fear and insecurities. The words provide a tool to use in moments of fear, anger, or worry. Many children report using these words regularly—in PE, at the doctor's office, during tests, when anxious, and at other times.

Emotional Strength

The process of developing Physical and Mental Strength also supports the development of Emotional Strength. With improved physical and mental control, students can develop the courage to express their emotions and the discipline to process the feelings that arise. Teacher and peer modeling of healthy emotional expression is also essential in developing this quality in students.

Jeremy had problems with extreme work avoidance. Whenever he began something he perceived as difficult, he would lock up and refuse to do anything. This exasperated his parents and teachers. Sometimes it would be impossible to get him back on track when he shut down, and no amount of coercion, threats, or consequences had any impact.

When he began coming to yoga, it was apparent that he was frightened of doing the wrong thing and being criticized. His fear of failure was so great that he would stop before he reached a place where he would fail. So I moved him into practice very slowly. When he was unable to participate, I allowed him to lie on his mat and watch the class. He would come in and out of the poses as he felt ready. To help him through his blocks, I gave him the language to say to himself, "I am strong! I am in control! I can do it!" He made good progress.

Once when the class was doing some very active poses, Jeremy looked extremely frustrated and angry. At one point, he sat down on his mat with a defeated look. I said, "Don't give up, Jeremy. Don't give in to that voice inside your head that wants you to quit."

He looked at me very sternly and said, "I'm not giving up, Mrs. Gillen. I'm sitting down to get my anger under control. I'm trying to tell myself those words you taught me."

"Okay. Good," I said, and we continued with the poses.

Jeremy sat for a few minutes, then got up and joined us in the practice. His yoga was strong and confident! He had really broken through something. I complimented him on how strong he looked.

After class, he told me that he had started to think about his brother, who was in a different foster care situation than he himself was. He said that people had told him he might never see his brother again, and that made him angry. "Then," he said, "I sat down and told myself that it doesn't matter what anyone else said. I will always love my brother,

and someday I will find a way to see him again." He told me he remembered the last time he had seen him. He remembered the look in his brother's eyes. He could tell that his brother loved him.

This story demonstrates how children begin to use their Physical, Mental, and Emotional Strength in complementary ways. Instead of running from his feelings of anger or acting out, Jeremy sat down and listened to them. Then he used the tools he had been taught to remind himself to think in an empowering way. Once he was able to manage his thoughts around his feelings about his brother, he took this strength into his body and channeled it into his physical practice. The results of his developing Mental and Emotional Strength were apparent in his attitude and composure while doing the poses. And as his competence and discipline in yoga grew, he increased his ability to move through his work avoidance issues.

Community

The Yoga Calm principle of Community is taught through games and activities that demonstrate the ways in which communities both support and challenge us.

The development of community support skills such as compassion and caring for one another begins with helping students learn to express their emotions. Given opportunities to become aware of both their feelings and the hardships of others, they gain insight into their own and others' behavior. They begin to want to help others and to see and value themselves as kind and helpful. Feelings of victimization are reduced, especially among underprivileged populations, while camaraderie with classmates is actively nurtured. Through all such experiences, students gain insight into the universal struggles of humanity and begin to understand the value of community support at a deep level.

Charlie, whose mother had recently died in a tragic accident, was a new student in Yoga Calm class. After the warm-ups, sixth-grader Jared asked if he could lead a sequence of poses. He seemed to have something in mind, so I allowed him to come to the front. Before he began the practice he turned to Charlie, looked him right in the eye, and said, "I'm doing this yoga for your mother."

The whole group grew silent in that moment of honoring. Their yoga was beautiful that day.

Of course, communities can be challenging, too. And these challenges can likewise be utilized in positive ways. In our social/emotional activities, for instance, we encourage lively conversations with differing points of view and include games that provide opportunities to challenge and test one another. We discuss how challenges make us stronger emotionally, physically, and mentally. Students understand that a game of chess or checkers is more interesting if your opponent knows how to play and provides some competition. And they recognize that a race is more interesting if a friend is skilled and provides an incentive to improve.

In fact, we need our families, neighbors, and friends to see our potential and call on us to do better—and to give feedback and sometimes even criticism. But at times criticism and challenging behavior need to be screened out. For example, the playground can be a harsh environment, particularly for students who have social or emotional issues. Teachers often coach students to ignore name calling or other bullying behavior, but this is difficult to do. Therefore, Yoga Calm's community games also provide opportunities to practice effective responses to bullying and similar negative behavior.

By gaining understanding and skill in dealing with the positives and negatives of community life, students develop a realistic and healthy model of living.

Through the teaching of these five principles, Yoga Calm helps to provide a safe and supportive setting and empower lifelong wellness habits for students and teachers alike. It is in this environment that our greatest potential can be realized.



Community activities provide opportunities to practice social and emotional skills.