



Grace In The Gray Areas

Everything I Need To Know About Life I Learn From Water Yoga

By Karen Kullgren

Over the four or five years that I have been taking water yoga, I have often been struck by how many of the things I learn about this practice offer lessons for life in general. I've spent a lot of time thinking about these metaphors and analogies.

First, let me say that I am a huge advocate for water yoga. It makes yoga's meditative and physical benefits available to people who might not otherwise be able to participate in or have difficulty doing "land yoga" because of issues ranging from back problems to pregnancy to joint replacements to obesity. Just about anyone, from a newbie to an experienced yogini, can go deeper into poses and stay in them longer in heated water, putting less pressure on their joints. But in truth the real joy is that water yoga makes this overweight, middle-aged woman, grown from a childhood past of gym humiliations too numerous to mention, feel truly physically graceful for the first time.

And to boot, I learn about--

Calm in the middle of the storm: This was my first and biggest lesson, and it keeps coming to me again and again in various permutations. It is a challenge sometimes (especially if the class has been doing vigorous movements in the water and roiling it up) to keeping steady and balanced to do things like the Tree pose (where you're standing on one leg). All you can do is still yourself from within. When you become still, the water becomes still, and when each person does it, the water is peaceful and supports us all better.

Rootedness and centering: In the Tree pose, you have to press the toes of your standing leg strongly against the bottom of the pool as you raise the other leg up and bend it with your foot against the standing leg. Only then from that strong base can you raise your arms above your head to complete the pose. Just as a tree can't grow and thrive and reach the sky unless its roots are strong and deep, a person can't reach her sky, can't grow strong and tall unless she creates a deep root system for herself, one of personal connections, strongly held values and self-confidence.

Not letting uncertainty paralyze you: I often take my glasses off when I do movements that involve putting my face in the water. I had done this in one class but then found myself at one end of the pool going through some other asanas (poses) while my glasses were waiting at the other end. Rather than interrupt my poses and retrieve my glasses, I realized that sometimes, even when you can't see clearly, it doesn't mean you shouldn't still move, so I continued. I learned that you can do that in life, too, even when the path isn't clear.

The fluidity and serendipity of life: Water supports us sometimes and resists us other times as we are still or move through it. Life can be like that too, and we can only relax and let it move around us or give in to the buoyancy of its support. Like with riptides, fighting only exhausts you and doesn't bring you back to shore.

The importance of attention and concentration: Sometimes I'm teetering to find my balance while others around me are already firmly planted. Other times I fight to hold my pose when someone next to me falls out of theirs. You have to move smoothly and stay steady even when others around you are wiggling, falling or struggling. And, of course, in yoga as in meditation as in life, if your mind wanders, bring the attention back to the moment, to your body.

Accepting assistance: Each week while others learned and then practiced the Bow pose, Dhanurasana, I would sigh and do something else because my knee flexibility even after surgery seemed to stop me from doing it. Then, one day I decided to try and do just one side of the pose, with the better knee. Having gotten that far, I asked my instructor, Lakshmi, for help with my other leg and was able to do the pose. That gave me the confidence and determination to keep trying. And now I can do it myself! Our class also uses foam noodles as props, and for some poses and movements we hold on to the edge of the pool. We've learned there is no shame in using support.

Defying gravity: One of the most magical things about water yoga is that you are released from the chains of gravity. Poses that even for our instructor were very difficult on land become possible and comfortable in water. Knowing that, I want to find other ways in my life to defy gravity, to be released from the chains of current realities to achieve my dreams.

Balance: Yoga places a huge emphasis on balance and complementary stretches. Every time you move your body in one pose, one direction, you must follow it with an opposite, for the good of your body. For example, we move in water yoga from the Cobra pose to a wall squat to reverse the stretch of our backs. Perhaps this speaks to the need for a variety of poses to stretch our lives and create balance, too.

Practice and determination: Another huge lesson of yoga for me has been that I can do some things I was sure I couldn't. Or there might be something I didn't think I could do, but circumstances change and then I can. I would never have known if I didn't keep trying or try again later.

Perception and perspective: When I first started water yoga, my most hated pose, because it really hurt my shoulders, was Shalabhasana, the Locust pose. Here you must place your noodle beneath your belly and then fling your arms to the sky with your feet up behind you. I don't honestly know what happened, but perhaps my muscles relaxed with practice and I became more flexible. Suddenly, one day, the pain was gone. The pose became joyous for me, and one of my favorites. Something or someone you once disliked or found impossibly difficult can become your favorite. How wonderful is that?

Sometimes all it takes is a new perspective. I have always found difficult those poses where my arms have to do tricky things behind my back, such as a chest-opening pose where the arms are clasped together behind the back and then lifted up. I never felt I could lift them far enough or hold them in the lifted position long enough. One day, though, while floating on my back, I tried clasping my hands together beneath me and voilà, found I could push them much further away and hold that posture longer.

Adjusting expectations and adapting to limitations: We've always had people in the shifting population of my water yoga class who've had to adapt their routine because of physical issues. For me, it was adapting to my arthritic knees, another young woman to chronic back problems, another to her blooming pregnancy belly, another 80-something woman to arm pain. Never before had I been in a class where I didn't want to quit if I couldn't do something as it was "supposed to be done," but rather just fully participated doing an adaptation. The funny thing was that I'd been adapting to the limitations of my bad knees for so many years that I forgot for a while to adjust my expectations after the limitations were removed with successful surgery! Now I'm rediscovering the joys of poses I took a long time to perfect, only to lose them as my knees worsened, and I've even been able to do some poses I just couldn't do at all before the surgery. Not that there aren't a hundred more I have yet to master...

Releasing toxins: I try to let all the junk of life, all the work hassles, all the stuff on my to-do list, all the financial worries, go before class. I once told Lakshmi that I was afraid to pollute the water on days when I came in loaded with the toxic emotions or thoughts. She said the water

would absorb them and evaporate them. It eased my mind and gave me a powerful image to motivate me to leave the cares of the world at the door (or on the land, as the case may be!) as I enter this sacred space where I am invited week after week to go inward.

Letting go: Oh yes, we hear a lot about the need to "let go," whether it's of our physical or mental clutter, our expectations or our need for control, and I myself have written plenty about letting go. But the other day in doing a water yoga pose where I felt uncertain and didn't know if the noodle behind my back would support me in the water or flip me over, I had an epiphany. Letting go involves trust and faith. So before anyone can be expected to let go, they've got to have trust in their support and have faith in the universe.

The real lesson is that everyone can find their gracefulness. When we give ourselves sacred space and time (for me it's an hour in a pool doing water yoga, for you it might be hours with a violin in your arms), we can feel the grace and through our silence and presence share it with others around us, too--even after we leave that space.

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