

Yoga and Peace Education -

Cultivating Peace

On and Off the Mat

DURING THE KRIPALU CENTER'S Yoga Teacher Training Program in 2006, I recall my surprise when skills like active listening and nonviolent communication were part of the curriculum. *What does this have to do with teaching yoga?* I remember thinking. As I came to find out, it has *everything* to do with it - both the teaching and practice of yoga. Ultimately, this realization led me from the yoga mat to the field of peace education.

When I tell people I teach peace, the usual response is, "What?" Usually they think they've misheard me, perhaps thinking I said "peas," or sometimes "P.E.," like physical education. "No, peace," I explain, giving a visual cue using my peace sign fingers, "- things like conflict resolution, compassionate communication, nonviolence, sustainability. You know, the knowledge and skills we need to create a peaceful world."

Their surprise usually comes from the fact that such a thing as peace studies exists. After all, we do not, as a general rule, study peace in any formal way throughout our education - and the field of peace education seeks to change this. We study war - history is often portrayed as a litany of battles - but we rarely study peace. How can we create a peaceful society if we do not study this concept and develop the necessary skills to build it? The field of peace education tries to remedy this. In a nutshell, peace education is the process of developing the knowledge, skills and values to transform our selves and society to create a just, peaceful, sustainable world.

I found my way to this field through yoga, as a natural extension of my yoga practice. Yoga had helped me to discover and be in touch with my own inner peace, which is the foundation from which a peaceful society can grow. My inspiration to become a yoga teacher was to be able to share this inner peace and help other discover it and the transformative potential.

Through teaching yoga, I discovered my passion for teaching. I also started to develop the skill of active listening and compassionate communication, which, as I mentioned, were part of the teacher training and which I found to be an extension of my yoga practice

off the mat. They became tools for the yoga of relationship, the yoga of communication, and I found them to be immediately beneficial in my relationships with friends and family. They were not just useful as a yoga teacher, in communicating with students, but they became useful in all my interactions.

This exploration began to help me see that peace could be learned - we could learn the skills we need to create peace but we weren't learning them in schools. It took me stumbling upon them as an adult, and I couldn't help but think about how my life might be different if I had learned these skills sooner. Thus I made it my life's mission to help disseminate this information and these skills as widely as possible, through teaching and practicing peace.

To me, one of the most inspiring parts of the peace education field is imagining the world we want to live in and taking concrete steps towards that goal. A peaceful world requires vision, creativity, and imagination, and it requires us to take action. Gandhi advocated *svadeshi*, a concept in Sanskrit that correlates roughly to the words of Theodore Roosevelt, "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are." Each of us can start exactly where we are, in our own hearts, our homes, and our communities, to create a more just, peaceful, sustainable world that we would all like to see exist.

These days I teach yoga; I also teach peace studies at the college level and my teaching of both influences the other. I bring my yoga teaching into the college classroom, not so much through yoga poses, but through starting each class with a centering meditation and the sound of a bell (which the students love!), and also through my own presence: the flexibility and flow with which I teach my classes. And as a yoga teacher, I am constantly encouraging my students to make sure they take their practice with them; for it's when we begin to approach all of our lives as the practice of yoga that our practice truly begins. A peaceful world is possible and our potential as human beings is infinite. The art, science, and practice of yoga helps us to realize this, and the field of peace education can help equip us to make it a reality.