

Breathe out and rebirth reality

By Ruth Ostrow

STRETCHING out like snakes, my legs crawl towards some unknown destination, searching for an end to the pain, the pain ... oh, the terrible pain. "Don't focus on the pain," comes the voice of reason from the end of the class -- international yoga teacher Rose Baudin -- scanning the furrowed expressions of her students, telling us to "breathe, just breathe".

"Only through the breath can there be any relief," says Baudin, who advises world leaders on spiritual health. "Just soften into the pose. Just allow the pain to come up, don't attach yourself to it," she says, as groans permeate the room.

Which is all very well to say. But my fingers haven't touched my toes in countless years, and our bodies are being asked to contort and contract into a host of positions that sound most inhuman: the dog pose, the cat, the cobra.

They are poses modelled on animals to help the Western mind wrap around the concept of standing on all fours stretching hamstrings that have been dead for decades, or lifting a spine that prefers to stay seated in a chair.

But Eastern philosophy believes the body is the temple of the soul, and my temple has become blocked, rigid and increasingly inflexible.

"Your body reflects your attitude to life. You have the body you have earned," the teacher reminds us as we sit on the floor bending at the waist in an attempt to put our stiff little arms towards our contracted little feet.

So this is my punishment. Years of wearing high heels has resulted in shrunken Achilles tendons. Decades of slackness has turned into locked shoulder blades, a stiff spinal column.

"Ahhhhh, ahhhhh," my head is screaming as fingers try to cross the uncrossable, unfathomable, impossible gulf between hands and feet. Conquering Mount Everest could be no harder. "If you're having trouble, take note of where the blockage is occurring and breathe into it. Breathing will help you shift focus from the source of the pain, and you will find yourself softening, softening."

It is true. I'm not soft any more. I'm stuck somewhere between youth and the final bus stop. The teens and 20s were nimble times. Free movement, free mind. But something dreadful has happened since. Thoughts are becoming more set, patterns more established.

Many of my friends feel the same. Though we have tried to move, extend, and flow like rivers through the vicissitudes of time, things are slowing down, intention is wearing thin.

A sense of risk, adventure is waning. But not here in this class as women and men of all shapes and sizes are putting on a heroic effort to achieve the impossible: toe touching.

"Challenge yourselves. Don't go limp with fear. Feel the resistance. Accept the resistance. Then go forward anyway, slowly, at your own pace.

"To remain stuck in the body is to carry that attitude out of this room into the world," Baudin implores, as my arms continue to seek uncharted terrain. Life often feels like this. Too painful to move forward, too painful to stand still. A place where fear is letting the body atrophy and the spirit die.

"Don't be afraid of pain," she says. "It is just another sensation. Hurt, joy, happiness, sorrow," she says as I feel a slight give in the back of my knees.

I think about how pain-aversive most people I know really are. Going anywhere, doing anything to avoid it. Darting about in search of pleasure, or simply action, to avoid feelings of loss, ageing, sadness or reality.

Driven away from their own sense of inadequacy by becoming workaholics or sexaholics, frantically changing partners to stave off boredom and grief. Running, moving, wriggling out of the painful pose of mother, husband, wife, lonely human being. Running from self.

It's an obsession in Western society, to seek the soothing balm of distraction -- TV, gossip, new relationships. The slightest hint of discomfort and we are off. The ancient Indian gurus -- from whom yoga and meditation were gifted -- knew better.

"Many people can't cope with yoga," says our teacher. "They find aerobics easier. Hop, jump, move away from pain, hop into another position.

"We stay with the sensations going deeper into it, deeper until there is no escape from the truth of who we are. Pain helps us to grow."

Which is why yoga is enjoying renewed popularity throughout the world, including Tahiti, where Baudin is going next, to teach the President of French Polynesia.

Yoga speaks to the soul. Not to those who want the body beautiful but a generation tired of clamouring after image and achievement.

Sit for long enough in a yogic, meditative position and all repressed emotions come up. Memories flood the skull as part of the cleansing process. Breathing is the only way to cope with what can best be described as the birthing of reality.

It's during this long struggle with my feet that I see her. The young girl I once was. Flexible, agile, loving acrobatics, movement.

"You have the body you earned," said our teacher. But what had happened that stopped me in my tracks? A negative comment about my body? A schoolteacher who battered my self-esteem? One women's magazine too many? Somewhere back in puberty there was an unconscious decision to hold back, as I am doing now.

I ease forward towards the 12-year-old who was supple and free-spirited. I want to catch her so we can start again.

"Bend yourselves, stretch, extend. It'll get easier as you practise," says the teacher, as I feel my right toe coming into reach.

And suddenly I have it... almost. I have my sock, tortured and twisted, in my grasp for the first time in decades. As a finger magically connects with my foot, a spark of cosmic electricity bounces off. Did anyone see it?

"Okay, come out of the position now," says Baudin. I look up at the clock. It's only been five minutes. Five long, painful, rich minutes.

Almost two more hours to go. Of staying still, of having to deal with the consequences of our lives. Of having to deal with the tragic realisation that one's sock was halfway off one's foot.

That elusive big toe -- so near and yet so far -- has become the new Everest of my soul.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 15 JUL 2000