

Intentionally Tuning Into Ecological Consciousness: Using the Body to Interpret the Teachings of the Land

By Jocelyn Burkhart

For many researchers and writers in the environmental and ecological education fields, outdoor and experiential educational methods are understood to be especially powerful for the development of ecological literacy and consciousness in students, both of which are crucial if we are to develop healthier and more respectful ways of interacting with the land. A couple of definitions may be helpful here. “Ecological literacy” refers to the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to read and understand complex interactions and processes in the natural world (Capra, 2007; Curthoys, 2007). “Ecological consciousness” refers to the consistent practice of basing personal and societal decisions and actions on a respect for the limitations and needs of natural ecosystems, as revealed by an ecologically literate assessment of any given situation (Puk, 2006). As an ecological educator who is passionate about living in a respectful relationship with the land and who has spent the past year studying yoga intensively, I sought to bridge these two worlds by asking, “How can the practice of hatha yoga aid in the development of ecological consciousness?”

The practice of hatha yoga is well known for its ability to help with relaxation, stress reduction and the development of strength and flexibility. It is also an incredibly powerful practice for aligning body and mind, and increasing awareness of both the physical body and the inner self. By focusing the mind on the breath and the sensations and flow of energy through the body, the mind and body come into alignment, and in this relaxed state, it becomes possible to access the body’s inner knowing. The practice of “Hidden Language” or reflective hatha yoga (Radha, 1987) provides access to this inner voice by posing reflective questions during the hatha yoga practice that enable intuitive and previously unconscious insights to rise to the surface of the mind. Many of the various hatha yoga asanas,

or poses, mimic natural landforms and creatures, and physically capture the essence of central quality of each through posture and movement. The mountain, tree, cat, dog and tortoise poses are excellent examples of this. By positioning the body in these various asanas and using awareness of the breath to align the mind with the body, it becomes possible to access the unique teachings of each of these various elements of the natural environment.

Symbolism plays a key role in this learning process. By asking reflective questions that draw upon the distinctive form of each asana and what it represents, the intuitive voice is able to respond specifically and intelligently. For example, when practising the tree pose, the mind can reflect on the metaphor of tree roots drawing nourishment while the feet ground and support the posture. Similarly, asking, “What are you growing up to or reaching toward?” as the arms stretch upward enables an embodied understanding of and response to this question. Furthermore, this response could occur on more than one level of awareness for each person, including, but not limited to, the emotional, physical, mental and spiritual levels. As the body mimics each unique element or creature, the space is created for awareness to expand into these elements. This enables, for example, an experience of “tree sense” with the tree pose or of “cat consciousness” with the cat pose. And in these moments of novel and spacious experience, the teachings of the land and its beings begin to emerge.

As the body forms itself into the shape of a tree or a cat, and the mind asks, “How am I like a tree or like a cat?” these questions become an invitation to explore our similarities with, and acknowledge our connections to, these beings with which we cohabit the earth and exchange energy. In this way, the practice of reflective hatha yoga

trains the mind to think beyond the physical form of the body. The various yoga postures and accompanying reflective questions encourage inward looking, and they expand awareness of personal and ecological connections with the chosen elements of the natural environment. In my experience, the more I practise these postures using this method, the more the insights revealed remain with me long after the practice ends. For me, this clearly indicates the powerful potential for reflective hatha yoga to aid in expanding students' awareness of ecological interconnections, which, in turn, is the foundation for developing an ecological consciousness.

References

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