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journey in yoga

by Aanika Chopra

As journeys go... up and down, short & long breaks, upheavals, detours, stopovers, getting lost and all other kind of excitements....I have had them all and you know what? I wouldn't change it for anything!! None of it, because that's what has made me the person I am today. And who am I? This question creeps up so many times and I never find the answer I like to hear!

When I was very young, I used to say I am a dancer. With ghungroos (ankle bells) on my feet, I used to wake up the whole house at the weekend! My brother would scream but the little ballerina in me would not stop. I loved dancing and watching myself dance. It was my Mum who first encouraged me to study classical dance. She played the classical Sitar, which we associate in the West with Ravi Shankar. I had the voice of a cuckoo! I was blessed with a cultural heritage in music and dance which helped my mother fulfil her dreams through me.

I wouldn't ever miss my dance classes and it was the most shocking, sad moment of my life when one fine morning at the age of 15, I woke up with a stiff neck. None of the massages, oil rubs or medication helped. My mum, not knowing what to do, took me to doctors who every kind of method, including placing brass rods on my back, twisting and turning. I screamed and struggled and felt as if I could never ever move my neck again. In acute pain, with my neck in crane shape, I was taken to hospital where I was treated for cervical spondylosis for 4 years. Later on, specialists discovered that I had never had cervical spondylosis but that my neck had in fact been fractured.

Because this wasn't treated or operated on when it should have been, my skull bone fused with my top vertebrae which resulted in limited movement. Despite the restrictions in my body and doctors' advice, I continued with my passion for movement.

In Indian Scriptures they say that your body is your temple. And so I have always looked after it. Growing up in India means living on raw food a lot of the time! Sprouted grains, fresh juices, lots of water and good vegetarian food were all part of my upbringing. My mother used to sprout grains at home and we used to have soaked almonds with honey when we could afford it. But I only really understood the mental detox process at a much later stage when meditation became an integral part of my life.

I grew up watching my Dad start his day with pranayama and used to be amazed when he would stand on his head and smile at me. Yes, he was an expert in headstands! Now I know the feeling of lightness in the posture and not just in my physical body....

After finishing my Prabhakar (6 years course) and undergoing folk dance training in Delhi, I performed extensively with the best of artists, and represented India in the opening ceremony of the Asian

games, 1982. I carried on with my dance work when I came to UK. Residencies performances, festivals, workshopsI enjoyed them all and was also commissioned by Granada TV to choreograph 2 dance pieces.

Life's ups and downs took me on a detour and the woman in me faced a challenge. Standing alone at crossroads, I had to make a living for myself and needing to prove myself strong, I joined the police force! I served in the Met for two years.

A sudden bolt from the blue came when my father was diagnosed with grade 4 cancer. I flew back home instantly. It was at my parent's house where I met a learned naturopath and Yogi who one day invited me to join him in a Shuddhi dhyana (Dynamic Meditation) which his Guru was conducting. I was excited at the prospect and went along with him. Shuddhi Dhyana (Dynamic Meditation) was perhaps the most powerful and intense experience I have ever had.

It was then that I decided that my next line of progression is Yoga. Having completed my first teacher's training course at the Sivananda Institute of Yoga, Kerala, I started teaching Yoga with an intensity and love that I never knew in myself. The student in me took me to Mysore where I finished my second intensive teachers training. At the same time, I had the privilege to begin a course in Ayurveda and I now practise Ayurveda as well.

I returned back to the Midlands from the coconut corner of Mysore. This time my classes had added dimension. Something had intensified in my own practice which subsequently showed in my teaching style. My classes are now very dynamic yet meditative. I cannot teach Yoga as merely a physical culture. Breath and soul leads any asana, from simple to the complicated.

When my father was struggling with life, there was a point when

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wherever I went I seemed to find spiritual writings and books coming to me. 'The Power Of Now' by Eckhart Tolle is my saviour. I have read it umpteen times and every time it gives me renewed energy. My spiritual Guru's words about 'Live in the moment' always bring me back to my centre whenever I go astray. And yes, I do!

Good things happen when you are enjoying yourself. Little nudges of the heart sometimes take you on an interesting turn in your path and that's where I am at today. So, who am I? A dancer? A cop? A Yogini? An Ayurvedic masseuse? Or none of these? I surely am much more than all of these and am very aware that all this is taking me somewhere else. Where, I don't want to know as I want to feel the excitement and joy of the moment when it comes.

I just wanted to share my journey and hope that it will encourage students who give up on their bodies and on Yoga because of a disability. My broken neck never stopped me from my practice in either Yoga or dance. In the bigger picture of life, all is taken care of. Why worry? Letting go is the hardest lesson that I am still learning..

For further details concerning Aanika and her work, including a DVD and new clothing range, see page 47

