

yoga for relationships



'The purpose of yoga is to facilitate the profound inner relaxation that accompanies fearlessness. The release from fear is what finally precipitates the full flowering of love. In this state you will love what you see in others, and others will love you for having been seen' – Erich Schiffmann.

BY MIMI KUO-DEEMER

Erich Schiffmann was my first yoga teacher. He told me that yoga would change the way I live and see life. I had no idea what he meant, but I was ready for something to shift my unhealthy, asthmatic state that often left me in an unhappy and anxious frame of mind. It was only years later that I realised what he was saying – that yoga had an effect far beyond its physical benefits.

Many of us come to yoga because we have heard it can help us physically and give us a chance to relax. It was only by doing yoga that I discovered that it unveiled how the mind works. The process of breathing deeply, moving mindfully and sitting quietly in meditation gave me a perspective on all the irrelevant narratives that went on in my head; it also offered me a way of stepping out of them. In time, I found that when I grew quieter in my own mental space, this had a positive effect on my relationships with others.

Indeed, the physical practice is just one of many doorways into a profound spiritual tradition. We may be able to do 108 sun salutations or put our leg behind our head, but in the words of the yoga teacher and writer Donna Farhi, 'our spiritual fitness can be tested only in relationship to others.'

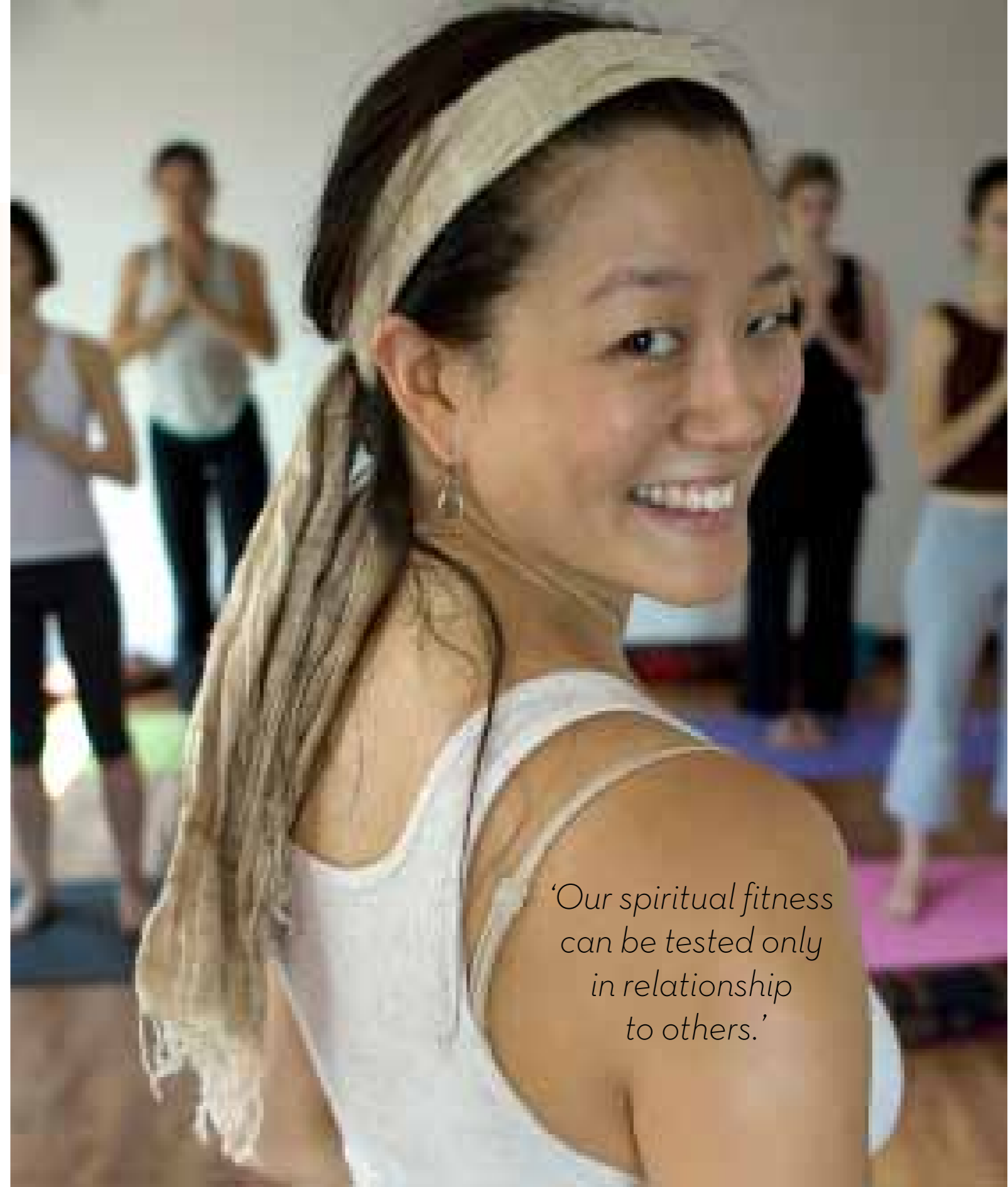
Many of the problems we have in relationships stem from acting without thinking. Whether it be down to our personal frustrations on that particular day or misunderstandings or hurts we have experienced from the past – our accumulated conditioning can lead us to think unpleasant things about people or to say and do

things that we regret. In yoga, our repeated patterns of behaviour – whether positive or negative, and whether consciously intended or not – are known as samskaras.

A yoga practice offers us time to pause for breath and live in our bodies in a more mindful way. When we are present in a non-judgemental way, we can begin to see more clearly, rather than through the lens of past experiences or anxieties about the future. This can allow many of our samskaras (conditioned habits) to surface. We can then begin to work to keep those that serve us well – such as listening before jumping to conclusions – and discard or shift the ones that we're better off without, such as knee-jerk reactions. This gradual yet radical process of self-acceptance can be quite scary when we first try it out. Indeed, when we see what's happening inside our minds it's not always pretty! The effort, however, is worth it.

When we begin to act from a more contemplative mindset, the greatest beneficiaries are our friends, family, colleagues and even strangers. We are much less likely to judge or blame them and they may, in turn, be less likely to judge us.

To make the challenge of managing our relationships a little easier, the ancient yogic texts offer us four principles for living – the brahmavihara. They are approaches to how we can interact with others in a way that causes us the least mental turmoil. Because they often go against our conditioning, they may not be the easiest of paths; but that's the great strength of yoga practice – little by little it begins to change us.



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the four-part plan for better relationships

The brahmavihara make up my favourite of all the Yoga Sutras, written by the sage Patanjali 2,000 years ago. The Sutra (1.33) reads...

'Maitri karuna mudita upekshanam sukha duhka punya apunya vishayanam bhavanatah chitta prasadanam'

...which translates as 'consciousness (i.e. the busy mind) settles when we radiate friendliness, compassion, delight and equanimity toward all things, whether pleasant, painful, good or bad.'



The brahmavihara or 'four attitudes':

1. Maitri - friendliness towards the joyful

This first brahmavihara seems fairly straightforward—happiness is a quality we all strive for. In reality, however, other people's happiness is often a challenge to accept. To celebrate someone else's joy rather than be envious or disapproving often requires us to set aside our own opinions and expectations and simply see it as a source of inspiration.

2. Karuna - compassion for those who are suffering

When we are unhappy, the slightest recognition of our suffering by someone else – a subtle smile, a quick email – fills us with gratitude. Someone is seeing us as we are and not judging us. To extend compassion to someone who is having a hard time moves us out of a space of indifference or frustration and into a place of love. Again, this idea may sound simple, but who hasn't become annoyed with their perpetually grumpy colleague, or felt superior to a friend going through a break-up because we've worked through hard times in a relationship and come out stronger?

Rather than letting someone else's unhappiness become a source of frustration, let it become a source of recognition or caring. This can be as simple as extending a helpful thought to someone in need, or awakening the practice of compassion into the charitable giving of money, resources and time.

There's a fine line between compassion and commiseration, however. It's important to be empathetic, but when one person starts telling a difficult and sad story, sometimes we feel compelled to start telling our own tragic saga. Sometimes we hear of a dilemma and feel compelled to offer strategies to fix it. Compassion is about offering a helping hand and lending a friendly ear.

3. Mudita - delight in the good fortune and good qualities of others



When someone has been rewarded – with a pay rise or an accolade – we can sometimes be quick to question whether they deserve it. Or when we meet a person who seems really nice and well-intentioned, we can sometimes doubt their sincerity. But we don't have to react that way. We can celebrate another person's good achievements and virtues. If we are able to feel genuine delight for someone else's good qualities, it generates less envy and more positivity.

4. Upekshanam - equanimity towards others' faults and shortcomings

If someone messes up, it's easy to look down on. But imagine it's you on the receiving end. Isn't it nicer to have your good qualities recognised than have your bad habits picked apart?

In the brahmavihara, Patanjali offers us ways of



seeing and interacting with other people that will help us stay calm. Maintaining our peace of mind when someone has wronged us is perhaps the biggest task of all. If we are eaten up with anger or hatred towards another person, it only makes us more miserable. Since the bad deed is already done, being angry only wastes energy. A far better use of our mental and emotional resources is to reframe that experience for ourselves (so much easier said than done, but Patanjali urges us to try).

The hardest task is when we are faced with violent atrocities. Of course we shouldn't stand back and watch a bad situation unfold if it's within our power to change it. But we can choose our perspective. On the one hand we can be filled with loathing and say, 'This person is evil and should face the direst consequences,' but on the other hand, yoga would say that what caused this person to commit these atrocities was an accumulation of negative or abusive experiences. Hating the deed rather than the person allows us to retain our humanity and build relationships rather than pile up enemies.

I find it helpful to think that when Patanjali's Yoga Sutras were written the ancient yogis were as flawed and challenged at calming themselves down as I may be; this makes friendliness, compassion, delight and equanimity in the face of all things good, bad, happy and unhappy sound like a reasonable endeavour.