

Sweet Surrender

All excuses aside, how could you begin to commit to a daily yoga practice?

By Phillip Moffitt

Forty-one-year-old Kim Knorr-Tait awakens each morning between 5 and 5:30 a.m. There is no alarm; she just wakes up. The first thing she does is head to the kitchen where she makes herself a small pot of green tea which she carries back into her bedroom, all the while being quiet so as not to disturb her sleeping 12-year-old daughter, Alyssa. She then takes an old couch pillow which she folds in half and sits on in front of a small altar she has constructed in the corner of her bedroom. It's not a fancy altar, just a small table with a white cloth on which she has placed various objects which are meaningful to her: a picture of the Virgin Mary with the Christ child given to her by a Benedictine monk, some mala beads, photos of people she loves, and some rocks and other earth images which connect her to the ground. For the next 20 minutes or so she will sit and read, from the *Bhagavad Gita*, or from Thomas Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation* (W.W. Norton, 1974), or her latest favorite, John O'Donohue's *Eternal Echoes* (Cliff Street Books, 1999).

After reading she sits there another half an hour in meditation and prayer. She chants "om" in its three distinct syllables—"ahhh...oohhh...mmmm"—as a kind of mantra meditation. The prayer is her own eclectic creation in which she gives thanks and appreciation, seeks to stay present and open, and holds those she loves in light. From a little window in her meditation corner, she soon witnesses the birth of the day, instinctively feeling what the weather will hold—

not a small matter because she lives on a farm in Pennsylvania where weather is always a concern. By now it's 7 a.m. and time to wake Alyssa for school. Calm and inspired by her morning practice, she spends the next 45 minutes delighting in being a mom until her daughter runs out to catch the school bus.

After her daughter leaves, Kim goes into her living room and spreads out her yoga mat. Sometimes she will put on some quiet music, either Ravi Shankar or Narada. For the next five to 10 minutes she does pranayama—*kapalabhati* (breath of fire) and *anuloma viloma* (a type of alternate nostril breathing). Then she stands at the end of her mat and begins her hatha yoga practice with 10 minutes of Sun Salutations. The standing poses are next, followed by a few balancing ones; if there is still time, she will do some floor work, if not, just Savasana (Corpse Pose). She has to be finished by 8:30 a.m. because she has a business to run.

Kim is the owner of Tait Farm Foods, a wholesale and retail business which operates out of the farm and employs 10 people. The company sells gourmet natural products such as chutney, herbal olive oil, vinegar, and seeds. There's also a harvest shop which sells direct to the public and gives garden tours. It's hard work with all the inherent pressures of being a small business without a lot of

capital. Kim's husband, David, started the business, but he died of cancer two years ago, so now it's all her responsibility.

Around 5 or 6 p.m., her tasks are finally complete, and she begins another round of Sun Salutations, standing poses, inversions, backbends, and forward bends for the next hour and 30 minutes. On warm spring and summer evenings she will put her yoga mat on the little deck outside the living room where she can be with the robins, the blooming cherry trees, and the wisteria. She's always teaching



ILLUSTRATION: BECKY HEAVNER

herself a new pose; recently she's been working on Scorpion (Vrschikasana) and Peacock (Pincha Mayurasana). In the middle of Kim's practice, Alyssa may wander in to seek help with a math problem, which Kim has frequently helped solve while standing on her head. It is always fine for Alyssa to just sit in the room and talk while Kim does her asanas; in turn, Alyssa is very supportive. "It's important she never feels excluded," Kim explains.

No Excuses

"I could never have a daily practice like Kim's," you say to yourself. "After all, I have family obligations." But Kim's got family to think about too, especially as a single parent. "Oh, but there is my job," you say. But Kim runs her own business. Then you switch to self denigration: "I'm too lazy, lack ability, or motivation, and I'm not well organized." But this is just a story you are telling yourself. Stop, experience your breath, find your feet on

the floor, and for just a few minutes live in the open-minded space of "not knowing," of pure investigation. How could you begin to commit to a daily practice; or, if you already have one, how could you take the next step and begin to surrender to the practice like Kim?

"You have to allow it to be transforming," she says. "Sometimes you can be right on the threshold, sort of committed, and then some life experience will just carry you there. For me, it wasn't really a conscious decision; it was just what was next. And when you commit to it, it really starts to change your life. It gives me the balance, the centeredness to handle what I have to do." She's quiet for a moment, "The commitment is the most challenging thing. It has to become non-negotiable."

Kim grew up with a mother who did yoga and remembers seeing her practicing headstands, but she only started doing yoga herself 12 years ago. In one of those synchronistic moments, she found her yoga teacher in an airport. She and her first husband were moving from

Massachusetts to State College, Pennsylvania, and she had just started doing yoga regularly. She was waiting for a flight in the Pittsburgh airport, carrying baby Alyssa on her back, and feeling very nervous about the move, when she started talking to the guy sitting next to her. When she asked him what he did, he told her he was a yoga teacher in State College. This man turned out to be Iyengar instructor Dean Lerner, who would later become her teacher. "Dean has made such a difference," she explains. "He has discipline and humor, and he lives his commitment to yoga. He is very dedicated and shows me by example what is possible."

Reap the Rewards

Kim is fortunate to have a practice that enables her to find balance in both her body and mind such that her life simply works. "I never have to make myself do it," she says. "Each day I look forward to my practice. It's the supreme act of self-care." If you look closely, you can see that Kim has created not one,

but two practices: hatha yoga for movement and a combination of prayer, meditation, and pranayama for stillness. Kim has achieved on her own initiative what I call in my professional work “life balance.”

At the Life Balance Institute in Belvedere, California, I work with men and women who have achieved what the world calls “success” but find themselves feeling unexpectedly dissatisfied. Often these highly functioning individuals lament that their lives don’t feel whole, and the happiness and peace they thought success would bring still eludes them. Some report their lives are going great, but there is something else they want to do, such as write a book or study music, and they need help envisioning how to fit it all together. Others, like Kim, have experienced a tragedy like the loss of a loved one, or are coping with a severe injury or illness.

I usually work with my clients for a few weeks or even months and may recommend a psychotherapist, or if they have physical problems, a somatic edu-

cator. Together we go through their lives, examining them without judgment, paying attention to imbalances and neglected feelings. We may create an action plan, or a timetable for change, or create new language for identifying patterns of self-harming behavior. Sometimes we do movement practices together so they can get a bodily experience of certain feelings that arise under stress, or we sit and meditate. All of these steps usually make a difference. But once a sense of balance or meaning starts to form in a person’s life, it’s almost impossible for him or her to sustain it without a spirit-based practice such as yoga or meditation.

I’ve found this need for a practice that connects the individual to something greater than him or herself to be almost universal. Yet many of my clients have actively resisted the commitment, even though they are bright, hard working, and highly motivated. Through the years of doing this work, I’ve learned that it’s the surrender of control and expectations that a spirit-based practice requires which makes it

so difficult to embrace.

What’s even more difficult for many of my clients is that I urge them, like Kim, to commit to two practices: a stillness practice such as contemplative prayer or meditation, and a movement practice such as yoga, aikido, or qigong. The two practices have overlapping but different teachings. What is called “insight” in vipassana meditation can best arise in a stillness practice; put simply, it is learning to just be with the truth of what you’re feeling and experiencing in the present moment and witnessing how the mind tries to avoid moment-to-moment experience. A movement practice teaches you how to be centered in the world and allows you to practice regaining your balance over and over again. In one sense all of life is movement, and to have a safe place where you can practice movement with awareness is ideal.

Exactly which practices you do are less important than choosing ones that resonate with you such that you are willing to make them a daily practice. If you

have been drawn to yoga, then you should explore it; experiment with what happens when you give yourself fully to it. "It transforms everything," Kim says. "It is the miracle of change—all I do is show up, and the rest just happens. But you know you've worked for it, and that feels really honorable. It doesn't happen overnight, but it occurs. Now I'm aware that I'm off my center when I miss even a day of practice."

Kim is surrendering to her practice. She has intention, she works on improving her poses, but mostly she is allowing it to shape her by simply giving herself over to the form. This is how a spirit-based practice works; the elements of change, grounding, and purification are in the form itself, so your challenge is only to find a way to practice that has integrity and loving-kindness.

Just Do It

So how does Kim stick with it through the long cold winter months and the alluring warm summer evenings? "I try to be gentle with myself," she says with a little laugh. "Sometimes I will play music, or I will make myself a cup of tea. When I first started I would only do the poses I liked. I hated backbends, so I just wouldn't practice them, but finally I established a routine where I do all the poses every day. I choose something to emphasize such as variations in the inversions, but I do them all." She doesn't seem to realize just how remarkable a twice-daily practice really is. "Oh, it takes a while with a home practice," she says. "It can take two years to just get away from the wall in Headstand, and there are those mornings when you can't even touch your toes."

Something that helped her develop a daily practice was discovering the Sivananda Yoga retreats. "I do Iyengar Yoga, but it was the Sivananda people who taught me a set routine, and that was so helpful. I try to go for a week once a year. I set aside just a little money every week so I can afford it. I think everybody that wants to establish a home practice should go to yoga retreats, at least to a

weekend retreat, because you end up doing yoga four, five, even six hours a day. It's a real immersion." I ask her how she avoids getting caught in the swirl of work and home activities, particularly since her business is there on the farm. "Oh, your practice time has to be a real commitment, and you have to make adjustments. For instance, my daughter and I don't eat dinner until eight o'clock."

It's always so easy to say, "Oh, but Kim is in a better position to practice yoga. Imagine the quiet of her farm," or "If I just had a teacher like hers." Again, this is just your mind making up stories. Kim's farmhouse sits near a busy road, so some mornings she has to wear ear plugs to shut out the noise of passing trucks. Instead of depending on her teacher for motivation, she has taken responsibility for developing her own practice. "What I have is a resource in my life," Kim says. "It is there for me, and it shows me the way to my personal sense of grace and clarity."

Isn't this really what you want as well: Your own sense of grace and clarity? How could it possibly be achieved except through a struggle of hope and doubt, intention and failure? One day you simply arrive, not at some special place, but the most ordinary of places—your regular up-and-down, always busy life, just as it is. But now it is your own for the very first time. There is within you a place of quiet and surrender, a place from which you get up in the morning and without the need of inspiration or optimism find your way to the cushion or the mat and offer yourself just as you are—sleepy, fresh, grumpy, or cheerful—to the moment as it arises. And in that moment, you know that you are alive and at peace, for you are not separate from all else. ♦

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