

# Ancient medicine for modern health: yoga and emotional literacy

## Opinion

Have you ever heard a yoga teacher say you store emotions in your hips? Or that asanas (poses) release stress or anxiety? Do you ever wonder which emotions they are referring to? Or maybe you are the scientific type, a “you can’t literally keep emotions in your hips,” but the truth is the yoga asana practice invites emotional exploration and emotional literacy.

Emotional literacy is a term that describes the interplay between naming one’s emotions, understanding their gifts, and cultivating self-awareness. According to Paul Eckman, who has studied facial expressions around the globe for over 40 years, research findings suggests that there are six primary emotional states, anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise. Subsequent research conducted by Humintell’s scientifically validated model found 7 basic emotions anger, contempt (jealousy), fear, disgust, happiness, sadness and surprise. Emotions have hallmarks that exist cross culturally. Some important things to know about your emotions is that they are not permanent, they are noble, and they will keep sending signals to the brain that prompts us into action. This action is a biological response to your surroundings. For example, when we are happy in a relationship we tend to spend more time with a partner, but when we feel manipulated or angry, we typically pull away from a relationship. Our feelings give us the gift of action. All emotions are important, and there are no “negative” emotions, rather it is what you do with it.

It is important to note that emotional literacy is not the same as emotional intelligence. Intelligence studies are historically rooted in eugenics testing that promoted the notion that being smart is an inherent trait that is not learned. Popular notions of emotional intelligence testing promoted by Daniel Goleman’s research studies are based on workplace efficiency and emotional competence for customer service. Whereas in the emotional literacy sphere, headed in the UK by Susie Orbach emotional literacy is a learned characteristic that can be used in life learning and self-awareness outside of corporate settings. Emotional literacy is developmental and is rooted in a tradition of mental wellbeing, while emotional intelligence is fixed and rooted in workplace efficiency.

Emotional literacy invites us to name our emotions and understand their messages; they are teachers that illuminate the areas in our life that need attention. Author Karla McLaren suggests that emotions are gifts. Each gift has a unique attribute that is helpful: anger teaches us how to develop boundaries, shame asks us to questions if we broke our internal boundaries or if other are emotionally manipulating us, jealousy reminds us to look at what we have and invites us to see where we need more nourishment, grief and sadness tell us to let go of old situations and let loved ones move on. Fear tells us to pay attention and use our intuition, whereas disgust tells you the food in your refrigerator are most likely bad. Emotions are not “good” or “bad,” rather it is what you do with them. Emotions invite us to take a stance of self-awareness and become curious about the language of

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our emotions and messages from our bodies, while emotional literacy is purely the practices of naming, dialoguing, listening to our bodies, and cultivating empathy with self, so we can have it with others there is more.

The more one cultivates self-awareness the more they begin to learn that emotions are psychosomatic. This means that we feel the biological response to a situation take form in our soma, the body. An example might be getting butterflies when you are about to speak in public, or getting a stomach ache before an important meeting. When you are angry, what happens to your fists, your shoulders? Yes, everything clenches. Your muscles, nerves, and tendons all respond to the emotional signals from your brain and is felt in different parts of your body. In the Vedic tradition there are 72,000 channels in your body that align at your belly. Hence, the gut instinct. Other traditions outside of Western science have been effective in documenting the ways that our internal organs hold and digest our emotional states. Traditional Chinese Medicine, a system that is 2,000 years old, suggests that the 5 primary organs are responsible for processing our emotions. According to a five-element theory, the lungs process grief, the heart joy, the spleen overthinking, the kidneys fear, and the liver anger. Movement and breathing exercises are invaluable as they help to stimulate the organ to process its related emotions.

Western methods of scientific inquiry have only existed for the last 200 years. Positivistic inquiry is limited by its instruments. Thus, measuring fear in your gut or a broken heart can only be done with a limited instrument, as the heart is immeasurable and fear operates in a psychological space. Though some reliable studies exist, such as the work of neurologist Antonio Damasio who demonstrates a somatic response to emotional stimuli, there is still room to grow and a need to look to old world traditional medicine that lives within Vedic knowledge, Latin American healing, and Chinese medicine.

In a yoga asana and meditation practice, we calm and quiet the mind as a way to listen to the messages of the body. If you have any emotions that you have not dealt with or have repressed they will use

this time to speak with you. Especially if you have not made time to catch up with yourself and/or emotionally check in. Each emotion as a unique language. You may feel the emotion of fear or feel vulnerable when you open up your pericardium in a deep back bend or leap into a handstand for the first time. You may cry when you are opening up your hip joints and surrounding muscle tissue. This is a release; it is safe and normal.

What your yoga teacher has probably not mentioned is that emotions are loyal and they persist, despite how long ago you felt a specific way. You may find yourself noticing a grudge that you still have from your teenage years or processing childhood emotional trauma much later in life. We only emote or process life's traumatic experiences when we are developmentally and physically ready to do so. Moreover, many old world medicinal treatments espouse the notion that we have to understand boundaries between our personal emotions, ancestral emotions, and karmic emotions. Emotions occur on the individual and the collective level.

So the next time your yoga teacher remarks that yoga releases emotions, ask yourself which ones? What are they trying to tell you? In what postures specifically? And see if those emotions fit into a larger social context. You may be surprised at the ways that yoga asanas and a clear mind develop your emotional literacy. Emotional literacy invites us to name our emotions, understand their messages, look at how they are rooted in a larger social or ancestral context, cultivate healthy boundaries, and witness our feelings with compassion. Emotional literacy does not mean that you are never angry or have

a bad day, or that you walk around only capable of saying positive affirmations about how you feel. Emotional literacy means we live in the authenticity of how we feel and respond by being a compassionate witness first to self and then others.

### **Five things every yogi should know about their emotions**

- i. Everybody has emotions, they are normal and prompt us to take action.
- ii. Emotional literacy is one's ability to listen to the language of one's emotions.
- iii. No emotions are negative it is what you do with them that counts!
- iv. Yoga is great for emotional health as it helps your practice self-regulation with your breath.
- v. The practice of emotional literacy invites us to witness our emotions and respond with nonjudgmental and compassion.

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