

## The Opposite of Motivation: Making Surrender a Part of Your Practice, By Alena Gerst, LMSW, RYT

I recently attended a lecture at Columbia University given by an ambitious psychotherapist and co-founder of the [NY Voice Dialogue Institute](#). The speaker's energy and enthusiasm for her work in mental health were infectious as she spoke of her focus on helping people heal from the moment she entered graduate school.

I felt a palpable kinship to her trailblazing energy, and soon into her talk I discovered why...like me, in her first career she had been an actor! I couldn't wait to introduce myself.

One of my favorite things about being an actor was being around other actors. Not only do most people who choose this particularly challenging occupation seem to have an innate charm and warmth about them; they also possess what I believe is a tireless, highly motivated drive to succeed.

I've learned that these qualities inevitably follow actors down whatever career paths they choose to follow beyond performing. Of course many people from all professions bring these same qualities to their work, whether it be parenting, healing, teaching, performing, advocating, managing, etc.

### The opposite of motivation is not lazy

I had always counted high motivation in my work as a perk, and it certainly was in a field as fiercely competitive as performing. But it wasn't until I took to the Yoga mat that I began to see how my hard-driving tendencies could be dangerous. Not only could I be injured in Yoga, but in life these patterns often left me feeling frustrated, tired, and at a loss for what to do when things didn't go the way I wanted them to.

Put another way, in Yoga, we refer to this sense of drive and motivation as *Tapas*, translated as a certain kind of willfulness, to be disciplined. Many actors, indeed many people, have a strong tendency toward *Tapas*.

In contrast to *Tapas*, the practice of Yoga teaches another concept known as *Ishvara Pranidhana*...surrender. I resisted this concept for many years, and still do sometimes, but it has become a key component of my practice and my teaching.

Some people have trouble with activating *Tapas*, the discipline to practice. They may recognize in themselves a tendency for complacency, even if they know the world has more to offer. And others struggle with Surrender, the practice of letting go, acceptance of where you are. A Yoga practice, using the body as a learning tool, can help you determine when you are being will-full, pushing too hard, and when you are taking it [a little too] easy and can benefit from challenging yourself more.

#### A very practical example:

As a dancer, I repeatedly sprained my left outer ankle over the years, to the point where it became weak and vulnerable to injury...I never gave it enough time after each sprain to heal properly. Over the years, my doctor tells me, protective tissue has developed around the joint to

stabilize it, limiting mobility. In general it doesn't bother me much, however a specific family of seated yoga poses is a very different story.

Recently I was practicing this set of poses when I heard myself thinking, "Ouch! That's my bad ankle." A virtual library of memories and images flooded my mind and body. I recalled the years of twisting my ankle in class, at auditions, in rehearsals, during performances...taking a couple advil, bandaging it, and hurrying back into the game.

Then I changed my thoughts to, "This is a strong opening in my ankle. I'm not ready to work this deeply." I knew this to be a more truthful assessment of my experience, as opposed to naming it "my bad ankle". I hooked a strap around my foot and modified the pose.

Will I ever be able to fully achieve the pose? I don't know, and it doesn't really matter.

I learned what I was meant to learn in that moment about when to be will-full (*Tapas*), and when to surrender (*Ishvara Pranidhana*). In Hatha Yoga, the body can be a very persistent and honest teacher.

## The Broader Concept

When we see things for what they truly are on the mat, we are more likely to translate our lessons off the mat. In general, a balance between *Tapas* (will-fullness) and *Ishvara Pranidhana* (surrender) is the essence of a balanced practice. It is through this foundation of self study (*Svadyaya*) in Yoga, that we come to know our tendencies, and by design, better know ourselves.

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