

Your Body As Teacher

THE INSPIRATION OF VANDA SCARAVELLI

By Anna Crowley

What does it mean to be left alone with your body on a mat, with no standard instructions as to what a position should look like? What does it mean to come to yoga practice fresh each time? To throw away *ideas* about how poses should be done? What does it mean to develop a creative practice - one that evolves moment to moment? How do we learn to follow the rhythms of our body and mind? The rhythms of breathing, rest and movement of attention? How would it be possible to allow your body to really become your teacher in your yoga practice? The yoga of Vanda Scaravelli invites people to explore these questions deeply and to seek the answers within their practice.

*"Movement is the song of the body. Yes the body has its own song from which the movement of dancing arises spontaneously."*¹

Many would recognise these as the famous words of Vanda Scaravelli, the great yogini who was introduced to yoga by B.K.S. Iyengar and T.K.V. Desikachar. Vanda later discovered an approach to yoga which emphasised the life of the spine, and gave freedom to the body to function naturally. Vanda has since died, but her teachings are visible in the comfortable strength and lightness of the bodies of those who were taught by her.

The experience of any yoga practice is not something that can be easily understood simply by talking about it. Vanda's approach is all the harder to talk about because she refused to let anything crystallise into a "style". She once said, "Yoga cannot be organised, must not be organised... it is a living process that changes moment by moment." However, the thread of this beautiful approach is reflected in the words that Vanda's students use to describe their evolving practice.

In 2008 I conducted a series of one-to-one interviews with three practitioners who keep the spirit of Vanda's teaching alive today.

Diane Long was Vanda's personal student for over 20 years and now teaches internationally. She recalls, "my first experience was when Vanda asked me to come to her house and she took me into her yoga room and she said, "Watch", and I started watching her doing backbends from standing and I had never seen so much relaxation and aliveness in someone's body."

Sophy Hoare also studied with Vanda. "She would clamber all over me, push me and pull me, not explain anything, I was just completely in her hands. I've got a memory of her ancient face (Vanda was 83 at the time), hanging upside down, peering at me, to make sure I was doing the right thing... But the main thing is that my body felt so free and deeply alive afterwards. I had no idea what she'd done or how she'd done it but it was just amazing." Sophy later continued her practice with Diane and now teaches workshops with her in Europe.

Ed Fellows is a long-term student of both Diane and Sophy and teaches in London. Prior to encountering this approach, Ed was already an established yoga teacher, but a prolapsed disk was causing him agonising back pain and had brought him to the brink of a major operation. He recalls when he started going to Sophy's classes. "I'd been used to pushing myself and holding positions

and thinking I needed to try harder to be better and suddenly I was faced with not being able to do anything, and then there was someone who was saying to me 'just rest a bit more'. It made deep sense to me. My body recognised something and asked me to stay with that relief. It was a massive relief."

In this article, Diane, Sophy and Ed share some comments about their practice. Common themes in their responses have been compiled under common questions. Sometimes surprising, sometimes intriguing, their words can inspire practitioners from all backgrounds in yoga to deepen the quality of their practice.

This approach to yoga does not prescribe exact positions in asana work and seems to include a lot of movement. Could you describe a little what this approach is about?

Sophy: "Well I can say what it's not about. It's not about stretching and bending in the conventional sense. It's not a static thing, where you name poses and try to perfect them in a particular way. It's not about those things. It's more about feeling inside the body and undoing [tension]."

Ed: "We get stuck in assuming that for instance to stand up I stand in this way, you know, we make very big generalisations, very fundamental assumptions about what it is to stand, what it is to be in headstand, what it is to be in downward dog, how my body is here, now. These assumptions take me away from my experience, from myself... We get obsessed with A and B and actually A and B aren't very interesting compared to what's between – there's so much going on there, so much movement... I would go so far as to say there is no pose, so I never want to get to the end, to the pose. I always want to explore the movement of where I am and this might take me somewhere else but I still enjoy where I am."

Diane: "There's always a directional sense [in the practice] but from where [do you go and] to where? And through where? Say I'm doing a forward bend, I can start from the wrist and the hands, I can start from anywhere, but I have to find how it brings me to the spine, and find how the spine releases me back again... A lot of times we use the idea of waves, but from where does the wave come, and how does it release itself and from where does it come again?"

The quality of attention you bring to the yoga practice in each moment seems to be of central importance. What sort of attention are you cultivating?

Sophy: "You have to have a certain curiosity. I like the expression of resting my attention somewhere. You know if you're really interested in something, anything, you don't find it difficult to read about it, or watch a film about it. You're literally all ears. Like anything that you find interesting or beautiful in nature, there's a kind of lightness to it. So it's not like 'concentrate really hard on this', it's more like turning a light on something. You know, just turn the light of your awareness onto it because you're interested in it."

Sophy: "You can't be goal-oriented and have attention in this way. They don't co-exist. Because the minute you have a goal, a specific goal, like in terms of being able to do something, a result, the minute you have that, the *second* you have that, your attention's not there in the same way any

more. There isn't space around it, somehow, to feel what's going on, because what we've really got to do is to feel what's going on, feel what's there."

Ed: "I think that's how it links to meditation. It's the ability to stay with yourself, to stay with the connections that are already there, with yourself being enough, with your breathing as it is - not to change- change is a gift."

What goes through your mind then as you prepare to move into a pose?

Diane: "That I've never done the position before. That I must, in the moment, discover for the first time, how to do that position... so being a beginner, a real beginner in that position."

Sophy: "[I] pay attention to every little thing, like even how I put my arm down on the floor or something, as if I've never done it before, and just take it one little step at a time. And in that way I think what's happening when you do that is you're really cultivating the attention again. Because when that's there, the body starts to respond... And the more it starts to respond, the more it reinforces your ability to bring your attention to it again."

Sophy: "Usually as I start doing something... I haven't got a plan; I have a pleasurable sense of, well something's going to unfold and maybe I'll find out something... I don't anticipate anything in particular because I want to be in the moment, I want to let myself feel."

Watching you practise, I have been struck by the rhythmic play between engagement and resting into the ground. You are free to move and explore your relationship to the ground. How would you describe it?

Ed: "Because I started from such a specific experience of being in chronic pain, I spent a lot of time undoing and softening in order to release my skeleton from this very powerful crushing grip of my muscles and also because my outer muscles were very hard, very rigid. I followed my breath, just letting different parts of my body follow my breathing, really just being very attentive to how I am stopping this part of my spine from breathing by my holding, by my tension."

Sophy: "It's about feeling inside the body, and undoing, and working through the joints, and separating the body where it's got stuck together, to give it more freedom so that it can pull together in a different way."

When you feel stuck or that not much is happening, how do you respond?

Diane: "There are moments when it's the hardest thing you can imagine doing to find [a sense of] wholeness. That's when you have to use play, you have to use surprise!... So for instance you're asking the same use of muscles, the same use of imagination in one posture, and then surprise it by going to another posture and then coming back. So perhaps you have to speed things up because the mind is dull that day, or sometimes the mind is just too much so you have to [slow] it down. It's maybe the same qualities that one would use to be a pianist, to be a musician, the qualities of rhythm and rest, and giving time for the resonance to be heard, to express itself... I'm more

interested in how all the qualities enrich what I'm doing instead of how they help me do the position."

Ed: "Now I know that when I think that nothing's happening, it's often a transition stage where I'm not realising that something new is happening because I'm not recognising it.... There's always something happening and we just might not be recognising it because it might not be what we're expecting."

You have said that this approach to yoga is neither a system nor a method. This must be frustrating for students who are looking for take-away techniques?

Diane: "I'm looking to create a freedom in the beginning, a wholeness in the beginning. That is my vehicle to move into the asana, and that is always my goal when I am in the asana... It's learning to get closer to the body's intelligence, so it won't lock itself into a method."

Sophy: "I like the fact that you can't define it and pin it down. It cannot be turned into a method, it doesn't belong to anybody and it isn't one person's invention; it's a discovery."

Ed: "It's not a system that you can tie down. It's about really looking and not coming with a set of rules or something that you apply to someone, a fixed idea that you apply to someone."

If it is not a system, then what is it?

Diane: "I remember when Vanda first wrote her book, she didn't know whether to call it "Awakening the spine" or "Reawakening the spine", because it's like already one time we lived with the spine, the spine was formed, and we lived in a [simpler] way. There is some type of deep knowledge in the body and when we come back to that knowledge, we've already been there. It's like coming home to ourselves."

Ed: "I think there's a lot about feeling here. Trusting feeling, trusting what we're feeling over what we know. What we know is that 'I know I'm stiff and I know I'm not going to be able to do this, I know backbend hurts me or I know I'm great at doing backbend.'"

Diane: "It continues to reveal more and more insights about how intelligent the body is. It's just never-ending. And it's like layers and layers of letting go, of going into and finding how the body awakens. It just keeps waking up over and over. The body truly does, when you care for it and invite it to show its intelligence, it gives you such marvellous responses."

Sophy: "We aren't trying to impose a shape on our bodies, but the same process is at work in each one of us, and that is visible from the outside, even though it's an inner movement coming to life. It's not a method, but a discovery of something that is potentially there in everybody. We are awakening and using a specific network of muscles, even though we don't know what we are going to find until it happens."

Ed: "One can talk about freedom and resting and engagement and relating better and all these things, but they only carry meaning when they're embodied, when they come from experience. By quietening down, one gets that as an experience, and not as an idea."

Because this approach is not built on a system of cognitive information, opportunities for teachers to work one-on-one with students and to guide with their hands is very important. The experience itself is also constantly changing, yet gradually moving towards greater ease and comfort.

“Say if you asked me a question I don’t have the answers because it keeps presenting new possibilities all the time,” says Diane. “So whatever I’ve arrived at, it reopens. It continues to leave me without the answers.”

Anna would like to thank Diane, Sophy and Ed for kindly participating in the interviews. For more information, you can go to:

www.dianelongyoga.com www.sophyhoare.co.uk www.edfellowsyoga.com

ⁱ V. Scaravelli. *Awakening the Spine*. Harper: San Francisco, p28.