



personal reflection sandy blaine

under water

Long before a friend dragged me to my first Hatha Yoga class, I found myself, one childhood summer vacation, in a meditative state in an indoor, Olympic-sized pool, as I moved rhythmically through the water in time to nothing but my own breath.

I had, previously, never been an especially enthusiastic swimmer. As a young child, I had been afraid of the water. Only months of patient instruction from a wonderful teen-aged swimming teacher in my neighbourhood, who gave lessons in her family's backyard pool, convinced me even to put my face in the water. Gradually, I became accustomed to the water, and proficient enough at the mechanics, but I was never a racer, nor a fun-in-the-sun kind of child. At summer camp, I preferred to hide in the shady roots of a tree with a book or a daydream rather than splash noisily around with the other kids in the swimming hole.

This was different.

When I jumped into the pool that day, it was more to escape weeks of being trapped in our station wagon with my family than with any idea of fitness, let alone meditation. It wasn't until much later, years into my devoted yoga practice, that I was able to define what I had discovered that day as a meditative trance. All I knew was that, with lap after lap of moving, counting, and breathing, the clear mind and quiet exhilaration that emerged within me was, quite literally, entrancing.

The water was lukewarm, the temperature of a bath that has been sitting a little too long. It seeped into my pores until my fingers and toes puckered. I was only dimly aware of the wavery arms and legs of a few other swimmers and the children playing around me in the pool; the echoes of their voices bouncing off the walls seemed far away. Each time I turned my face up out of the water to breathe, my nose filled with the scent of chlorine. I could feel my eyes stinging, and my vision blurred, but my path was clear—straight across and back again, over and over. My memory of feeling timeless is vivid. I had no desire to stop.

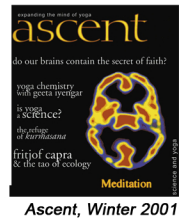
I realized that I was close to fifty laps and could keep going; I was still moving easily through the silky warm water when I reached a hundred. I had never swum laps before and found, as I pulled myself red-eyed out of the pool, that the lack of fatigue was an illusion encouraged by the weightlessness of submersion—every muscle quivered on dry land. But I knew I had found something sustaining in the water that I could not define—and at age fourteen I didn't need to understand it. At home I became a regular, solitary swimmer, addicted to the endorphins and the unconscious act of—yes!—watching my breath.

Twelve years later, I fell in love with yoga. At first, I went to classes that were challenging, fun and somewhat social; gradually, I began to practise on my own, and with this my experience deepened. Over time, *asana* became a quiet sanc-



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tuary for me, organically awakening my latent spirituality and calling me to meditation. And the familiar feeling of meditation eventually brought back the memory of that first ecstatic swim, along with a fuller understanding of the meaning behind what I had felt that long-ago day.

There is something in me, and many of us, that connects profoundly to the combination of physical movement and meditation, to the power of breath as a meditative doorway. Our cells were born in the sea, and there is something primal and soul-nourishing about being in the water, whether a mountain lake or an indoor pool.

As I realized the relationship between my yoga practice and my experience of swimming, I also learned that yoga is not limited to a specific series of postures and precepts. With intention, or even sometimes without it, anything can be yoga. Yoga is the discovery of an underlying awareness

of the miracle of our own consciousness. It is in the dawning knowledge that we can rein in our baser human impulses and, with diligence, learn to practise gratitude and tenderness. It is in the momentary flash of awareness that we are part of something bigger, the unfathomable Divine that we strive to know through our practice. And sometimes that awareness finds us even when we are not seeking it. ☸

Sandy Blaine practises, teaches and writes about yoga in Oakland, California. She taught yoga at U.C. Berkeley for many years, and now has public classes at the Alameda Yoga Station, where she is co-director, and at the Berkeley Yoga Room, where she also is on the faculty for their Advanced Training Program. Her writing has appeared in *Yoga Journal* and *Yoga International* magazines.