

FREEING OUR VOICES

An Interview with Anne Cushman

As a writer and teacher of Yoga and Buddhist meditation, Anne Cushman explores the poignant intersection between spiritual practice, creativity and life. In the process, she's struggled to balance her identities as a writer and a yogini. In this interview, she shares her creative process and helpful hints for cultivating the flow of Yoga and creativity as pathways to awakening. She explains that both Yoga and creativity can be, "ways of connecting to our life in all its juiciness, immediacy and aliveness."

Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM): What is your relationship to Yoga and writing?

Anne Cushman (AC): Yoga and writing are both mastery paths. Sometimes it feels like I could devote my entire life to either one. The art and craft of writing could consume all my time and so could the art and pursuit of Yoga. Practicing, studying, teaching Yoga is a full life in itself. So, just on the practical level, I sometimes feel, "Oh, I could be getting so much more writing done if I weren't spending several hours a day in spiritual practice or regularly going off on retreats—either to teach or take a retreat." But, the choice I've made is to do both because my spiritual practice is the ground from which my writing emerges.

Even if I do less writing and, in the eyes of the world, accomplish less, that's not the point. I really need to root myself in a deep practice life in order to write. Without my Yoga practice, I couldn't do the kind of writing I do because my writing is grounded in an intimate connection with my body, my life and my heart. My Yoga practice is my way of connecting to that. And there are the sheer physical demands of sitting at the computer and writing—if I spent all my time writing, my body wouldn't be happy!

IYM: You've said that Yoga isn't a path to some "disembodied enlightenment," but a path that takes you into the heart of life. What do you mean?

AC: The heart of it for me is the idea of Yoga practice not as a way of *transcending* life but as a way of *connecting* with life. All my experiences of going on retreat, of living in spiritual community, have taught me that life—people, relationships, responsibilities—comes with it. Even celibate monastics have relationships with their fellow monastics. So, wherever we are, life is right there.

In the beginning, I think I believed some kind of myth that, if I did Yoga, life wouldn't be so messy or complex, that I wouldn't need to deal with uncomfortable emotions or passions. I then discovered that life goes on being life but, because of Yoga, I have a reflective, flexible, sane and connected way of being in this flow of life—my practice takes me right in and opens up my life to me so I can really be there for it. There's a trap we can fall into in our Yoga practice: We can think we're going to be able to

control our bodies, our minds and our lives. What's much more interesting to me is getting into a *relationship* with my body, mind and life—a relationship that's characterized by sensitivity, presence, openness, responsiveness, flexibility and attention rather than a relationship that's characterized by clinging, aversion, reactivity, pushing away, grabbing onto or trying to control.

IYM: What role does discipline play in Yoga and creativity?

AC: Anyone who has ever played an instrument knows that, for all the freedom of improvisation, there are hours and hours put in mastering the basics and playing scales. In any art form there's a balance between discipline and freedom, between form, structure and spontaneity. That's also one of the things we can explore in our Yoga practice: the balance between will and surrender: *abhyasa* and *vairagya*, having focused intention and showing up again and again for our practice, and then letting go into its flow.

It's discipline that enables us to carve out the time—whether for the creative arts or for our Yoga practice. The whole tide of modern life is telling us to do something else with our time—go online, shop, find deals during the holidays. Can we make the space to come to our Yoga mats and meditation cushions, to come to our pen and paper, our journals, our paints, our clay? Can we make that window through which creativity and spontaneity can pour? There's an incredible power we cultivate in Yoga by doing our practices whether we feel like it or not. We can make our practice a training ground through which we can cultivate our spiritual and creative lives.

A lot of my writing comes out of journaling. Sometimes I feel, "I'm not going to sit down and journal because nothing happened today. I'm just living my ordinary, old boring life so maybe I'll wait and journal when I'm traveling in India or when something exciting happens.

The act of writing, like meditation, is a way of paying attention. I'll sometimes start to write about what seems like a perfectly ordinary day and realize it's bursting with miracles. The same is true with our Yoga practice. We may feel, "Why do it today, my body feels fine." Or, "Why sit on my meditation cushion and watch my breath? You've seen one breath, you've seen them all!" And then you sit down and revealing itself, moment by moment, is this

extraordinary river of life manifesting through our bodies, through our breath, through our hearts.

Writing can be a way of opening up to that, opening into that so that the present opens into the past, an ordinary moment becomes a doorway into the heart of love—and this all is revealed just by writing down a few paragraphs about being up at night as the mother of a sick child. So, I don't wait to feel inspired. I just sit down and do the writing, whether or not I feel inspired. Because then there's a space created into which that creativity and aliveness can flow. There's an incredible power to discipline that can carry us—whether in our practice or in our art.

Along with making the time to show up for my Yoga practice, I allow a window for what wants to emerge so that I'm not overly rigid and controlling. I may think that I'm going to do vigorous *vinyasa* and practice a lot of backbends today. But when I arrive on my mat, I realize I'm really tired, depleted and exhausted. I don't *have* to stick to my plan. Instead, I can choose to do some long, slow, restorative poses to soothe and ease my energy system.

We want the kind of discipline that brings a sensitivity and awareness to our practice, which is another quality we're going to want for our creative lives—responding to what's true rather than overriding that because of some mental idea of what we should do.

IYM: How can we move through blocks in our creativity with sensitivity?

AC: Writer's block is something with which I'm intimately familiar. It always seems to be tied up with ideas about an end product and a kind of perfectionism and self-consciousness rather than tuning into the practice and the process. I once read a quote that said something like, "I never experience writer's block; I just bow down to the process and then accept whatever comes." To me this means accepting whatever comes—even if I think it's no good—and to let go of the idea that I can evaluate, in the moment, whether my work is good or not. This means taking the emphasis off of the end product and enjoying the process.

When we're first cultivating our creative flow, it's important to have it removed from commerce. We can begin to build up our creative muscles, to train our ability to balance—as we do with Yoga—will and surrender. We want to first train it in a non-pressured environment so that, when we're in that pressured environment, we have the will to keep going, meet our deadlines and have the capacity to surrender within that structure, while maintaining that sense of play and enjoyment.

One way to do this is through what I call cross training, which is especially helpful if you are stuck or blocked



Anne Cushman

in your process. Blockage usually comes from thinking you have to do really well at something. I teach Yoga on creativity retreats at Spirit Rock that integrate movement, meditation, writing and painting. Sometimes I go to the painting studio and just paint with the painters because I have no illusions about painting. I realize I'm not going to be a great painter and I don't start thinking, as I might do when I'm writing an essay or article, "Hmm, this painting is good so maybe I'll be able to sell it to such and such magazine." The idea of selling, trying to please, needing something to be perfect, is completely removed from the process so I can just go in and splash around with paint. It's a feeling of childlike pleasure and I try to ground that feeling in my body and then notice when I'm slipping away from that sense of enjoyment, play and fun in my writing.

IYM: What about dealing with the pressures of supporting oneself as an artist?

AC: During the creative stage, you have to suspend thinking about selling your work. It's one of these paradoxes. Of course that's where the discipline of just cranking something out can be so incredibly useful. I used to have this experience a lot as a journalist. I'd be writing a story that was due on deadline and so I had to finish it. I'd feel that it was falling short of my ideal but it was due in an hour so I'd have to crank it out and get it done. Well, it was usually just fine [*laughs*]!

We're our own worst critics. So, having a deadline can really help us bring things to completion and to let go of

perfectionism and drop into the reality of what's there. Any work of art is uneven. We're never going to have every part of it be perfect, so having a deadline helps us to move through to some sort of conclusion—and nobody else sees the flaws the way we do.

I tend to get blocked around issues of productivity and the crunch of perfectionism, so I must come back to the playfulness and to the balance between discipline and freedom. It's important to have a certain amount of discipline in order to finish things. You can say, "I'm going to write a three-page short story about something that happened the other day." And just bring it to completion and then let go of it and move on to the next task.

Otherwise, there can be this temptation to get stuck in perfectionism, and then things will never get completed. We'll be stuck in that awful place where it seems like the project we are working on is so far from the glittering ideal of what we thought it would be. What then happens is that another glittering ideal presents itself and we think, "Well, maybe I'll abandon the first one and go chase the new one for awhile."

I had a dream about this the other night. In it, I was tasked to write a bestseller within a month. I was obsessively trying to think of the plot for what could be a popular bestseller as I was eating an entire jar of jellybeans—something I would never do! Suddenly, out of the jar of jellybeans came a voice that said, "Don't start a new story now. Finish the one you started and the next one will be born out of the sprawling mess of this one." I thought that was a fascinating line. I took it to mean, not just my writing, but life itself. The life we envision having in the future comes out of the life we already have—as sprawling and messy as it is. If we stay with it and work with what we have and bring it to fruition each of us can find our own unique path through the sprawling mess.

IYM: What inspired you to write *Enlightenment for Idiots*?

AC: A few years ago, I walked out of a Yoga studio where I was teaching a class and passed a young woman sitting in her car in the parking lot, her Yoga mat on her lap and her meditation cushion on the other seat, sobbing into her cell phone. "I wonder what her story is?" I asked myself. And in that moment, the character of Amanda—the narrator of *Enlightenment for Idiots*—was born.

I've always been fascinated by the intersection between the lofty ideals of ancient Eastern spiritual practices—such as Yoga and meditation—and the all-too-human daily lives of their modern practitioners. In my writing I especially like to explore the lives of contemporary Western women, which are obviously dramatically different from those

of the celibate male ascetic yogis who developed these systems. When the two worlds intersect, the results are often hilarious—even when they're life-transforming.

When people ask me to summarize the novel, I say, "It's the story of a young American wannabe Yoga teacher looking for enlightenment and messing up her life." Just about everyone knows someone who fits that description—and often, it's themselves!

IYM: How does art best serve our world?

AC: For each of us, freeing our voice is a contribution to the world. Freeing our voice, so our unique voice can speak, means we are manifesting who we truly are in the world. Life is creative. By opening to that flow of life and expressing it in our unique form, we're contributing to the health and creativity of the whole. I think that's a more useful way to look at it rather than thinking, "Well, what sort of art can I create that would bring about great transformation in our society?"

If it's our path, if it's our *dharma* to do a certain type of art, that's what will come through us when we open the floodgates. It's like how we practice Yoga: Are we forcing our bodies into poses because we think those are the right shapes they should be in? Or, are we using the practice to liberate our body's own intelligence so it expresses in its own unique form? To me, that's the kind of Yoga I'm practicing. I'm opening so that my body can be more fully my body and express itself in its fullest health. I think the same is true with our art.

I think that we can trust that, when the channels are open and we are really writing from our deep place, each of us has a story to tell, or a painting to paint, that is uniquely ours. We don't have to look to the person on the mat next to us and think, "Oh, that's how they are doing triangle. I want to do it just like that." We don't need to look over at other writers. I can only tell the kind of story I can tell because of who I am. We can really trust that that is our contribution to the world.

Anne Cushman is the co-director of the Mindfulness Yoga and Meditation Training Program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California. She is the author of the novel, Enlightenment for Idiots and the travel book, From Here to Nirvana. She is a longtime contributor and former editor at both Yoga Journal and Tricycle: The Buddhist Review. Her personal essays have also appeared in the New York Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, O: The Oprah Magazine, Shambhala Sun, among others. She will teach a on a retreat called, "Meditation and the Spirit of Creativity" from April 18-25, 2012 at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. For more information about her writing and teaching, please visit: www.annecushman.com.