

yoga

JOURNAL

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4 POSES TO RELAX YOUR JAW

BREAKFAST OF YOGIS

lightness of being

In a quest to be slim, one woman loses more than mere pounds and, through yoga, finds herself.

I'm lying on the floor of a hotel on the island of Roatan, Honduras. We're just finishing class and have taken Savasana.

Moments earlier, standing in Warrior II, I looked out over my fingertips at the Caribbean. Our teacher urged us to listen to our bodies. I thought, "Are you kidding? Listen to my body? This body cannot possibly be trusted."

The thought surprised me. Wasn't I finished with all that? I had accomplished something many would consider extraordinary: I lost 85 pounds, weight that I'd gained throughout my 20s and early 30s. I'd been well equipped to survive any potential famine but was unable to fit into airplane seats, shop in regular clothing stores, or walk up a slight incline without being winded.

One day, I'd had enough. I signed up for a popular weight-loss plan and learned that to lose weight I just needed to consume fewer calories than my body burned. Over two years, I tracked what I ate, tracked my exercise, and tracked my weight. It was an analytical process, not an intuitive one. The last thing I did was listen to my body, which wanted less extreme treatment.

As I settled into that Savasana, I realized, with great sadness, I still hated my body. It looked fine. But I hated it because I couldn't trust it—or myself.

NO LIMITS

When I lost all that weight, my entire life changed. It changed for the better, in the expected ways: new clothes, compliments galore, my doctor beaming during physical exams. But it wasn't all rosy. Being overweight had given me an excuse to avoid trying new things



and to stay within a limited comfort zone. Post-weight loss, those boundaries disappeared, as did my sense of safety.

I backpacked through the Wyoming wilderness, strapped myself on a rainforest zip-line, skied in Aspen. It was exciting and fun, but honestly, I was often terrified. Although every part of my body was tense leading up to these activities—my brows were knotted, my teeth were clenched, my stomach churning—I wouldn't allow myself to back away from a challenge. I didn't know what my physical limits were, so I didn't set any. In my quest to be

reflection

the new-and-improved me, I put myself in scary and uncomfortable situations. When I ran into people whom I hadn't seen in a long time, they'd ask, "Don't you feel great?" I'd always say yes; it seemed impolite to be more honest and say, "I wake up each morning to a person I don't really recognize in the mirror, living an unfamiliar life."

LEARNING TO SHAPE SHIFT

All this led me to Honduras and a week-long yoga retreat at an eco-lodge called Hacienda San Lucas, in Copán Ruinas. It was to be a fusion of Mayan philosophy and Kripalu Yoga, created by yoga teacher Leah Glatz and Aum Rak, a Mayan shaman. The Mayans believed that a person could live many lives within one lifetime, which seemed to mirror my experience. I figured the yoga would provide a familiar framework for understanding this body-mind transformation. I hoped the retreat would help me refresh my spirit and come to terms with the unexpected ways my life had changed as I became lighter.

Each morning we gathered under the roof of Gaia, an open-air yoga-practice pavilion. After the final Savasana, the warm-hearted Aum Rak led our meditation. In the afternoon we'd have excursions. In the evening we'd return for dinner, then retire early to rest and reflect.

On the first day, Leah led us through gentle poses to help us recover from the rigors of travel. As we descended into Sphinx Pose, Leah encouraged us to draw our bellies up toward our backs. Her instruction meant a tiny little move, yet this slight adjustment was new for me. The shift meant that the energy of the posture ran through my entire body in a completely different way than it did when I usually practiced the pose. One small change can lead to a whole new experience, I thought.

After practice, I retreated to a hammock overlooking lilac bushes, with a glass of iced hibiscus tea and a notebook to reflect on that insight. I had made major changes in my body while expecting the rest of my life to stay the same.

Or at least, expecting all the changes to be for the better.

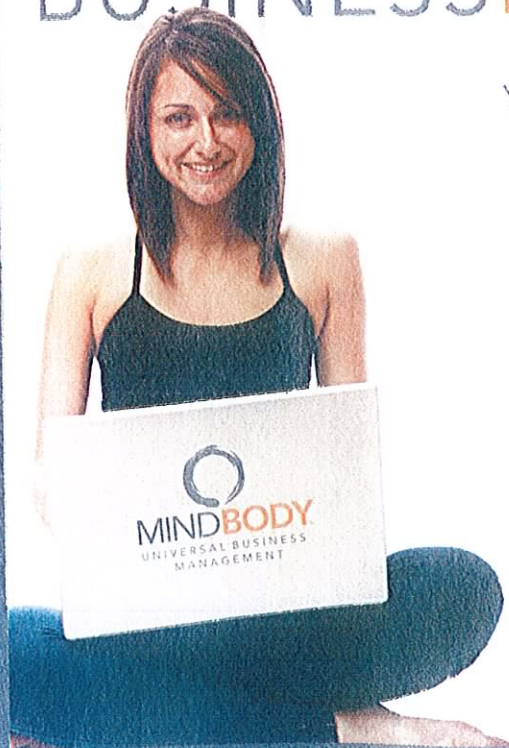
HOW DO YOU FEEL?

But losing 85 pounds and expecting that I'd stay the same in all other ways, that nothing would be difficult again? Impossible. I know that the first step toward *santosha*, or contentment, is to clearly see and accept the reality of your life as it is in the moment. I had to accept that the physical change I'd made created shifts in other areas.

A clap of thunder interrupted my thoughts. I looked up to see dark rain clouds gathering over the mountain. I went to my room and sat cross-legged on the bed to continue my journaling as the afternoon storm clattered down. The next step, I realized, was that I needed to admit to myself how those changes really felt—not how I thought they should feel.

My lighter self was making decisions based on how I thought a slim person should behave. A thin, fit person would want adventure, so I had gone for that,

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without giving credence to my own feelings of fear or need for balance. I'd lost weight by adopting the eating and exercise patterns of a healthier person. But I'd overextended the lesson.

No wonder I didn't trust myself anymore. I'd gotten so good at playing my new role as a thin woman that I was ignoring my true feelings, dismissing them as relics of a past I'd rather forget. But even after I'd shed extra weight, my lighter self had anxieties about new physical challenges. I was ignoring my instincts.

One morning, toward the end of the retreat, we entered a quiet corner of the Mayan ruins. Aum Rak conducted a smudging ceremony and asked us to honor the lives and the spirits of those who had once lived on that very spot. Afterward, Leah led us through a series of yoga postures that looked like the poses struck by the figures carved on the stelae, or stone pillars, in the ruins.

In meditations, Aum Rak had urged us to let go of our anger and to practice forgiveness. "Please forgive me," she asked

us to say to ourselves. And then, "I forgive you." I made myself say the words each day, but I didn't mean them. I was still mad at myself, angry that in my quest to lose weight I hadn't magically created a totally perfect life. I realized I was mad at myself for "wasting" time being heavy and that part of my quest for adventure was a desire to make up for all that "lost" time.

"But darling," Aum Rak told me, "everything happens just as it's supposed to." While I saw my time "before" as a mistake, she saw it otherwise. I had to have that experience for my own development. And until I dropped my anger about it, I'd never trust myself—you can't trust someone you're angry with.

Her teaching started to click. Maybe it came from standing on those ancient ruins, where thousands of lives, with all their dramas, had played out. Maybe it came from realizing that an entire civilization had come and gone, but I could still learn from the rich traditions it had left behind. I don't know. But as we moved

through our poses that day, I understood that I could choose to be angry at myself, choose to let that anger suppress my true emotions so I'd have no choice but to continue feeling untrustworthy. Or I could choose to stop, listen to my true reactions

I could choose to listen to my true reactions...and to trust myself again.

to the very real changes in my life, and trust myself again. I realized I was ready to embrace change.

We stood in Mountain Pose, hands in prayer position, and I found myself thinking, "I forgive you." I folded into a forward bend. "Let the suffering, anger, and pain roll off your back," Leah urged. And, in that moment, I think I did just that. ✧

Alison Stein Wellner is a New York freelance writer who travels whenever she can.



Margaret's yoga class just learned cleaning their floors doesn't have to harm the environment.

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