

Fall 2020

**Juluka and Law Teaching: Working to the Edge, Reveling in
Silence, and Practicing Gratitude**

Lynn Boepple Su



ARTICLE

Juluka and Law Teaching: Working to the Edge, Reveling in Silence, and Practicing Gratitude

Lynn Su

*Professor of Law
New York Law School*

Published: September 1, 2020

Introduction

When I am sitting on my lime green yoga mat in the Sukhasana¹ pose, knees bent and legs crossed, setting an intention for my yoga practice, my mind sometimes wanders to my role as a law professor. I think about how I set intentions for Legal Practice, a required two-semester course I teach at New York Law School that introduces first-year students to essential lawyering skills.²

Juluka,³ a studio where I take many yoga classes, is run by a woman who exudes calm, grace, and positive energy. Hailing from South Africa, she named the

¹ *Sukhasana*, YOGAPEDIA, <https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/6524/sukhasana> (last updated Sept. 1, 2017) (“*Sukhasana* is one of the most basic yoga asanas and is suitable for yogis of all levels. The name is derived from the Sanskrit, *sukha*, meaning ‘pleasure’ or ‘comfort,’ and *asana*, meaning ‘pose.’ The pose is entered by sitting on the floor and folding the left leg until it is touching the right thigh. The right leg is then folded so that it touches the left thigh. The hands are kept on the knees”)

² The first semester of Legal Practice introduces students to legal reasoning and analysis, legal writing and research, and interviewing and fact gathering. The focus in the second semester is written and oral advocacy, client counseling, and negotiation.

³ Juluka is a yoga studio in Hillsdale and River Edge, New Jersey. It is run by Mandy Grant.

studio “Juluka,” the Zulu word for sweat.⁴ Those who teach and learn essential lawyering skills experience a psychic Juluka: professors must sweat to impart knowledge, and students must sweat to understand and apply concepts.

Practicing yoga has inspired me to think about how I can use my experience as a yoga student to become a better law professor. Yoga not only helps its practitioners gain strength, agility, and discipline; it also encourages a mindset of patience, focus, and equanimity.⁵ Many of my yoga classes begin with a short, inspirational “Dharma talk”⁶ in which the teacher shares a story, anecdote, or writing that reveals an insight about life.

Three principles of yoga have deeply resonated with me as a professor: working to the edge, reveling in silence, and practicing gratitude. Each principle has informed my teaching and transformed my thinking about how students learn.⁷

I. Working to the Edge

Yoga teachers often tell students to “work to the edge,” “find your edge,” “play with the edge,” or other incantations to that effect. “Working to the edge” challenges yoga practitioners to reach their full potential in asanas,⁸ or yoga postures, without jeopardizing their physical well-being:

Healthy ambition requires you not to push yourself too hard but not to take it too easy, either. This seems like a fine line, and in fact, in yoga practice it's often referred to as “the edge.” It's the place where you're working at the top of your body's ability on that day. If you worked any less, you'd be slacking off; any more, and you'd be risking injury.⁹

As a casual yoga student who mixed it up with Zumba, Pilates, kickboxing, and interval training classes, I was quite content to reap the physical and psychic benefits that yoga brings to those who, like me, cannot do a Taraksvasana

⁴ What does *juluka* mean in Zulu?, WORD HIPPO, <https://www.wordhippo.com/what-is/the-meaning-of/zulu-word-0303c5a3fb507d87667892fc484c03a7198334aa.html> (last visited June 27, 2020).

⁵ See Timothy McCall, *38 Health Benefits of Yoga*, YOGA J. (Apr. 12, 2017), <https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/count-yoga-38-ways-yoga-keeps-fit>.

⁶ See Maribeth Woodford, *Dharma Talks*, NEW BLOG (Nov. 19, 2015), <http://sukhayogaclass.com/new-blog-2/2015/11/19/dharma-talks>.

⁷ See Megan Fulwiler, *On Yoga and Teaching Writing: What Faculty Members Could Learn from Yoga Instructors*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (Oct. 6, 2014), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/On-YogaTeaching-Writing/149237> (“Both [yoga class and writing class] require a commitment to practice rather than perfection; reward risk-taking rather than hesitation; flourish with timely but limited suggestions that encourage rather than frustrate; are active all-at-once activities that are learned by doing; and remain difficult no matter how long you’ve been doing them. I’ve come to see that the foundational principles of yoga—practice, active learning, and nonattachment—have actually shaped my orientation toward my students and their writing.”).

⁸ See *Asana*, YOGAPEDIA (last updated Apr. 23, 2020), <https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/4951/asana>.

⁹ Alison Stein Wellner, *Playing on the Edge*, YOGA J. (Apr. 13, 2017), <https://www.yogajournal.com/practice/playing-on-the-edge>.

handstand scorpion¹⁰ or other complex poses. Because I am not a Gen Zer or a Millennial, I believed that my body would not allow me to progress beyond a certain point in my yoga practice. But I was wrong. In the last year, I realized that marked improvement is possible if I work to the edge. I have added Janu Sirsasana (bringing my head to my knee in forward seated bend) to my asanas.¹¹ And I have begun to overcome the fear of falling and can now do a wobbly Sirsasana headstand¹² and a three-second Bakasana crow.¹³ Practicing yoga has reminded me that working to the edge, along with practice and a growth mindset,¹⁴ helps learners conquer challenges and acquire new skills.

Over the years, I have instinctively incorporated yoga philosophy into my teaching of Legal Practice. I urge my students to engage deeply in the learning process by closely reading legal authority, thoughtfully analyzing facts, and thoroughly revising, editing, and proofreading their writing; in yoga parlance, this is working to the edge. I also emphasize that practice is key to developing essential lawyering skills. Building block assignments, such as analytic outlines, initial drafts, and research reports, allow students opportunities to revisit their thinking and hone their writing. And I encourage my students to tackle their studies with a growth mindset that embraces perseverance and resilience. “Ancient yoga texts stress the importance of *tapas*—the fiery quality of discipline and determination.”¹⁵ I advise my students not to be deterred by setbacks, because adversity is an integral part of the learning process.¹⁶ Both students and teachers should be heartened by the words of James Joyce, who eloquently wrote that “. . . errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery.”¹⁷

¹⁰ See Anna Coventry, *10 Insane Yoga Poses You Wish You Could Strike*, DOYOUYOGA, <https://www.doyou.com/10-insane-yoga-poses-you-wish-you-could-strike/> (last visited June 27, 2020).

¹¹ YJ Eds., *Head-to-Knee Forward Bend*, YOGA J. (Jan. 7, 2019), <https://www.yogajournal.com/poses/head-to-knee-forward-bend>.

¹² YJ Eds., *Supported Headstand*, YOGA J. (May 16, 2017), <https://www.yogajournal.com/poses/supported-headstand>.

¹³ YJ Eds., *Crane (Crow) Pose*, YOGA J. (Jan. 7, 2019), <https://www.yogajournal.com/poses/crane-pose>.

¹⁴ CAROL S. DWECK, *MINDSET: THE NEW PSYCHOLOGY OF SUCCESS* 7 (2016) (“This *growth mindset* is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others. Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience.” (emphasis in original)).

¹⁵ John Schumacher, *How to Practice Headstand*, YOGA J. (Oct. 4, 2017), <https://www.yogajournal.com/poses/headstand>.

¹⁶ See generally ANGELA DUCKWORTH, *GRIT: THE POWER OF PASSION AND PERSEVERANCE* 218-19 (2016).

¹⁷ Esther Lombardi, *25 Unforgettable James Joyce Quotes*, THOUGHTCO. (updated June 24, 2019), <https://www.thoughtco.com/unforgettable-james-joyce-quotes-740277>. The full quote, found in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, is this: “A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery.” See also Fulwiler, *supra* note 7 (“. . . ‘mistakes’ aren’t mistakes at all; they’re crucial evidence of a student’s intention and opportunities for productive growth”).

As I continue my journey teaching law students, I plan to draw explicit connections between my experience learning yoga and their experience learning lawyering skills. Although distinct endeavors, yoga and legal practice both require the mastery of skills. When I explain how we acquire new skills, I will share my experience as a yoga student: I was able to break free from my limitations when I began to work to the edge. My flexibility and balance improved, and I added new asanas to my yoga practice. I hope that sharing the story of my progress as a yogi will embolden my students to work to the edge and respond with resilience to the challenges they will inevitably face when learning lawyering skills.

2. Reveling in Silence

Yoga celebrates the power of Mauna, the Sanskrit word for silence.¹⁸ Silence promotes mindful introspection, empowering students to absorb and integrate new concepts into their existing base of knowledge:

It's the [yoga] teacher's job to share the knowledge. . . . At some point, though, the teacher has to step back so the students can allow the guidance of their own inner teacher to arise. Without silence, it can be much more difficult to hear that voice within.¹⁹

Incorporating periods of purposeful silence in the classroom may be a difficult task for law professors in a world bursting with digital overload. Technology and social media bombard and beckon us with a 24/7 stream of news, photos, and memes; moments of silence are increasingly rare.²⁰ Over the years, I have adapted my classroom teaching to appeal to digital natives, relying more heavily on PowerPoints, YouTube videos, group work, and interactive exercises. Silent periods when students ponder over a question can be fraught with anxiety for a professor, who may fear that students, accustomed to constant stimuli, will tune out; this has often been the case for me. Uncomfortable with periods of classroom silence, professors may rush through an exercise that requires silent reflection and resume the chatter, believing that dialogue is necessary to engage students.

Yoga has transformed my thinking about silence in the classroom; I now see it as vital to learning because it gives students psychic space to consolidate their

¹⁸ Kristen Brunello, *Three Reasons to Practice Silence*, YOGA GROUND BLOG (Oct. 10, 2019), <https://www.theyogaground.com/blog/silence>.

¹⁹ Jim Bennett, *The Case for Embracing More Silent Moments in Yoga Classes*, YOGA INT'L, <https://yogainternational.com/article/view/the-case-for-embracing-more-silent-moments-in-yoga-classes> (last visited June 27, 2020).

²⁰ See Erling Kagge, *SILENCE IN THE AGE OF NOISE 1* (2017) ("Whenever I am unable to walk, climb or sail away from the world, I have learned to shut it out. Learning this took time. Only when I understood that I had a primal need for silence was I able to begin my search for it—and there, deep beneath a cacophony of traffic noise and thoughts, music and machinery, iPhones and snow ploughs, it lay in wait for me. Silence.").

understanding and synthesize information. Practicing Savasana at the end of yoga classes has increased my comfort level with silence. In Savasana, the corpse pose, the body rests on the floor with limbs extended.²¹ This pose, which features stillness and silence, may last for several minutes.²² Surrendering to the stillness of Savasana can be a challenge for yogis,²³ but the benefits of Savasana are substantial: “Savasana allows the body to absorb and integrate the benefits of . . . [the class] into . . . muscle memory, mind and nervous system.”²⁴ As a yogi who has surrendered to the demands of Savasana, I have come to appreciate that purposeful silence in the classroom, a practice that may be unnerving in the digital world, creates an excellent environment for contemplative, creative thinking to flourish. Moving forward, I will carve out time for meaningful silence in my classroom, encouraging students to use the silence to unlock the complexities of legal analysis.

3. Practicing Gratitude

Yoga inspires its practitioners to practice gratitude.²⁵ Reflecting on the good in our lives, especially when we are grappling with uncertainty and navigating through hardship, can strengthen and soothe us.²⁶

Gratitude is a simple, yet powerful, form of mindfulness that deepens our connection to the beautiful people, places, events, and things in our world. Fostering and expressing thankfulness can also improve mental and physical health, boost happiness, reduce depression, and enhance our relationships with others.²⁷

Yoga’s emphasis on gratitude has helped me remain strong and focused during trying times. I have shared the gift of gratitude with my Legal Practice students, and I have encouraged them to approach their law school experience with an attitude of gratitude. My hope is that giving and receiving gratitude will help them celebrate the joy of being a law student and fortify them to withstand the challenges of studying the law.

In recent years, I have talked about gratitude before returning a graded assignment and at the end of the semester when students are preparing for exams; these are times when stress and anxiety levels may rise. I express thankfulness for my role as a teacher and mentor, and I remind my students that we are a select group

²¹ Nikki Costello, *The Subtle Struggle of Savasana*, YOGA J. (Apr. 12, 2017), <https://www.yogajournal.com/practice/corpse-pose> (“The essence of Savasana is to relax with attention, that is, to remain conscious and alert while still being at ease.”).

²² See *id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *The Importance of Savasana*, WESTERN WELLNESS: LIVING WELL (Dec. 8, 2014), <https://www.westernwellness.com.au/blog/2014/12/the-importance-of-savasana.html>.

²⁵ Brigitte Keeble, *Why develop a gratitude practice?*, THE YOGA INSTITUTE: BLOG <https://yogainstitute.com.au/why-develop-a-gratitude-practice/> (last visited June 27, 2020).

²⁶ See *id.*

²⁷ Timothy Burgin, *17 Inspirational Quotes on Yoga and Gratitude*, YOGA BASICS (Nov. 13, 2018), <https://www.yogabasics.com/connect/yoga-blog/17-quotes-on-yoga-and-gratitude/>.

privileged to be together on a unique journey—teaching and studying the law. I invite my students to savor every moment of the journey, especially those moments that are difficult or disappointing, because it is often the tough moments that help us reach our full potential.

Conclusion

I wrote this article in the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, a disorienting and frightening time across the globe. I am grateful for my students, my job as a law professor, and my yoga practice; they are blessings that have given me stability and comfort during this crisis. As I continue teaching remotely, I will redouble my efforts to bring the yoga principles of working to the edge, reveling in silence, and practicing gratitude to my virtual classroom. My teachers at Juluka often say, “Acknowledge your hard work, excellent effort, and brave spirit.”²⁸ This is the message I will convey to my students as they stay the course, focusing on their legal education in our dramatically changing world. Namaste!²⁹

²⁸ Mandy Grant, as well as other Juluka teachers, may conclude a yoga class with empowering words to this effect.

²⁹ Rita Geno, *The Meaning of “Namaste,”* YOGA J. (Nov. 12, 2018), <https://www.yogajournal.com/practice/the-meaning-of-quot-namaste-quot>, (“The gesture [Namaste] is an acknowledgment of the soul in one by the soul in another. . . *Nama* means bow, *as* means I, and *te* means you. Therefore, *namaste* literally means ‘bow me you’ or ‘I bow to you.’”).