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## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

# The Zen Actuary Installment 12: “Sharing and Celebrating the Practice”

By Rich Lauria

*Author’s note: This is part of a series<sup>1</sup> adapted from the book Awake at Work by Michael Carroll, covering the application of Buddhist teachings to situations encountered in a modern corporate workplace setting. These applications have been further refined for this series to address challenges frequently encountered by practicing actuaries.*

Installment 11 chronicled the first major obstacles of my struggle to overcome my natural resistance to the path of yoga teacher training, and what I learned from that. This installment concludes that epic saga of the training that I happily completed in 2016.

Much of the effort involved dropping my well-worn storylines about “I’m this, and I’m not that,” and opening myself to the possibility that I might just be a bit more than what I thought I was. Through that effort, I began to realize that my practice could be much more than just 60 to 90 minutes of daily solitude, self-examination and sweat. What if I could share the benefits of the practice with others?

Even though I had come a long way, there was more resistance to deal with. I had to conduct three private sessions and teach three group classes to people other than those involved with the teacher training. This meant I would have to solicit others to help me complete the requirements. I thought jokingly, “Which friends and relatives do I risk ticking off?” However, the response I received when approaching others was a very pleasant surprise.

It started with my wife, Valerie, who suffers from chronic pain issues and had not had good experiences with yoga. She was willing to be my first experiment. I knew I had to customize a very cautious regimen that worked around Val’s many physical limitations. But this is what teaching yoga is really about, working with the body as it is rather than imposing a standard regimen on everyone.

This point was emphasized frequently during the training, and we had been schooled extensively in gentle yoga variations. I carefully thought through a simple one-hour program, beginning with some simple breathing exercises and then slowly introducing basic movements that gently warmed up joints and glands. The program worked! Val was so happy with it that she asked for a second session and began to practice on her own.

A close friend also volunteered to do a private session. He too had tried yoga before with negative outcomes, usually hurting himself in some way. He also told me he was dealing with some chronic injuries, but was willing to do his part to help me get my yoga teacher certification. So I took it real slow with him, starting with an extended warm-up session and focusing on breathing. I had to adjust my plan part-way through to best suit his needs in the moment, and he very much appreciated the effort. Not only did the experience not cause him injury, he also claimed to feel much more relaxed and at ease for several hours after the session.

I began approaching co-workers about my requirements, and was genuinely humbled and thankful for their ready willingness to let me practice teaching them yoga. This involved taking time after work hours and walking over to Battery Park to do the session. Many of them had never practiced yoga before yet trusted me to introduce the concepts to them. And most of them walked away from the experience feeling good and wanting to further pursue the discipline.

My resistance was melting away. The dread of approaching people to take a yoga lesson from me had been converted into genuine awe and excitement at the opportunity to share this wonderful system I had grown to love. I realized through this process that sharing this gift was indeed the growth in my practice I had been searching for; I just hadn’t realized it even though it was right there in front of me.

How often do we limit ourselves in our actuarial practice due to messages, sometimes quite subtle, that we tell ourselves? We’ve done pricing for most of our careers, so that’s what we’ll keep doing even if we don’t find it as challenging and rewarding as we used to. Or we continue to work in a certain practice area because it’s comfortable. Maybe we turn down that opportunity to advance because it involves managing people, and we’ve had challenges doing that in the past. I’ve observed that my mind can always find a reason to say no and avoid the unknown and uncomfortable. Fortunately, the universe has blessed my career with many people who have encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone, even though I often did not see it that way in the moment!

And that career growth opportunity is not always as obvious as a promotion with more responsibility and dollar signs. Often it

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comes from giving back in some way, sharing our precious talent for a cause outside ourselves and expecting nothing in return. The actuarial profession is well-renowned for its extensive army of volunteers, serving in capacities ranging from proctoring examinations to membership on industry committees to the growth of the Actuarial Foundation, the profession's flagship charitable organization that is supported financially and logistically by many actuaries. It is this kindness and generosity that takes the profession to another level. In this way, actuaries practice the "selfless service" that is a core theme of the Bhagavad Gita, an inspirational spiritual story that is a "must read" for any aspiring yogi.

Why practice yoga? Yes, the physical practices help the practitioner get healthier and feel better. But there are plenty of other valid exercise programs, so what is so special about yoga?

I believe it's what all of the practices—including physical poses, breathing, meditation, concentration, diet, moral code and personal observances—do to help the aspirant gradually settle the mind and find lasting peace. And bringing this peaceful mind out into the world influences a sense of calm in others. That is how a kinder, gentler world begins: going inward and discovering who one truly is, so that one can better serve others and in that process connect to something far greater and awe-inspiring. In that way one finds one's way in the world and experiences lasting joy.

Most actuaries I've worked with feel very fortunate and blessed to be in this remarkable profession. They love what they do and are passionate about their work. While they enjoy the financial rewards that the career has brought them, they have found the true reward comes from going within to create the work product that they bring to their colleagues, management, clients, regulators, and the public at large. And they have joy and peace in realizing their efforts serve to maintain the solvency of the critical financial institutions that rely on their minds and hearts. That is the yoga of being an actuary!

Yoga teacher training for me started with a desire to do better physical inversions like headstands, handstands and forearm balances. Thankfully, it grew into something far more meaningful and memorable. I graduated from the training program in 2016

and had the opportunity to reunite with the other trainees at the ceremony. While we all came from different backgrounds and life experiences, we all immersed ourselves in the program with a genuine desire to deepen our respective practices and share the joy of yoga with others. That common goal brought us together as a family, supporting each other through the many trials and tribulations we encountered.

And while yoga teacher training is a serious pursuit, there were also many amusing moments that lightened the journey. I'll never forget trudging down to the meeting room half asleep at 6 a.m. and finding the senior member of our group, Boris, a 65-year-old Russian native, piking his legs while standing on his head. I will always remember him simply as "The Phenom." Or doing group sing-songs of the Sanskrit alphabet—much like children sing the alphabet ("now I know my ABCs ..."). Or being completely engrossed in doing a standing twist during an asana session outdoors with the sun setting, hearing the sound of water trickling down about three feet from me, and looking up and realizing it was a fellow trainer's dog urinating from a balcony above. Or the group being startled during an intense session on therapeutic yoga by a frog that had gotten in the room. Or the incredible bliss felt by giving each other leg massages. And those wonderful evening campfire chants.

I've also been fortunate to meet and work with many great actuarial professionals. Beyond their tremendous intellect and strong integrity, they all share a sense of humor and healthy perspective for what we do for a living. And through that network I've been able to experience many memorable moments as well. It is this vibrancy and passion that continues to elevate and strengthen the profession, allowing its members to humbly serve the public in more varied roles and responsibilities.

I am thankful I completed yoga teacher training. It not only has strengthened my yoga practice; it has opened my mind and heart to a new and more profound perspective on my actuarial practice.

It's more than just yoga. And it's more than just actuarial science. ■



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#### ENDNOTE

- 1 The first 11 installments in the "Zen Actuary" series were published in the November 2013 through March 2017 issues of *The Stepping Stone*, available online at [www.SOA.org/ld](http://www.SOA.org/ld).