



‘Yoga helped me walk again’

Almost the first thing I was told when

I regained consciousness after two men attacked me in a shop was that if I moved my head I would never walk again. My spinal cord was resting on an open fracture, like a piece of string on a razor blade, just waiting for the slightest movement to sever it.

Imagine hearing something like that. I was 26 and running my own business importing antique textiles from India to the UK. I had a houseboat in Kashmir and was fit and healthy – I loved yoga and had even studied it in India. Yet here I was strapped to a bed being told that everything as I knew it depended on my not moving a muscle.

The attack by two men that left me like this was unprovoked. One of them grabbed me in a headlock while the other punched me in the face, head and neck. I managed to say “Please stop” and suddenly it was all over. Fuelled by adrenaline, I ran out of the shop supporting my head in my hands. I had no idea that my neck, nose, cheek and jaw were broken; all I know is that I could barely see through the blood. I think I was probably screaming.

It took the doctors 48 hours to plan the operation to rebuild my spine, which was dislocated as well as broken. It was in this crucial period that the yoga I’d studied came into its own. To help me stay calm and, most importantly, still, I used yogic techniques, such as a range

of breathing exercises to improve concentration and relax the mind and body. I honestly believe that without yoga I wouldn’t have made it through those 48 hours without moving and I’d be in a wheelchair today.

The operation took 12 hours. For two days I felt as if I was paralysed; it was like being buried alive. But again, I turned to yoga, this time using breathing techniques to stimulate the brain to release endorphins and encourage the body to heal itself.

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A month after my operation I was well enough to stagger out of hospital, albeit with the help of two nurses. Everyone was amazed by the speed of my recovery – at one point I’d been warned I could spend up to a year in hospital. I stayed with my parents for four months, and it was a year before I was back to anything like my previous levels of strength or activity. I still have limited motion in my neck and a lack of

sensation in my skin from my jaw to my collarbone. The two men who attacked me, meanwhile, got community service.

But while I was in hospital, I decided that when I recovered I wanted to teach yoga. I believed then, and still do, that I’m in a unique position to teach from, given what happened to me and how yoga helped me.

I now help people all over the world to perform at their optimum levels of health and fitness. I teach executive one-to-ones, and go into boardrooms and offices to deliver workshops. I believe that yoga emphasises the inherent recuperative power of the body to heal itself without the use of drugs or surgery, and that it alleviates the symptoms of stress and anxiety, and increase energy levels.

I’m proud that what happened to me has helped to help others. Although the attack was an awful thing to go through, I believe it made me who I am today. Up until then I had always felt invincible but I was left totally helpless. It was then that I learned humility. My whole attitude was that if I could just move, if I could just walk, if I could just stand again then everything else in my life would be a bonus. I’ve never forgotten that standpoint, and it makes everything else in life feel so much more enriching.

As told to Natasha Courtenay-Smith.