

Is There a Link Between Mediation and Yoga? by Cynthia T. Runge, Esq.

I am a divorce mediator/family law attorney and a part-time yoga instructor. For the most part, I have kept these two seemingly distinct roles separate from one another, as they do not generally intersect on a professional level. However, I do not regard these two disciplines as being all that different. In fact, I see more commonality between mediation and yoga than not. I have been practicing/teaching both mediation and yoga professionally, for about 16 years. I've been practicing law for 26 years. During that time, I have observed that there are several similarities between mediation and yoga.

How is mediation similar to yoga? Personality disorders aside, I believe that we all have more in common with each other than not. We all have specific thoughts and feelings about situations in our life. We all have the experience of life's victories and defeats. My role as mediator, or yoga teacher is not to judge or fix anyone I'm working with. My role in both instances is to guide each person through their process in an open and facilitative matter, so that it is not about what I think is best for them. In mediation, I'm not there to give either party legal advice (although I can provide legal information, i.e. "these are the child support guidelines.") As a yoga teacher, I recognize that the style of yoga I am offering may not be right or best for everyone. There is no one size fits all approach in mediation or yoga. Ultimately, I think practicing non-judgment of others (and hopefully myself), helps me to be a better teacher and mediator, so that I can better assist my clients move through their respective processes in the best possible way for them.

Does yoga inform my work as a divorce mediator and family law attorney? Absolutely. Yoga helps me to slow down, focus on my breath, and to pay attention to what is happening. When I can pay attention to what is happening within me, I am more able to slow down and become grounded. Being grounded helps me to see what is really going on between the parties that I'm working with so that I can better assist them. When I myself am under stress, the concept of coming back to the breath is one that I have to revisit constantly, just like everyone else. It is a practice after all.

How does yoga practice show up in divorce mediation? One of the biggest changes from transitioning from the role of attorney to mediator, is learning to let go. As lawyers, we always feel as though we need to control the process. Although I still practice law, and enjoy doing so, I think I do so more mindfully because of my yoga training. Of course, I can easily slip into "I can fix this" mode during a mediation, but I'm much better at recognizing when that starts to happen, so I can re-shift my focus back to helping the parties solve the process in the matter they think is best.

As a mediator, I believe that I have to be somewhat directive in guiding the parties' through the issues that need to be addressed in their Separation Agreement (*how else would most people know what should be included?*). However, I realize that it is not my responsibility to control the outcome – nor could I control it if I tried! How I gauge whether or not I am being effective in a mediation is when I observe that I am doing *the least amount of work* in the mediation. For example, when I notice that I am "working too hard" in the mediation, i.e. if I'm the only one talking for significant lengths of time, then I know it is time for me to back off. When the parties are talking and communicating with one another, then I know the process is working, because it is the parties' process, not mine. As a mediator, my role is to help guide the parties through their process and to create an available space for them to work out their issues.

In sum, I feel a sense of humility when I'm serving as a family mediator or yoga instructor, and I feel extremely grateful for having the privilege and opportunity to be of service to others as they make their way through their respective journeys.