

## THE SALIX SPACE: HOLDING PLACE FOR GROWTH

During the ‘pause’ created by the global pandemic coach **Fenella Trevillion** and her partner, yoga teacher **Alison Partridge**, engaged in deep discussions around their shared areas of professional interest in coaching, yoga and mindfulness. From these the Salix space emerged. They describe its genesis and impact.

For us, as a coach and a yoga teacher, we have a shared aim: to provide a place where new insights, experiences and opportunities can emerge through spaciousness, opening and presence. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, heightened by the sense of shock following the very public murder of George Floyd, global conversations revealed shared experiences of disbelief, incredulity and disturbance. We wondered whether, through combining our practices, we might achieve our aim and offer a holding place. This way, could we perhaps work with participants’ emotional discomfort to generatively explore their challenging areas?

As we walked and talked by the riverbanks, some populated with weeping willows (*Salix* is willow’s Latin name and genus), their gentle healing nature and enclosed space gave us hope and perspective during this unsettling time. Being partners, our discussions ranged across personal and professional explorations into the practices of yoga/physical activity, mindfulness/meditation and coaching/therapeutic approaches. They uncovered the interplay, the overlaps and the complementary nature of our work. We spoke of a similarity in experience, despite differences in language and lineage. We felt and noticed something new emerging.

We worked together to combine the practices, and explored issues of fear, loss and conflict. Sometimes we noticed shifts and had ‘aha’ moments; at other times we simply enjoyed the creative spaciousness of the process. Through the confluence of meditative practice, yoga-inspired movement and coaching inquiry we experienced a sense of exploration and restoration. We named this the ‘Salix space’.

In our quest to understand it, we searched the literature and found data on the simultaneous use of two practices, but nothing seemed to combine all three. What we did know, through our own separate experiences of the three practices, is that we often inhabited a place of creative vulnerability.

Our awareness of the intensity of using the three modalities together enhanced it exponentially; this caused us to pay special attention to setting up the eco-environment of the encounter. A clear framework of expectations and agreed behaviour became essential components of our toolkit.

### TRYING IT OUT

The technological ease of Zoom and easy access for workshop attendance offered the ideal opportunity for testing. We initially ran two workshops (both one and a half hours), inviting colleagues and friends to bring personal issues to explore. We included a pre-workshop contracting agreement, non-scripted in-the-moment guided meditations, breath work, yoga-inspired movement, individual journaling and paired listening in response to scripted, specific coaching questions. The questions were adapted to address either pre-identified subjects (e.g., the impact of the pandemic) or self-defined issues, allowing full presence and deep paired listening.

While one listener told us that they found the pain of the experience shared with them hard to hear (we responded to this quickly and reviewed the agreement and introduction), the evaluation responses overall were very positive. This led to a commission from

Oxford Brookes University in the UK, in association with the Oxford Centre for Spirituality and Wellbeing, to run workshops. Health and social care staff used these to focus on their experience of Covid-19 and the pandemic. Following this, we held two more workshops where again the feedback was very positive.

### ORGANIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH FEEDBACK

Instead of approaching this through a formal research route, we developed the Salix space iteratively; following each workshop we examined the evaluations and adapted the next one in line with what we had learned.

Of the 51 people who attended across the five workshops we had a 76% evaluation return. Over 90% of them rated the workshops as positive or very positive. One person said they would prefer to have only one modality per session; other than that, there were no negative comments. Participants noted an increased energy and balance simultaneously linked with breath and gaze; one found that they became tearful. Just as we hoped, the space encouraged heightened awareness, with the physical centring giving spaciousness for the emergence of creativity. Some reported that combining the three modalities allowed a shift from the internal, cognitive level of understanding to the emotional level, often experienced somatically. This theme of shift was typified by the following comment: ‘I got in touch with a part of me that had been quite disabled.’ These comments were profoundly influential: ‘There’s something unique about having a dedicated amount of time to write the issue down and distil it into just a few words;’ and ‘such simple, clean, clear questions gave an expectation of agency.’

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### ANCIENT ROOTS AND THE UNDERPINNING NEUROSCIENCE

Yoga’s ancient lineage arises from Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism; mindfulness is based on similar traditions, as well as Jainism and Confucianism.<sup>i</sup> Coaching, while still a relatively young profession with its naissance in sport, draws from a number of psychological, philosophical and learning traditions<sup>ii</sup>, many also with ancient roots.

These traditions have common themes at their core. Yoga is ‘a process of fully inhabiting ourselves in a radically engaging and inquisitive way.’<sup>iii</sup> Mindfulness is ‘bringing attention and awareness to all experience... it is open to whatever is present in any given moment and conveys an attitude of curiosity, friendliness and compassion.’<sup>iv</sup> Coaching is a ‘vital space that enables creativity to emerge.’<sup>v</sup> These three modalities have much in common; all use ‘felt sense’ and the ‘intelligent inner truth that is sensed in the body.’<sup>v</sup> All encourage a listening pause, curious exploration, interrupting patterns, nurturing and the emergence of new insights.

From a neuroscientific perspective, these modalities bring flow, creating a greater felt sense and awareness of somatic sensations.

Through interoception (a sense of the internal state of the body), we access a knowing from the inside. This process encourages self-awareness, presence and a feeling of greater connectedness through the body and with the universe. Within the calmer internal environment, the opportunity arises for creating new neural pathways and for new insights to emerge.

The impact of using overlapping modalities – sometimes simultaneously, sometimes sequentially – appears to be significant. All modalities access the mind, body and spirit dimensions in ways that we don’t completely understand, yet the outcome for the participants is positive and substantial.

### WHERE NEXT?

We believe the Salix space might offer a useful format in a variety of settings, such as workshops, conferences and teams. These are often places where tricky and uncomfortable areas such as intersectionality are explored. Some have fed back that standalone workshops focusing on loss, climate and growing older (in a society where this is a burden rather than a source of experience or wisdom) would be successful too.

While we are committed to creating a safe and honest environment, we would be cautious doing this work with people who have experienced significant levels of trauma. We see the Salix space as offering a place and opportunity for participants to rebalance, and find new understanding and possible renewal. What we do know is that the early findings from this small inquiry – with feedback such as ‘I felt like I’d had a massage for my mind’ and ‘I had a breakthrough with my issue’ – suggest exciting and wide potential for our work in the Salix space.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Fenella Trevillion (MSc, BSc, CQSW) and Alison Partridge (CQSW, Yoga Alliance, 2,000 Hours) have both had long careers in public services across a variety of leadership and commissioning roles. In the last 10 years both have established successful new careers, Fenella as an executive coach and Alison as a yoga teacher. They have both trained in meditation and mindfulness and draw on these practices in their work separately and together.

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