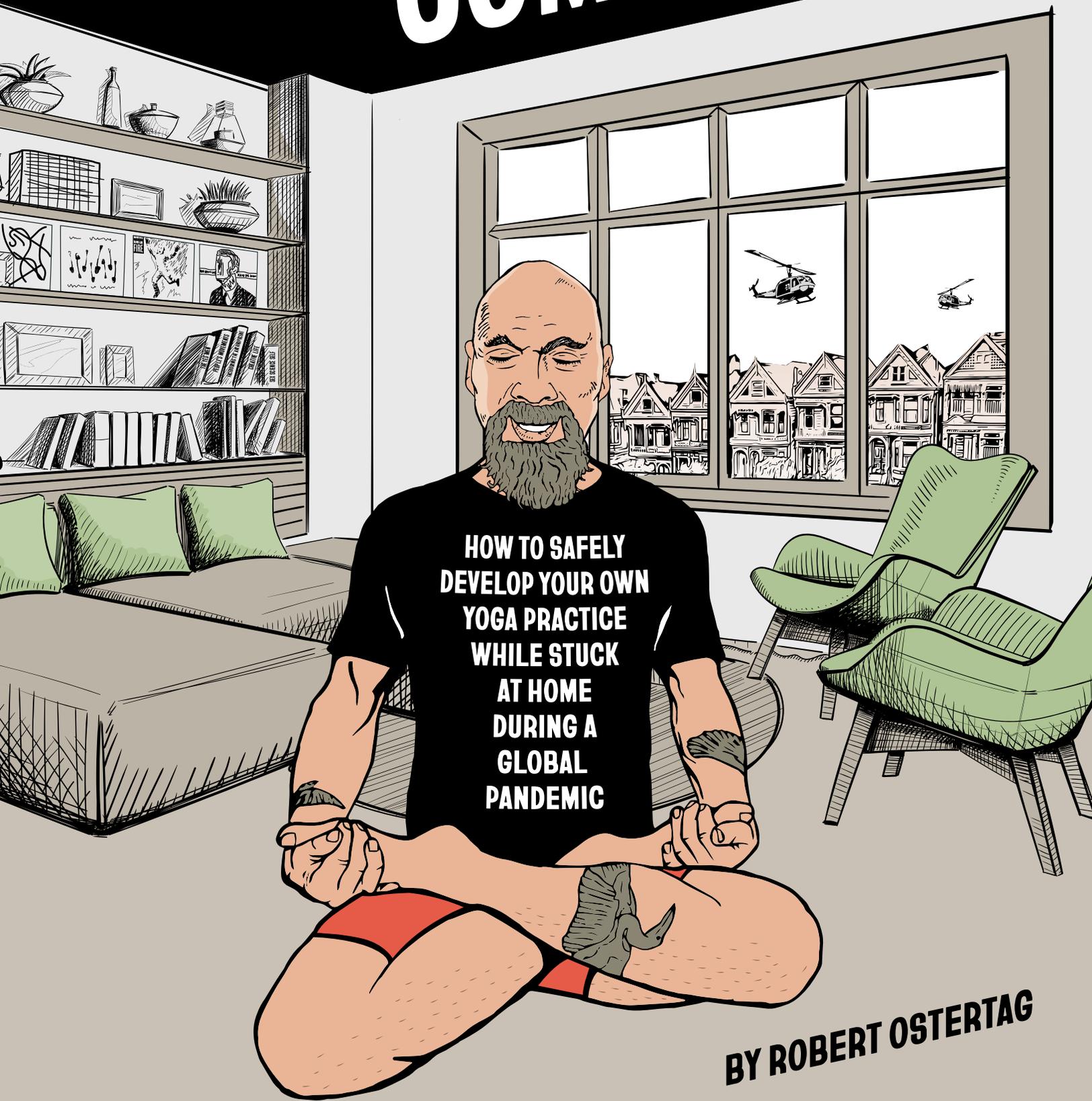


# A HOME YOGA COMPANION



**HOW TO SAFELY  
DEVELOP YOUR OWN  
YOGA PRACTICE  
WHILE STUCK  
AT HOME  
DURING A  
GLOBAL  
PANDEMIC**

**BY ROBERT OSTERTAG**

**THIS BOOK IS AVAILABLE  
FREE FOR ALL LIVING BEINGS**

**Stay home.**

**Stay safe.**

**Stay mindful.**

**Maintain your social distance.**

**Wash your hands.**

**Do yoga.**

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## Like almost everything else, this book changed with the arrival of COVID-19.

**BEFORE:** There were plenty of good reasons to develop a home yoga practice before the pandemic: save money, prevent injury, go deeper into meditation, tailor your practice to your own body, and, most of all, to do more yoga.

**AFTER:** For most people around the world, a home yoga practice is the only yoga available. If we are not going to do yoga at home, we are not going to do yoga at all.

So I have rushed to make this book available as a free e-book. A modest but hopefully helpful contribution to the unprecedented coming together of people all over the world in the face of the pandemic.

To move things along as quickly as possible, I have not revised the text since the outbreak of the pandemic. So there is still discussion of why home yoga is in many cases preferable to class, along with occasional asides about the high price of classes and the shortcomings of many teachers. Today, however, yoga studios around the world are closed and yoga teachers unemployed. They all need and deserve support, just like all other businesses and workers affected by the crisis. So please, support your local studios and teachers in whatever way you can.

Now is the time to develop that home yoga practice you were always meaning to get around to but too busy to actually begin. Home yoga will help you get through the crisis. Calm the body to calm the mind. Stay fit and healthy and sane indoors.

As you will hear again and again in the book: the one simple goal is to want to do yoga tomorrow even more than today. If, like me, you are sheltering-in-place for an indefinite period, and you practice with that goal in mind at least a bit every day, you are going to emerge from this crisis with a far deeper yoga practice than you ever imagined for yourself.

At some point this pandemic will end, and doing yoga at home will again become a choice, not a necessity. This book will help prepare you for that happy day.

– Bob Ostertag



# INTRO DUCTION

## PANDEMIC NOTE

With much of the world sheltering in place, many yoga teachers and studios are offering online classes. These classes provide income for studios and teachers, who are in the same desperate position as all other small business and self-employed teachers. And online classes have many of the same merits that in-person classes have. They are good sources of ideas and technique. They can provide at least some sense of community, even if the community is only virtual. This may really help the sense of isolation so many are feeling.

But classes, whether online or in-person, are where it all *begins*, not where it all *ends*...

No one takes dance class for years and never goes dancing.

No one takes art classes for years and never paints a painting.

And no one takes guitar lessons for years and never experiences the joy of sitting in their room late at night strumming their favorite tunes.

Yet yoga studios are full of students who take classes for years but never develop their own yoga practice.

Odd, isn't it?

Not that yoga classes are bad. Classes are where you go to get ideas and learn technique. Just like dancing and painting and playing a guitar.

But classes are where it all begins, not where it all stops.

And classes cost a lot of money. A monthly pass at the studio nearest my home costs over \$2000 a year! This kind of yoga is a nice pastime of the well-to-do, but what about the rest of us?

## **A home practice costs nothing at all.**

*Well, I don't do yoga that often, so going to class doesn't cost all that much.*

What? You don't do yoga very often? What a pity! A bit of yoga every day keeps the doctor away, puts a smile on your face where there might have been a tear or a frown, relieves stress, calms the mind, opens the heart, and eases all kinds of pains and ills. Why wouldn't you want to do it often?

*Because it would cost too much.*

Aha!

*But who has time for that much yoga?*

Hmmm. I see all those yoga classes have convinced you that yoga must be done for 60 or 90 minutes. That's ridiculous. You can do yoga for 5 minutes or 5 hours. We all have time for a little yoga every day.

*But I am exhausted after yoga class. I drag my tired body home to recover. No way I could do that every day.*



Why are you pushing so hard? Probably because your teacher pushes you like that in class. That is certainly one way to do it, but there is a world of others. Most people would think of my practice as quite strenuous, but I have worked up to that over many years. I rarely break a sweat and I always feel more energetic when I finish than when I started.

*But I would hurt myself. I injure myself often enough in class with a teacher there to help me. I would hate to think what would happen if I did yoga alone.*

Bingo! This is yoga's dirty secret: yoga classes often lead to injury, sometimes very serious injury. We will have much more to say about this throughout this book.

The way to avoid injuries is to listen to your body and tailor your practice accordingly. This is basically impossible to do in a yoga class where a teacher calls out one-size-fits-all orders to a large group. You can only do this on your own.

So this little book might save you a lot of money, prevent you from hurting yourself, and make you healthier and happier.

What's not to like?

Classes are good for learning the mechanics and techniques of yoga poses, breathing, and more. That sort of information is much easier to convey in person with real bodies than on a page or in a video.

And classes can build community (though they rarely seem to build as much community as many of us hope). At most studios, there is simply no time or space for any kind of community function because every hour and square foot of space is being constantly monetized. For all the talk of community I have heard at yoga studios over the years, the results I have seen have been paltry. Though even at the most commercial studio you are at least going to bump into other people as you are herded in and out, and they will share your interest in yoga, so already that is something.

So yes, go to class. But don't only go to class. Over time, as your skill set grows, hopefully the balance between class and your home practice will continually shift in favor of the latter.

In this book, we'll assume you have been taking classes already, and know at least the basics of the most common yoga poses.

Our purpose here is to help you take what you have learned in class and actually do yoga, in the same sense that guitarists take what they learn in class and actually play music. Which is why you were taking classes in the first place.

Of course, teachers at yoga studios could teach you how to develop your own yoga in their classes. But they don't. They often say they do, but they don't. They have rent to pay, salaries to cover, and profits to make. So don't be surprised. Or take it personally.

I once taught a 4-class series on how to develop a home rich practice and go to class less. Not surprisingly, it was difficult to find a studio interested in hosting that series.

Joel Kramer is a good friend and one of my yoga mentors. In the 1960s, Joel became well-known as the "American self-taught yogi" and taught extensively. A yoga studio in Los Angeles recently invited him to teach a one-time workshop, and asked him what the prerequisite experience students would need before taking his class. Joel suggested that the class be limited to only those

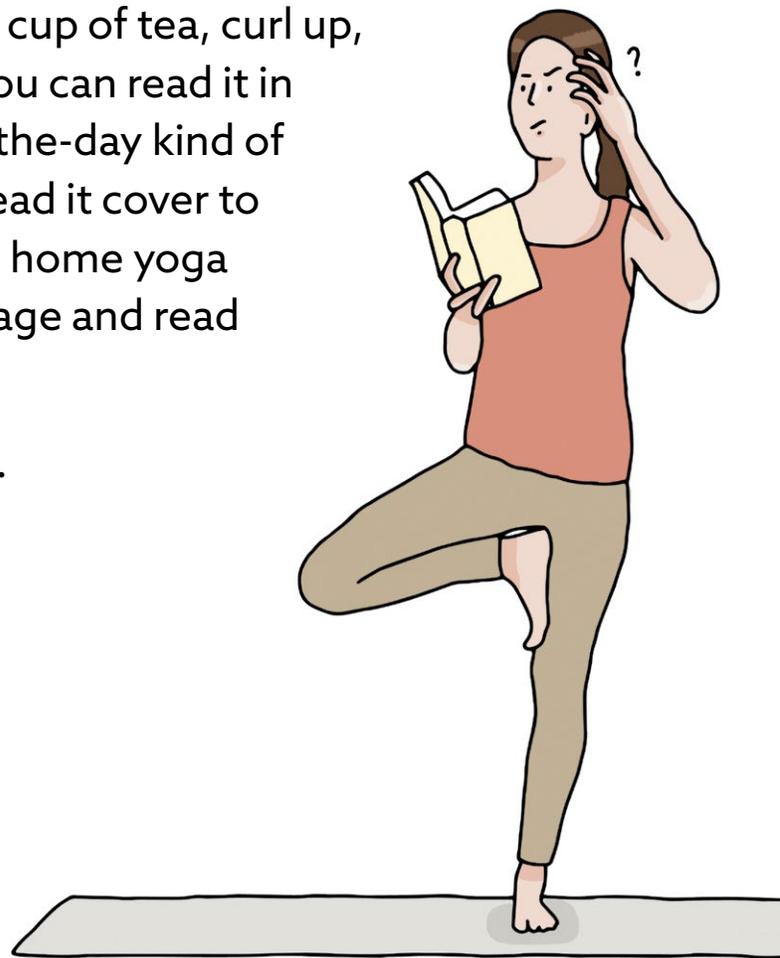
students with at least some sort of home practice. The studio answered that they had no such students. "None at all?" Joel asked. "You don't understand," they replied. "None of our teachers have a home practice."

Here is the good news: you can learn a lot of what you need to know to go beyond classes and into a deep home yoga practice from a book. Even a little book like this one.

And you can read this book however you like.

You can make yourself a nice cup of tea, curl up, and read it all in one go. Or you can read it in small bites, in a thought-for-the-day kind of way. Or you could do both: read it cover to cover first; then, before each home yoga session, open to a random page and read just a little bit.

It's easy. And fun. And cheap.  
And you won't hurt yourself.



# TEACHERS AND BRANDS

If you are feeling a bit skeptical – of who I am and what qualifies me to write this book – then you are already ahead of the game.

One of the big problems with yoga classes is how poorly qualified many teachers are, and how gullible the students are.

What does it take to become a yoga teacher? Well, you just announce that you are one and that's pretty much it.

The leading yoga brands are now churning out yoga teachers with “200-hundred-hour” or “300-hundred-hour” teacher training certificates. This is great for business. Those courses are expensive, so these teacher training classes are often a brand's most profitable endeavor. And the legions of graduates become evangelists, or salespeople, for the brand. And they are very enthusiastic about the brand. Of course they are! They just spent a boatload of money getting certified as teachers for that brand. The way to get a return on their investment is to build the brand.

In general, business practices like this are called “pyramid schemes.”

The brands find many willing students for their teacher trainings, because their regular classes are full of people who are trying to figure out how to pay for all the classes they are taking. Or who dream of a new life in which they trade a soul-sucking job in a corporate cubicle for a mat in a beautiful yoga studio. And who wouldn't want to make such a trade? Most of those low level office jobs require at least a college degree. How many thousands of hours do you suppose goes into getting a college degree? And now someone tells you you can trade all that for a life of yoga with only 200 hours of study?



In my experience, I have found that total-years-doing-yoga matters more for good teaching than hours-in-teacher-training. Someone who has only done yoga for a few months can take a 200-hour teacher-training course and become a “certified” yoga teacher. Yet this teacher will have never seen a serious injury occur, or contemplated how their own yoga practice changes as they recover from injury or sickness, or age, or even as they become more flexible.

There is no substitute for time-on-the-mat when it comes to teaching yoga.

That doesn't mean that there are no good young teachers. Of course there are. But the prudent student will maintain a certain skepticism towards all yoga teachers. Here is one good rule of thumb: if the teacher is younger than you, take it all with a grain of salt. And the greater the age difference, the more salt. Particularly when a young teacher calls for poses that seem to you in any way injury-prone. A teacher who is 25 does not – cannot – know what yoga feels like in a 55-year old body.

And there are many yoga teachers who do not even have that minimal teacher certificate. They just announce they are yoga teachers.

Like I did, when I taught my class on how to stop going to class. So please be especially skeptical of me.

I have not taken any of those teacher-training courses. I have no certificate. I have not counted how many hours I have trained. But I have been practicing yoga for nearly thirty years. Long enough to feel my own body aging and watch the aging of those around me. Long enough to have gone through lots of injury and illness, some resulting from yoga, some not.

I have taken classes in most of the major yoga brands: Hatha, Iyengar, Ashtanga, Anusara, Bikram, Shadow, Jivamukti, Forrest, and more. I am skeptical about all of them.

I use the word “brand” here deliberately, for they really do function just like brands of clothing or ice cream or smartphones: yoga entrepreneurs brand their teaching as a way to wall “their” yoga off from the rest of yoga in order to sell it.

Basically, each of those brands is the codification of one person’s yoga practice. Someone did a lot of yoga, developed an advanced practice, set their own experience in stone as the correct or true experience, and then packaged it with a name and a trademark so they could sell it to others.

OK. These brands were started by advanced yogis who surely learned some things along the way that may well be useful to you. After all, if you want to learn to play saxophone you would do well to study the technique of Charlie Parker, and if you are an aspiring cellist you might want to check out what Yo-Yo Ma has to say about technique.

But none of them has the one way. Because there is no one way. Certainly none of their ways is your way. Only you can find that. And finding it will take time. By yourself. For free.

And seriously, not all of today's yoga brands were founded by the yoga equivalent of Charlie Parker or Yo-Yo Ma.

# INJURIES INJURIES INJURIES

One big difference between learning yoga and learning guitar is that you are unlikely to sustain a serious injury learning guitar. In yoga, serious injuries are everywhere.

Look around your next yoga class. How old is the oldest person in the room? Where did all the students go when they aged? Why?

The answer is injuries.

There is a well-worn path that people who attend yoga classes cycle through:

- they begin taking classes;
- they get hooked and come to class often;
- the teachers push them harder and harder;
- they get a few minor injuries but decide to muscle through them;
- eventually they get seriously injured and drop out of yoga altogether;
- their place in class is taken up by a younger person just starting out on the same cycle.

In my experience, it is rare to see someone over 50 in a class, and almost never anyone over 60.

Teachers also get terrible injuries. I remember going into one of the more famous yoga studios in New York City, where they had some pills for sale by the cash register. Next to the pills was a testimonial from the school's founder about how the pills had helped him heal from a horrendous shoulder injury. The thought that someone who had recently nearly destroyed his shoulder doing yoga might not be the best teacher apparently had occurred to no one.

The injuries are not surprising when you consider that most yoga poses are actually borrowed from British gymnastics and French modern dance from the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Sorry if that information bursts your yoga bubble, but it is true. This includes poses from Downward Facing Dog to Warrior One to the push-ups they call Chaturanga.

If you know any modern dancers or gymnasts, you know that they have very short careers. Very few dancers are still performing at age 40. Even 35 is pushing it for many. Why? Injuries. So it is with yoga.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, if you look around at the age range of the students in a modern dance class, it mirrors what you find in most yoga studios. No surprise there.

None of this is a problem if you don't mind ending your yoga practice around your fortieth birthday. But why would you want to do that?

I am 62, and happily doing more yoga, more often, and more deeply, than ever. I have no idea if I will still be around at 72 or 82 or 92, but if I am, I hope to be doing yoga.

- 
1. For an excellent history of contemporary yoga, British gymnastics, and French modern dance, see Mark Singleton's *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*. Oxford University Press: 2010.
  2. For a good source on injuries common to contemporary yogis, see Broad, William J. "How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body." *The New York Times*. January 5, 2012.

# WHAT IS YOGA?

This is not a simple question. Book and books could be written – have been written – on this question.

The point of the modest book you are reading is not to answer such lofty questions but to help you start your own little yoga practice. But we cannot avoid the question completely, because how we answer it will inform how we approach our practice. So, before moving on, here is my own, completely unapproved-by-anyone, un-branded, and very simple answer to the question of what is yoga:

**Yoga is a tool for calming and focusing the mind.**

All meditation practices center on calming and focusing the mind. All use some sort of tool to help.

- Catholics count rosaries.
- Zen Buddhists contemplate koans.
- Tibetan Buddhists look at mandalas.
- Many traditions chant.

Yoga is a meditative tradition that uses contemplation of the body itself as the tool for calming and focusing the mind.

It's that simple.

You can leave it at that, or you can add a belief in God, or god, or gods, heavens, enlightenment, vibrations, energy, gurus, and anything else you like.

It doesn't really matter.

A yoga pose is simply a position that can be comfortably sustained for a long period, to give us time to use contemplation and control of the body as our tool for calming and focusing the mind.

# GOALS

Common goals among students at yoga classes include:

- Making your tummy flat.
- Getting a great ass.
- Becoming more flexible.
- Becoming physically fit.
- Becoming adept at difficult, advanced poses.

There is nothing wrong with flexibility, a great ass, or a six-pack. Being fit makes you feel good and cheers up your life. If, instead of yoga classes, you paid a tennis teacher for tennis lessons which you attended diligently for 90 minutes at a time, several times a week, you will also feel great. Much better than if you stayed at home on the sofa at your laptop. But, like modern dance and gymnastics, pursuing fitness through yoga often leads to injury. If fitness or a great ass is your goal, tennis or biking or swimming or weight machines in a gym might lead to quicker results with far less risk of injury.

But what if you approach yoga with the goal of calming and focusing your mind?

Many good things follow:

- You will not push your body so hard, so will be at much less risk of injury.
- You will find that your practice improves literally every other thing in your life, yet doesn't exhaust you or leave you feeling destroyed. So you will want to do it more and more.
- You will quickly realize that if you go to yoga classes all the times you now want to do yoga, you would go broke.
- You will discover in yourself the "discipline" to maintain a steady home yoga practice, which will not seem like discipline at all.
- Fitness and flexibility will come, but as the byproduct or side effect, not as the main goal.

Instead of going for flexibility, a great ass, or a sixpack, what if you approach yoga with just one simple goal: **to want to do yoga even more tomorrow than today.**

So, if the next day you are exhausted and aching and cannot imagine dragging your tired ass to yoga, you are failing to meet your goal.

If you consciously make this your goal, developing your home practice will be easy. Think it through step by step. Do I feel like doing yoga today? If not, what was my practice yesterday? What was it that made me to tired, and that led to pain or soreness today? Whatever it was, don't do that.

Likewise, if you wake up and just can't wait to get back to yoga, notice that as well. What was your practice like yesterday? What was it that led to this wonderful feeling?

It is so simple, in this way, to let your body be your own teacher.

Review your practice and its results step by step, and you will find yourself doing yoga every day in no time at all.

Once you have that up and running, there may be one more useful goal: **to be able to sit comfortably in Lotus for longer and longer periods of time.**

As we mentioned, most contemporary yoga poses were borrowed from modern dance or gymnastics, and only entered the world of yoga in the last few decades. But a few poses, like Lotus and Tree, have a history going back to ancient times.

Both poses are very powerful. Highly recommended. Lotus in particular is very conducive to calming the mind and centering the attention. There is a reason that all over Asia there are ancient statues of Buddhas and Buddhists sitting peacefully in lotus.





**IT'S NOT  
AS HARD  
AS YOU  
THINK**

When I tell people I do yoga by myself every day, they say things like:

*I would love to do that but I just don't have the discipline.*

Yet I don't consider myself to be a very disciplined person. Yoga is the best, most rewarding, most fun part of my day. It takes discipline to stop doing yoga and return to the chores and duties of daily life.

So how do you get from that place where a daily yoga practice seems impossibly out of reach to a place where you enjoy it so much you can hardly stop?

**You do it every day. It's so simple.**

The fact is, this is how we get good at almost anything. Want to get good at basketball, or math, or playing the violin, or drawing, or writing poetry? Do it every day. Even if only for a few minutes. Yoga is no different.



# THINGS YOU DON'T NEED

**You don't need any money.**

You don't need an airplane ticket to an "exotic" destination which has been emptied of its native inhabitants. You don't need a beach or a rainforest.

You don't need a room that is especially hot. (The polar bears and "all other living beings" – those folks to whom yoga teachers often dedicate their classes – will thank you for not cranking the heat.)

Remember those images of Indian yogis wearing nothing but rags and doing yoga in icy mountain caves? Or on beds of nails? A skilled yogi can do yoga anywhere. Surely there is a spot in your home at least as accommodating as a bed of nails.

You don't need music.

You don't need a bottle of imported designer water. ("All living beings" will thank you for skipping the bottled water.)

You don't need pictures of Hindu deities.



You don't need any special "props." (Though if you have them and are in the habit of using them, by all means go ahead.)

You don't need any expensive clothes. (At home you don't need any clothes at all.)

## PANDEMIC NOTE

The subject of the following section is time.

All over the world, sheltering-in-place has dramatically changed people's relation to time.

For those who are out of money and food (and as I write these words it seems like this will very soon be the case for so many), time has become a force of true desperation. These poor people are trying to find their next meal, not reading a book about yoga. My heart goes out to them.

If you have stable food and housing, but have kids or grandparents or anyone else you have to care for with you, your time is probably even more slammed than it was before the pandemic. The 5-minute yoga practice we will discuss is for you.

But if, like me, you have no dependents to care for, and stable food and housing, your relation to time has changed in a different way. Instead of struggling to squeeze time for yoga into your busy schedule, you are wondering how to fill up your day. Perhaps you even have that all too rare opportunity to practice yoga until you feel like stopping, rather than for a set length of time. There are precious few silver linings to this pandemic. Let's not squander this one. Once this terrible crisis is over, there will once again be few opportunities to do yoga without regard for time.

# TIME

*I am too busy to do yoga. Out of the question.  
There are not enough hours in the day as it is.*

This is one of those unfortunate misunderstandings that people take away from yoga classes. It takes a lot of time to go to classes. Most run an hour and a half. And you have to get there. You have to change your clothes, wait in line, sign in, pay money, and probably sign something promising you won't sue them if you get injured (which may well happen). Then add in the time you spend making the money to pay for the class, and suddenly doing yoga requires several hours of your day.

But you can do a nice yoga session at home in 30 minutes. Or 20. Or 5. Or 200.

So you see, you have plenty of time for yoga. Every day.

There are steps you can take to make even a 5 minute yoga practice meaningful. This book will help you with that. The idea that there is a set amount of time required to do yoga is a perfect example of the onesize-fits-all approach people pick up at classes and that you are thankfully freeing yourself of by developing your home practice.

You can do yoga for any amount of time. So how much time is right for you?

Well, what is your goal? To do yoga every day.

If you keep this goal in mind, a lot of the rest will fall into place.

Just ask yourself:

*Did the yoga I did today make me more likely to do more tomorrow?*

If you are practicing so long that after a few days you are freaking out about all the work you have left undone, then you are practicing too long.

If you wake up the next morning full of aches and pains, wondering how you will possibly crawl out of bed, you are practicing too long.

Remember that your goal is not to do yoga for 30 or 60 or 90 minutes. Your goal is to do yoga every day. So start small and easy, then gradually work your way up.

For most of us, time is limited. We do not have the luxury of sitting down and doing yoga until we feel like stopping. We have things to do, and usually we have to do those things at specific times. So we are thinking about time our entire waking day.

When we do yoga, however, we want to forget about time.

In a yoga class, you pay a teacher to keep track of time for you, so you can forget about it. At home, all you need is an **alarm clock**.

It may seem paradoxical that you need an alarm clock so you can forget about time, but the alarm clock will keep track of time so you don't have to.

Without an alarm clock, while you are trying to calm and focus your mind, little questions will keep intruding, like:

*How much time has gone by? When is my next appointment? Am I late? Do I really have enough time to be doing this?*



This last question can be the most distracting. Even if we are sure we know the answers to the first three questions, that fourth one can gnaw away at us. So, before you begin your practice, think through how much time you have so you don't start second guessing yourself later while you are trying to do yoga. Do this in a conscious and deliberate way.

If tomorrow you don't have time to do yoga because you practiced so long today, then that practice was too long, because your goal is to do yoga every day.

Once you decide how much time you have, set your alarm. You may even want to set two alarms: one when you must stop, and another five minutes earlier. (Smartphones allow you to set multiple alarms. Most of our clocks have a snooze function that will also work.) That first alarm will give you a cue to start finishing up your practice.



Now that you have set your alarm, put away the clock where you can't see it. Presto! You have freed yourself from thinking about time. Enjoy your yoga!

And if you are using the alarm on your smart phone, don't forget to set the phone to "airplane mode." No calls, emails, texts, tweets, Facebook, or any of that. You will quickly discover that simply unplugging is such a lovely experience that you will look forward to your daily yoga even more.

Every now and then, I have the luxury of doing yoga on a day when I have nothing else to do. I can forget about time, and simply do yoga until it feels like time to stop. What a treat! If you find yourself occasionally in this situation, enjoy it. Chances are these occasions will be all too rare.

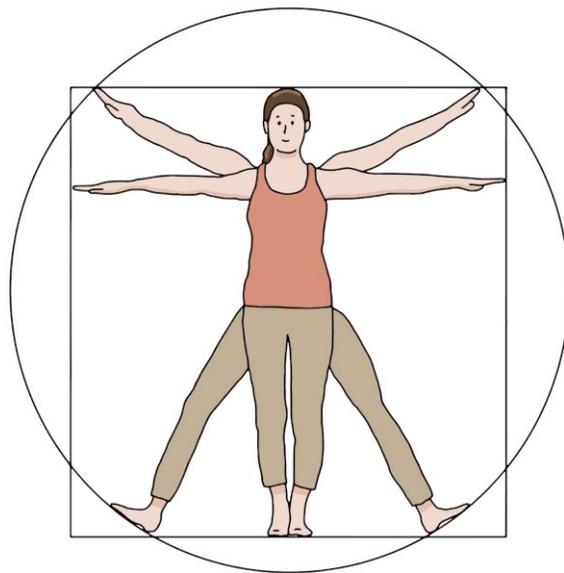
# SPACE

For most of us, space is just as limited as time. Maybe you live in a big beautiful home with lots of extra space. More likely, you live in a tiny studio apartment, or are crammed into your living space with several roommates.

Fortunately, you can do yoga in very small spaces.

As with time, the key thing about space is not to have a lot, but to organize what you have to facilitate your practice.

Lie down on the floor with your legs straight and your arms extended above your head. That is how much floor space you need side to side. Now stand at the center of that line, turn sideways, and stretch your arms out wide. That is how much space you need front to back.



You will want a wall along the back of this space which you can use to assist you in balancing poses, inversions, and so on. It is fine if there is a door in the wall, as the doorknob and frame can be useful as tools as well. But there should be no pictures or other wall decorations that you might knock off with your feet or hands.

You could almost do yoga in your closet.

If that seems cramped, think about the last crowded yoga class you were in. The one where the guy in front of you kept accidentally kicking you in the face. See how spacious your home seems now?

If you do not have a sufficient empty space in your apartment the way it is currently arranged, how could you create the needed space with the least amount of hassle? Take the time to really think this through.

What you need is:

## **A SIMPLE ROUTINE**

Because your goal is a daily yoga practice, if rearranging furniture and things to make space for your practice is too burdensome, or if clearing space for your practice leaves your apartment a mess, your daily practice will never happen.

So, how can you make this easy? Create a simple system. It may take some time, but you only need to figure it out once to facilitate years of yoga.

## **PROPS**

Props can be very useful for yoga, but they don't have to be "official" yoga props that you pay too much for at a yoga store. You surely have many useful yoga props around the house, you just have not thought of them that way.

## A YOGA MAT

I often practice without a mat. If it is a sunny day, I almost always do yoga in the nearest park, because why not? Unless I am worried about garbage or sharp objects in the grass, I don't take a mat. Grass works fine.

Sometimes I don't use a mat when visiting yoga studios, because the rental mats are often smelly and unclean. Most yoga studios have nice wood floors that make mats unnecessary, though I was once expelled from a yoga class in Brooklyn for not using a mat. Their rental mats were stinky, and they had a beautiful wood floor, but apparently their lawyers had told them there would be liability issues if students touched the floor! (People who see yoga as a living tradition often ask: now that yoga is so popular in the US, what will be our unique contribution to the tradition? One answer: lawyers!)

But all other things being equal, a mat is a nice thing to have.

## A MIRROR

A mirror will be far more useful than you might think. You can use it to check your alignment in different poses. You may be surprised to see that what you were sure was a straight arm is in fact anything but.

The mirror is useful in other ways too. Often times a pose will require you to relax a certain muscle somewhere in your body that you cannot even find the connection for in your mind. You try to concentrate on it, but the connection between your brain and that muscle just isn't there. If you can see that part of your body in a mirror, you can simply start playing with the different muscles in that part of your body and literally see when you have the right connection. This can be a powerful tool.

However, mirrors can also distract us with our image. We can get sidelined into worrying excessively about our hair, or our butt, or that belly that we wish would not keep getting bigger. Or conversely, admiring some part of ourselves we think yoga is making more attractive. If you find yourself falling into these traps, put the mirror away. It is not necessary.



## **A DOOR FRAME**

Door frames are sublimely useful yoga props for standing poses. Each door frame is different and lends itself to particular uses, depending on its width and height, how it opens into the room, and what furniture is around. So I can't tell you how to use your particular door. Experiment! How can you wedge yourself in there and use the frame to assist you? Double-sized door frames fit me especially well, but you and I are probably not the same size.

## **A STRAP OR BELT**

A strap can be useful, but here again there is nothing magic about the "official" yoga straps sold in yoga studios. You probably already own a belt. Or a scarf.? Or one of those stretchy rubber thingies that physical therapists give people for doing exercises to recover from injuries. Try all of those, pick the one you like the best, and then leave it in your yoga space so it is always there.

## **A BLOCK**

Blocks are super useful. A block can make an otherwise difficult or injury-prone pose comfortable and sustainable. And those “official” yoga blocks really do the trick. The right size. The right weight. A block may be the one piece of yoga “gear” you want to get. Actually, not just one. Get two. They will come in handy.

## **WHATEVER IS ON HAND**

Almost any piece of furniture can be useful. A desk top or table can play the same role that a ballet bar would play in a yoga studio. Doing Downward Facing Dog with your hands on a chair or a footstool can be extra protection for a muscle which is complaining, or just a nice change of pace. A doorknob can be nice to hold on to while in all sorts of poses.

I always find it slightly funny to see Iyengar students lined up carrying their institutional metal folding chairs to and fro. There is nothing special about those chairs. I suppose they were present someplace where Iyengar was developing his teaching technique, and thus became set in stone as the only correct Iyengar chairs. Skip that nonsense and find ways to use what you have on hand.

# WHERE TO BEGIN



OK.

- You have thought through how much time you have for yoga today.
- You have set your alarm and turned off your phone.
- You have created your space at the wall, with a nearby mirror.

What do you do now?

# START WITH THE BREATH

Begin your Ujjayi breath. (Hopefully you have learned this in yoga class. If not, find a demonstration on YouTube. It is easy to learn from a video.)

- Mouth closed.
- Slow inhale through the nose with a soft ocean sound.
- Pause at the top without closing your throat.
- Swallow saliva if you need to.
- Slow exhale through the nose with soft ocean sound.
- Pause at the bottom without closing your throat.
- Repeat.

Move the air from your diaphragm.

Gently expand your chest on the inhale. Gently pull your stomach in and your perineum up on the exhale. Never let your stomach sag out. Keep it tight.

That's it. Yoga. You're already there! Keep that breath going, just like that. If you are breathing like that, in a position you can comfortably sustain, calming your mind and relaxing your body, you are doing yoga.

# WHAT POSE?

*OK, but what do I do now? Don't I need a teacher to tell me what pose to do and how long to do it?*

Nope.

Forget about those sequences of poses you learned in class. There is nothing special about them. They are not ancient. They are more likely just a few years old. Maybe even a few months.

Often times their only real purpose is to give inexperienced teachers a form to hang on to, a one-size-fits-all routine.

But you are now free of all that, which is a wonderful thing. You get to make your own, "brand-less" yoga.

Try starting with this:

- Think through all the poses you have learned in class. Of the whole list, which would feel most comfortable for you right now? Do that.
- Hold it until it becomes uncomfortable.

Now repeat:

- Think through all the poses you have learned in class. Of the whole list, which would feel most comfortable for you right now? Do that.
- Hold it until it becomes uncomfortable.

Keep repeating until the alarm clock rings.

That's all there is to it. That's how you begin, that's how you continue, and that's how you end.

*What!?! Don't I have to start with vinyasas? Or Warrior One? And do all those push-ups? And Upward Dog? And and and...?*

Nope.

*But what if I follow those instructions and only end up just repeating the same two or three poses?*

If you can do an entire yoga practice with just two poses, while keeping your breath even and easy, your mind calm and focused, and your body comfortable, then congratulations: you have a very advanced yoga practice. Most of us will need more variation.

# HOW LONG?

How long do you hold a pose? There is no short answer.

A few paragraphs up, we said “until it becomes uncomfortable.” That is the simplest answer, but deepening your practice will require more than that.

Step #1 is to hold the pose as long as comfortable.

Breathe.

When you experience discomfort, calmly observe it.

If you are calm and focused, you will notice it long before it becomes a serious problem or a potential injury.

If the discomfort is already a serious problem when you first notice it, you are too far into the pose. Back off, before you hurt yourself.

Let’s assume you did not go too far, and that the discomfort is not a serious problem. Hooray! It’s time to play.

Where is the discomfort? Which muscle? Precisely where in which muscle?

Think it through calmly and deliberately. Locate it as precisely as possible. Observe.

Now, calmly and mindfully, change one thing in your pose: maybe how the foot presses on the leg; maybe the angle of the arms or hands; maybe something else.

Breathe.

Calmly and mindfully notice how the effects of that single change ripple throughout your body.

Focus.

Try to situate those effects so as return you to a place of ease.

Return your focus to the place you were experiencing discomfort. Is the discomfort gone?

If yes, congratulations!

If no, calmly and mindfully notice that.

There is no problem here. Since you have not gone too far, there is no room for play. You are not going to hurt yourself.

Breathe.

Remember, whenever we say "breathe," we don't mean just any breathing. We mean Ujjayi breath.

- Mouth closed.
- Slow inhale through the nose with a soft ocean sound.
- Pause at the top without closing your throat.
- Swallow saliva if you need to.
- Slow exhale through the nose with soft ocean sound.
- Pause at the bottom without closing your throat.
- Repeat.

Change one other thing in your pose. Some small aspect of the pose. Maybe your arm. Maybe just your gaze. Maybe you relax your lower back. Maybe you just remember to pause at the top of your inhale without closing your throat.

Notice the effects of this new change ripple through your body.

Notice if your discomfort has eased.

And so on.

Play mix-and-match with the upper and lower body positions.

Notice how changing just the arrangement of your upper body can ease discomfort in your lower body, and vice versa. Pay extremely close attention to this:

*What just happened? I made a slight change to the angle of my right arm, and suddenly the discomfort in my left buttock disappeared!*

Breathe and enjoy that. Then, mindful of your relaxed buttock, see if you can return to the previous arm position without tensing the buttock.

Tomorrow you may be doing a completely different pose and notice you are again clenching your left buttock. Remember back to how changing your upper body relaxed that buttock today. Is there a similar way you might shift your upper body in this other pose? Does it relax the buttock again?

Be mindful.

Be calm.

Observe.

Notice everything.

# TREE POSE IS A GOOD PLACE TO START

If you still cannot figure out where to begin, try Tree.

Why Tree?

It is hard to injure yourself doing Tree.

If you do it everyday you will quickly get to where you can hold it comfortably for a reasonably long time.

The improved balance you will pick up from Tree will help you in all other poses.



Balancing poses provide a nice doorway into calming and focusing the mind, because they give you instant feedback: when you lose your focus you fall. It's like having a gentle, somewhat humorous mind-wandering alarm.

Many of us have lower back issues. Unfortunately these can be aggravated through yoga. Fortunately, they can often be resolved through yoga as well. Tree is wonderful way to begin to address lower back problems in a safe way with almost no chance of making things worse.

Though we like to think that yoga goes back to ancient times, most poses are decades old at best. There is documentation, however, of a very few poses being practiced a very long time ago. Tree is one of them.

*But but but... I am not sure I know how to do Tree correctly.*

*One teacher told me to put my hands together over my head.*



*Another said to extend them straight up.*



*Still another said to angle my arms slightly outward.*



OK. So try all three.

In each variation, what aspect of holding the pose becomes easier? What becomes harder? Notice how changing your the position of just your hands or arms redistributes the effort throughout your entire body.

Notice everything.

Calm your mind by focusing on the tiniest redistributions of effort and tension throughout your body.

Breathe.

Welcome to yoga!

- Put your legs in Tree with your arms extended straight upward and apart.
- Ujjayi breath.
  - Mouth closed.
  - Slow inhale through the nose with a soft ocean sound.
  - Pause at the top without closing your throat.
  - Swallow saliva if you need to.
  - Slow exhale through the nose with soft ocean sound.
  - Pause at the bottom without closing your throat.
  - Repeat.

- Continue as long as comfortable.
- When it becomes uncomfortable, take a break from Tree and do something else. Think through all the poses you have learned in class. Of the whole list, which would feel most comfortable for you right now? Do that. Hold it until it becomes uncomfortable.
- Now return to Tree, with your arms extended straight upward and together.
- When it becomes uncomfortable, take a break from Tree and do something else.
- Now return to Tree, with your arms extended upward and slightly apart.

*But but but... What do I do with my legs?*

*One teacher told me to press the ball of my foot hard into my thigh.*

*Another said to press hard with my heel.*

*Still another said not to press hard at all, but to rest my foot gently against my leg.*

Ha! A teacher once told me to press my foot into my leg "at least 500 miles per hour." It was the same teacher who had horribly torn up his shoulder, then used the injury as a marketing ploy to sell herbal supplements.

OK, the first thing to note is that despite what your teachers say, there might not be one right way to do it. Try it each different way. But be careful to leave yourself a wide margin of safety while you explore.

- Stand on one leg, pressing the heel of your lifted foot into your thigh.
- Breathe. Continue as long as comfortable.
- Take a break: Think through all the poses you have learned in class. Of the whole list, which would feel most comfortable for you right now? Do that. Hold it until it becomes uncomfortable.
- Return to Tree, this time pressing the ball of your foot against your thigh.
- Breathe. Continue as long as comfortable.
- Take a break: Think through all the poses you have learned in class. Of the whole list, which would feel most comfortable for you right now? Do that. Hold it until it becomes uncomfortable.
- Return to Tree, this time gently resting your foot against your leg.
- Take a break.
- Return to Tree, this time lowering your foot to where it lies gently across the knee of your standing leg.

You will discover that changing things in one part of your body changes things everywhere else in your body, as the effects of the redistribution of weight and effort and flexing and relaxing ripples outward.

Notice how changing the way you press your foot against your leg changes the distribution of weight in your pelvis.

And the way your vertebrae stack up.

And the way your shoulders line up with all that. And which parts of which muscles in your standing leg are holding you up.

Wonderful. Focus on that. Notice everything, even the smallest things.

Remember: yoga is the meditational tradition that uses contemplation of the body as the tool for calming and focusing the mind.

It's that simple.

*But but but... What do I do with my hands and fingers? One teacher told me to extend my arms and fingers straight up. Another said to interlace my fingers. Another said to reverse that.*

There are many, many variations of Tree. You can interlace your fingers above your head. You can reverse interlace your fingers above your head. You can put your hands into prayer. Or reverse prayer. You can put your hands on your hips, or gently interlace them behind your head. Or fold your arms gently behind you. And these are just a few.

So, which variation is easiest for you? Which would put you most at ease right now? Start with that one, then explore.

Breathe.

*But my balance is not yet good enough to stay in Tree very long.*

No worries. There is a wall somewhere nearby, yes? Use it. Stand sideways to the wall, put your lower body into one of the variations, and steady yourself against the wall with your hand.

Don't worry about relying on the wall too much. Remember, you are going to do this for at least a few minutes every day. If you do that, the balance will come soon enough without you even thinking about it. So for now, put your hand to the wall.

- Breathe. Notice the effects of this change ripple though your body. Has your discomfort has eased? Continue as long as comfortable.
- Change your lower body to a new variation.
- Breathe. Notice the effects of this new change ripple though your body. Has your discomfort has eased? Continue as long as comfortable.
- Change your upper body to a new variation.
- Breathe. Notice the effects of this new change ripple though your body. Has your discomfort has eased? Continue as long as comfortable.

Turn around and face the opposite direction, and steady yourself with your other hand.

- Breathe. Notice the effects of this new change ripple though your body, and if your discomfort has eased. Continue as long as comfortable.

Now back up snug against the wall for balance, and put both you upper and lower body into new variations.

- Breathe. Notice the effects of this new change ripple though your body. Has your discomfort has eased? Continue as long as comfortable.

Getting the idea?

Suddenly you have been doing yoga for 15 minutes, you are more relaxed and limber than when you began, your mind is calm and centered, your muscles are more toned, and you didn't injure yourself.

Welcome to your home yoga practice!

If you only had 15 minutes for yoga, your alarm is going off and it is time to return to the rest of your life. If you have more than 15 minutes, lucky you!

# THE YOGA MIX-AND- MATCH FLIPBOOK



Learning all the poses taught in today's yoga classes can be daunting. There are lots of them, and alternating between English and Sanskrit names as many teachers do adds another level of confusion.

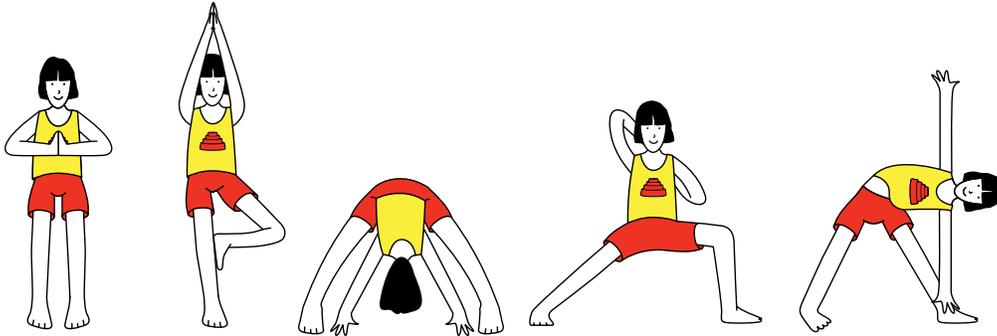
Remember that only a few poses, such as Lotus and Tree, are ancient. Some are only a few years old at best. So there is no real canon of yoga poses.

Rather than trying to memorize them one by one, try a "flipbook" approach. Remember those books you loved when you were a kid? The pages were cut into thirds, with legs on bottom third, heads on the top, and torsos in the middle. You could create odd sorts of people or animals by mixing and matching different combinations of legs, torsos and heads.

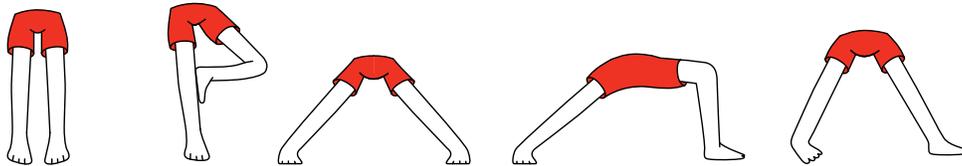
If you think of yoga poses in this manner, a little knowledge goes a long way.

What's more, instead of treating poses as isolated islands, learning poses this way highlights the elements they have in common. This can help you take what you learn from one pose and bring that along with you to a pose that is more challenging for you.

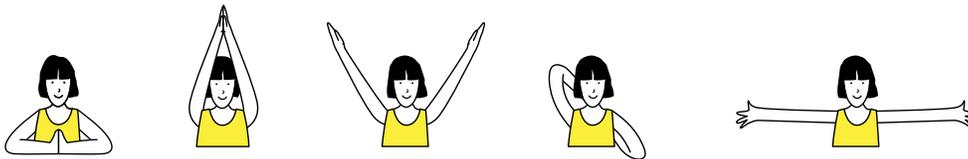
Think through some common standing poses.



Now make your flip book. Legs are the bottom third.



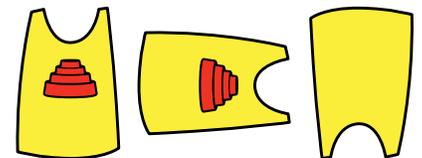
Arms go in a different strip of the page.



Put these in each possible combination and you have 25 yoga poses.

The torso is the 3rd strip in the flip book, and from the 5 poses we started out with you have 3 torso positions.

Presto! 75 poses.



Working through these combinations can be a wonderful journey. In fact, we already talked through one such journey when we went through the possibilities of Tree pose.

The key thing to understand is this:

*with your lower body in a single position, changing the arrangement of your upper body redistributes the weight and effort in your lower body.*

And:

*with your upper body in a single position, changing the arrangement of your lower body redistributes the weight and effort in your upper body.*

So, one good way to work a pose, calm the mind, relax the body, and spend a longer time in any given pose is this:

*if the limit you hit while holding a pose is the effort required of your lower body, calmly and mindfully change your upper body position.*

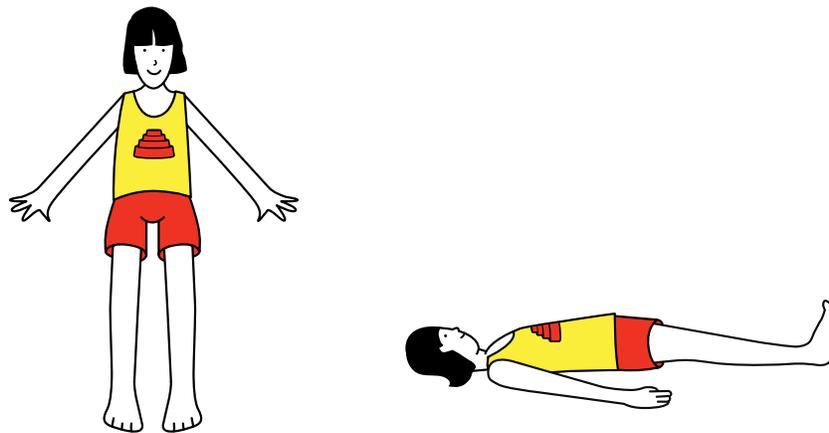
And:

*if the limit you hit while holding a pose is the effort required of your upper body, calmly and mindfully change lower body position.*

# GRAVITY AND YOU

Another simple way to go deeper into a pose is to change your relation to gravity.

For example, consider Mountain Pose and Corpse Pose.



In yoga classes, these are taught as distinct and unrelated poses, but your body is in the same position, just rearranged with regard to gravity.

How about Staff, Half Forward Fold, and Legs Up the Wall?



These too are taught as three different poses with individual Sanskrit names (Dandasana, Ardha Uttanasana, and Viparita Karani), but your body is in the same position in all three. Only your relationship with gravity as changed.

Why not add a fourth pose, with your body in the same position, but lying on your side?

If you experiment with the poses you already know using this approach, you will find that many of them can be done in different relations to gravity.

And many of the new poses you will discover in this manner will turn out to have Sanskrit names.

If you take the poses we got from combining different arm and leg positions, and now move them through different relationships to gravity, you will find you now know well over 100 yoga poses.

What's more, you will find that you are learning progressions of poses that make sense. They make sense because instead of going from one discreet pose to another, you will be changing one or two elements while leaving everything else constant. This is a great way to calm and focus the mind, relax the body, and observe the tiniest changes in awareness.

This is also a very intuitive way to develop your own sequences.

- Take a pose which is easy for you.
- Think of that flip-book. Turn just one page: arms; torso; or legs.
- Repeat.
- Settle on a sequence which lies comfortably on your body.

Practice that sequence for a few weeks, or months, or years.

When the time is right, change it.

# HOME BASE

Often times it will help you to return to some sort of “home base” pose in between sequences. In yoga classes, Downward Dog is invariably used in this manner.

Downward Dog is an option, but it is certainly not the only one. I often use Dolphin, Crow, or Lotus. You can surely find your own “home base” pose that suits your body and skill level.

You can also try changing it up. What if every few months you tried a different “home base” pose, as your skill level changes.

# VINYASA, OR RESET SEQUENCES

Just like it can be helpful to have a “home base” pose to return to, it can also be helpful to have a vinyasa, or “reset sequence”, you use frequently.

Have you ever had a fancy multi-course dinner where you were served a “palette cleanser” between courses? Some very small and light dish, such as, say, a not-too-sweet gelato to freshen your taste buds before the next dive into flavor? “Reset sequences” serve the same purpose, palette cleansers for the body. Shake everything loose between one sequence and another.

Just like yoga classes always use Downward Dog as home base, they invariably use Chaturanga to Upward-Facing Dog to Downward-Facing Dog as the Vinyasa, or reset sequence.

After years of doing this, and watching others do it, I cannot recommend it. The push-up (Chaturanga) is stressful for the shoulders, and the backbend (Upward-Facing Dog) is stressful for the lower back. Both are stressful no matter how you approach them, but if you blow through them in a rush, quickly taking each to your limit, it is just a really bad idea.

In my years taking yoga classes, many minor injuries and tweaks resulted from these sequences. And I have seen numerous students leave yoga either for brief periods or forever due to injuries from this sequence.

Fortunately, my injuries were minor. Nevertheless, they frequently prevented me from doing yoga for a few days or longer. Which hardly serves our one simple goal of doing more yoga the next day.

Why do yoga classes push everyone through the same one-size-fits-all sequence with so much potential for harm?

Well, all those repetitive vinyasas can fill up a lot of class time for an inexperienced teacher who is not sure what sequence to call next.

And, at the end of the day, that is just a whole lot of push-ups. Push-ups build muscle. Define your pecs. That's why they do them so much in the army and at the gym. Students whose yoga classes are full of push-ups can go home and admire themselves in the mirror and feel like they are accomplishing something.

Until shoulder pain takes them out of yoga entirely.

Any sequence can serve as your reset sequence. Experiment. What sequence cleans your mind and body, leaving you invigorated, relaxed, and ready for the next deep dive? Find it for yourself. Use it for a while. Six months or six years. When your practice has deepened to the point that you are ready for a more challenging reset sequence, you will know.

# THOU GHTS



The rest of this book consists of thoughts and ideas which may help you in your home practice: how to stay safe and avoid injury; how to respond well to frustration; to focus; how to keep at it every day; how to go deeper.

You can read them all at one go. Or you might try reading just one before each practice. Or do both. Or something else.

The thoughts do not appear in any particular order, so feel free to jump around or open to a page at random.

# ENTERING A POSE IS A BEAUTIFUL JOURNEY, SO ENJOY IT.

Picture it like this: entering a pose quickly and going directly to your limit is like driving a Hummer through an alpine meadow of wildflowers.

Why not take a leisurely stroll through the meadow instead? Slowly. Smelling the flowers. Appreciating the shape and color of each. How each one sways in the gentle breeze. How the scents ride the breeze. And the dance of the sunlight.

Go into the pose...

one...

step...

at...

a...

time.

Observe.

What should you observe? Everything!

If you hurry through a field of flowers, when you arrive at the end, well, then you are at the end. No more flowers. Sorry about that.

There is nothing waiting for you at the end of the pose except your breath. Which was there with you all along.

# MINDFUL TRANSITIONS

How should you move from one pose to another?

- Without injury, first of all,
- without extraneous movement,
- without showing off,
- without breaking your meditation or your breath,
- with focus,
- and with ease.

Before leaving one pose, mentally choose your next one. How can you move from where you are to where you are going with ease and without extraneous movement?

If you are so far into a pose that you can't think through where you are going in a calm and focused way, that is a clue that you are pushing too hard. Back off.

# MOVE WITH YOUR BREATH

Time your movement from one pose to the next with your breath.

Some yoga teachers insist that you should only move on the exhale. Or the inhale. Or in between the exhale and inhale.

So try moving each way and see what you think.

But however you do it, be deliberate. Decide, for example, to only move on the exhale. Now stick to that. Not because moving on the exhale is the “one right way,” but because timing your movement with your breath is another tool for calming and centering your mind. If you have decided to only move on the exhale and then discover that you are moving on an inhale, let that serve as a gentle reminder that your mind is wandering.

Don't be frustrated. Don't judge yourself. Let all of that go, but reel your focus back in, and on your next movement, move on the exhale.

# NO SHOW-OFF TRANSITIONS

Yoga teachers often encourage students to move from one pose to another in a very particular way, often very quickly, and involving jumping or hopping, or some other sort of show-off move.

Many injuries occur in exactly this way. In my experience, as many yoga class injuries occur during transitions between poses as during the poses themselves.

But people insist on doing them nevertheless because show-off transitions provide an opportunity for a teacher, or a yoga brand, or a particular student, to stand out.

If a teacher insists on one way for everyone in the class to move from one pose to another, particularly if the suggested move is quick or sudden, that is a good sign that this teacher merits an additional helping of skepticism.

# NEVER FORCE A POSE OR A SERIES

Forcing your way into a pose is the surest way to injury.

The best way to get into the habit of forcing poses is to set a goal of successfully completing a fixed series of poses that have nothing to do with you and your body and your age and your ability.

Unfortunately, this is exactly what most classes ask you to do. Ashtanga and Bikram and “power yoga” are the biggest offenders here, since those classes are built on rigid sequences which every student is encouraged to master. Anyone who has been around yoga for a long time knows that these classes produce more injuries than others. But there are many “flow” classes which are nearly as bad: classes in which a single teacher stands in front of a large class of students of different abilities and shouts out a series of poses to be held for specific amounts of time, none of which has anything to do with the particular students in the room and their abilities.

# PROTECT YOUR WEAKEST LINK

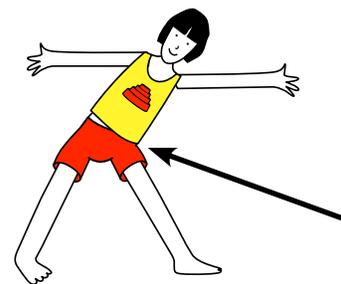
The best way to illustrate this idea is with a particular example. Say, Triangle Pose.

Yoga teachers often insist that students enter Triangle Pose by first setting their feet and straightening their legs, then extending their torso and forward arm horizontally, and finally extending their arms directly out from their shoulders.



Teachers do this because they want you to notice the crease that is created at your hip when your torso and forward arm are extended.

But extending your torso and forward arm with your legs straight places enormous strain on your lower back. For many people in countries where people sit in chairs, work at desks, and drive cars, their lower back is their weakest link. The part most susceptible to injury.



Again and again, I have seen people injure their lower back in class while entering Triangle Pose the way the teacher insisted. Early on in my practice, I tweaked my own back this way more than once.

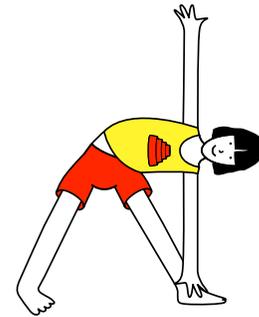
Try this instead:



Set your feet for Triangle but don't straighten your legs. Keep your front knee bent.



Then, in a relaxed way, extend your torso.



Then, in a very relaxed and easy way, straighten your front leg and extend your arms.

See how easy that is on your lower back?

How you implement this approach in different poses depends on you and your body. The basic principle is this:

- move into the pose one step at a time,
- put the weak-link part of your body into place first, in the most supportive way possible.
- put your strongest-link piece into place last.

# LET FLEXIBILITY COME TO YOU

Flexibility is not the goal.

The goal is calming and focusing the mind.

We use calming and focusing the body as a tool for calming and focusing the mind.

As we practice calming and focusing the body, our bodies become more flexible. It will just happen.

Of course, flexibility allows us to move through the world more calmly and comfortably. But flexibility is a byproduct, not the goal. It is not an end in itself.

People who are more flexible are not better, or happier, or more enlightened. If that were true, then gymnasts would be the most enlightened people in the world.

Of course, maybe they are. But I doubt it.

Enlightened or not, gymnasts have brief careers punctuated by frequent injuries.

We want to do yoga until we die, happily and without injury.

# LET THE POSE COME TO YOU

Students often get frustrated when they just cannot get into a pose despite working on it for a long time. So they push themselves even harder, and then injure themselves. Which brings even the slowest, most gradual progress to a crashing halt.

If you have been working toward a pose that you just cannot get, stop trying. You cannot meditate while working that hard anyway.

Go back to the poses you can do in a meditative way. Do them for longer. Do them with less effort. When a pose that you could only do with great effort becomes effortless, something has opened in your body.

Now, with your newly opened body, check back in on that pose you tried forcing for so long. You might find, to your delight, that the pose that had been nearly impossible is now easy. Hooray.

If, however, that other pose is still out of reach, forget about it for a while. Deepen your practice. Explore the poses which are available to you. There will always be more than enough. Continue for a few weeks, or months, or years. Every now and then, check back in on the pose that was out of reach. Maybe you find it has become easy. Or maybe it never becomes easy and you forget about it entirely. Or put it on your do-not-attempt list.

# LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

There are the messages your body sends you in the moment of effort.

There are the messages your body sends you a few hours later.

And there are the messages your body sends you the next day.

Listen to all of them. Muscle soreness a few hours later may not be such a bad thing.

**But remember, our one simple goal:  
to want to do more yoga tomorrow than today.**

If the next day, crawling back into bed or just staying in the hot shower for hours seems like a better plan than doing more yoga, then you have pushed too hard.

If you just can't wait to do more yoga, because you feel refreshed and energized, then you are on the right path.

One good idea is to make a habit of consciously doing a mental body scan a couple of times a day. Can you still feel your last yoga practice? What feels juicy? What feels tired? What feels sore? What feels like an injury in the making? Adjust your next practice accordingly.

# LEARN TO DISTINGUISH KINDS OF DISCOMFORT

Is the discomfort in your muscle, your connective tissue, or your joint?

If the discomfort is in your muscle, back off a bit and play with it. Can you ease it by calming and focusing your mind? If the answer is yes, then continue working and playing with the pose. If the answer is no, it is time to leave that pose for something else.

If the discomfort is in your connective tissue, there is nothing to gain except injury by continuing. Either back off into less extreme expression of the pose, or move on to something else.

Joint pain is NEVER a good thing. No pain in your knees, hips, or shoulders. Don't try to suck it up. Don't try to "soldier through it." Stop. Now. Move on to something else.

No matter how limited your practice is, there will always be many healthy options available.

# “PROGRESS”

Going farther into a pose, or attempting a more difficult pose, or executing a series of poses codified by a yoga brand – none of that is “progress.” Let go of that idea.

**Remember, yoga is the form of meditation which uses awareness of the body as a tool for calming and focusing the mind.**

“Progress,” if it means anything here, means meditating longer, more often, more calmly, and with greater focus. If all you do are “easy” poses but you can hold them for several minutes each, with a sense of ease, relaxing your body and calming your mind, you have made more “progress” than if you can push yourself through a series of difficult poses for thirty seconds each.

The goal is to spend time meditating through your body without injuring yourself, in a way that leaves you looking forward to doing even more the next day.

If you are doing that, then you are doing “advanced” yoga. Which poses you are doing is less important. If you look forward to doing more yoga the next day, you are doing the “right” poses.

There is nothing more to do. Except to do more yoga.

## ADD ONE POSE AT A TIME

Add poses to your home practice one at a time, so that you can fully understand the impact of each.

I learned this early on in my home practice. I got so injured at class that I was on the verge of stopping yoga altogether. Instead, I stopped going to class.

At home, I realized that I did not know which poses were aggravating my injuries. No matter how I shuffled them, or backed off from exertion, my various pains would be exacerbated.

Finally, I reduced my practice to just one pose: Tree. Tree with arms crossed behind my back. Tree with hands behind my head. Tree with arms horizontal. Tree with arms vertical. In between I would calmly walk in circles, or take Child's Pose, or whatever.

Once I was satisfied that Tree was not aggravating any injury, I added one more pose: Downward Dog.

I learned that it took a week of doing a new pose to know for certain if it was hurting or helping. How did I feel in the moment? How did I feel that evening? How did I feel the next day?

Adding more than one pose a week puts too many variables into play, so you cannot isolate which consequence is from which pose. And remember there is no rush. You want to do this the rest of your life. Giving each new pose a week to settle in is a luxury you can afford.

# **IT IS JUST FINE TO NOT DO A POSE, NOW OR EVER**

Remember the goal is to do more yoga. To use the body to calm and focus the mind. The goal is not to do any particular pose.

It is just fine to not do a particular pose for now. And it is just fine to not do a particular pose ever.

One of the keys I needed to unlock my home yoga practice was to finally give myself permission to not do poses which often left me feeling unable to do yoga the following day.

There are now quite a few poses I do not even attempt, even though I could formally execute them easily. No Warrior One, Reverse Warrior, High Lunge, or Upward Dog. No Tripod Headstands. No Wheel, or any kind of backbend beyond the most gentle.

And no Vinyasas. At least not the series that rushes from push-ups (Chaturanga) to backbends (Upward-Facing Dog) that teachers call over and over to fill up time in yoga classes.

If you look at that list and think back to your last few yoga classes, you will see that I do not do a lot of what goes on in yoga classes.

My one simple goal is to do more yoga. To relax the body in order to calm and focus the mind. To feel more like doing yoga tomorrow than today. Practicing any of the poses in my no-go list would make it less likely that I would reach that goal.

And anyway, there is no muscle that is stretched or joint that is opened in the poses I avoid, that is not addressed more gently in the poses I do.

So give yourself permission to take some or many poses off your list. Let them go. Don't worry about it.

Allow yourself to do the poses you can do by allowing yourself to not do the poses you cannot do.

# OPEN DOORS AND CLOSED DOORS

Often times we get obsessed on a pose. Maybe it is a pose that is often called by a teacher in a class we attend. Or maybe it is part of a fixed sequence we want have seen in an Ashtanga or Bikram class. Or maybe we are just fascinated by the aesthetics of it. Or perhaps the pose seems so impossible that we think that if we can master it we will feel good about our accomplishment.

We work and work, yet make no progress. So we push ourselves harder, and then harder again.

This is the basic, most effective recipe for injury.

Here is an idea that may help you get out of this trap.

Think of each yoga pose as a door. As there are many poses, there are many doors.

If you are obsessed with a pose you are not getting any closer to, then you have parked yourself in front of a locked door and you are banging your head against it.

Ouch.

Why not leave that door and wander down the hall, gently testing other doors as you go. Many of the doors will be locked. There is no use banging your head against them, unless you want to injure your head. So test them gently. Don't worry about all the locked doors. Move on. Lo and behold, you find one that opens with a gentle push. Go through that door.

You go through that one because you will enter a space where you have room to play. To push a bit and then ease up. To redistribute weight and effort and focus without worry of injury. To hang out long enough to smell the flowers.

So, next you go to class, and the teacher calls out different poses, treat each one as a door to gently test. Many will be closed, but keep your eye out for one that seems open.

Then, when you are back home doing your home yoga practice and wondering what pose to do, return to the open door you found in class.

And since you are at home and there is no teacher already calling out the next pose, you can take your time with your new door. Test it gently. How heavy is it? What kind of wood? What kind of handle? Do the hinges squeak? Have fun. Play with it.

Come back to that door, again and again, day after day. Soon it will open almost effortlessly. Go through the door!

Once you start thinking like this, you may well feel a bit chagrined (like I did) over how much time you spent banging your head on locked doors when there were other doors nearby which opened with the gentlest effort. Oh the folly.

But there's more.

Imagine two doors. After banging your head uselessly on the first door, you finally move to the second and discover you can easily go through. Once you are through the second door, you turn and approach the first one from the other side and discover that the door has opened. Instead of banging your head against it over and over hoping the door breaks open before your head does, you just open the door and walk through.

Boat Pose was like that for me. I couldn't do it. Not only that, I couldn't even figure out how to approach it. Yet it is part of the Ashtanga series, and I was going to Ashtanga classes, so I thought I had to master it. I pushed and pushed. I tweaked my back again and again. I would have to take days, or even weeks, away from yoga to recover from the pain of these attempts.

Finally, I had the good sense to just stop. No more Boat Pose. People would look at me funny in Ashtanga class when I wouldn't even try, but I was done with it.

I started to practice yoga at home. I practiced poses that were easier for me. No Boat Pose. I focused on my breath. And calming my mind.

Later, almost by accident, I discovered that Boat Pose had become something I could do with ease. Not because I had worked on it, but because I hadn't. Now I love Boat Pose. It feels great. It fits on my body like comfortable clothes.

By "later," I mean years later. Meaning: I took Boat Pose out of my practice for years, before I discovered that door was now unlocked and walked through it. With ease and a smile.

# WHAT'S HARD? WHAT'S EASY?

Zen Buddhists contemplate koans as an aid to calming and focusing the mind. Tibetan Buddhists use mandalas. Catholics use Rosaries.

How might you go about training yourself to calm and focus the mind by contemplating your body in a yoga pose?

- Go into any pose. Don't push so far into it that you cannot hold it for a while.
- Ujjayi breath.
  - Mouth closed.
  - Slow inhale through the nose with a soft ocean sound.
  - Pause at the top without closing your throat.
  - Swallow saliva if you need to.
  - Slow exhale through the nose with soft ocean sound.
  - Pause at the bottom without closing your throat.
  - Repeat.

- Slowly, mindfully, and deliberately, move your attention through your body. Not in a vague way. really do it. Start wherever you like. Say, your left foot.
- Closely observe your left foot. Where are you expending the most energy and where you are expending the least? Where are you most relaxed and most tense?
- Ask: what tiny shift or adjustment can I make that would reduce the effort at the most difficult spot, and increase the effort at the easiest spot.
- Make the adjustment.
- Now move into your left leg and repeat.
- Continue through your entire body.
- When you get to the end, return to your left foot and start again.

This sort of technique is a lovely tool. It gives you a very specific yet shifting focus which is not a distraction, but actually points you in the direction of contemplating the body as a way of calming and focusing the mind.

Do this on any sort of regular basis and you will quickly be comfortably holding poses for longer and longer times.

# CLOSE THE CIRCUIT

In electrical engineering, you need an unbroken circle, or closed circuit, for electric current to flow. If there's a break anywhere in the path, the current stops flowing.

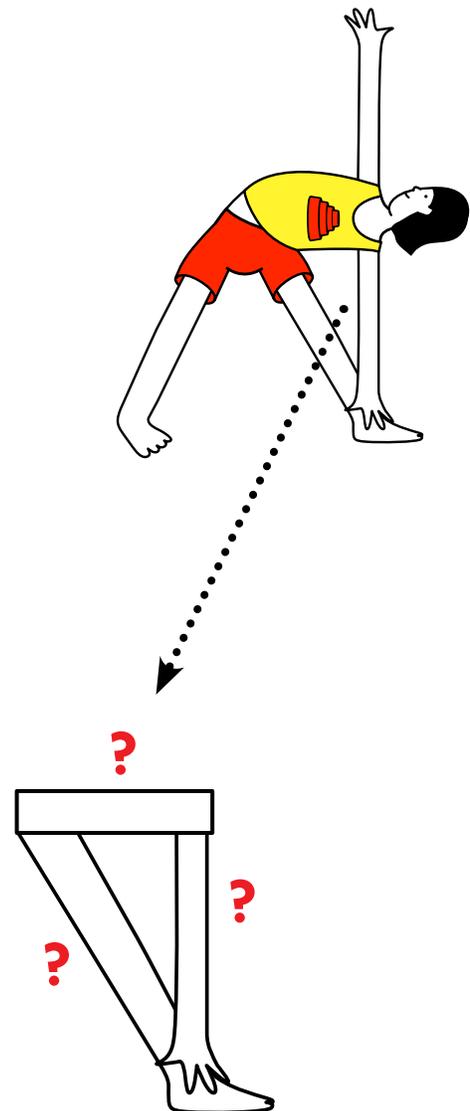
Each yoga pose can be imagined as a circuit.

Try this out in Triangle Pose.

Think of the triangle formed by your forward leg, the lower edge of your torso, and your arm reaching to your shin. That is your "circuit."

How are you going to close the circuit and cause energy to flow?

- In your mind's eye, trace through the circuit: from your front foot up your leg, across your torso, down your arm, and back to your front foot.
- Notice where you are expending the most energy and where you are expending the least. Where you are most relaxed and most tense.



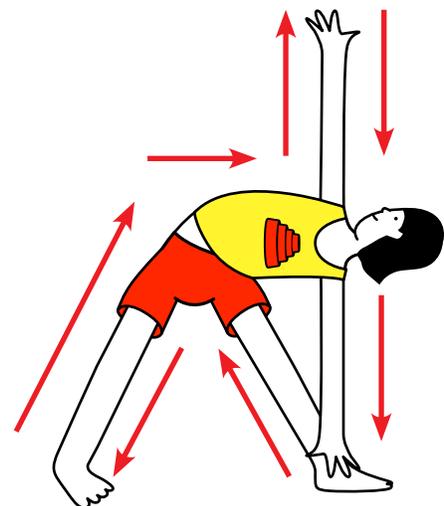
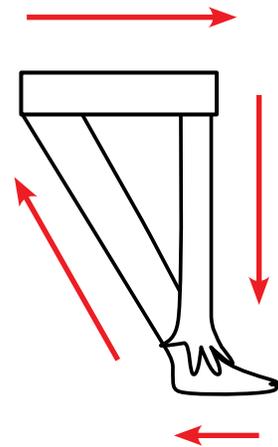
- Ask yourself what tiny shift or adjustment can you make that would reduce the effort being expended at the most difficult spot, and increase the effort at the easiest spot.
- Make the adjustment.
- Repeat.

Each pass through the cycle, you come closer and closer to equalizing the effort throughout the entire circuit.

When you fully equalize the circuit, feel the energy start to flow.

Really visualize it in your mind: equalize the effort throughout the circuit and watch the circuit light up. In this case, the lightbulb that is lighting up is you.

Now expand your visualization of the circuit to include your back leg. Light up that circuit. Then again including your upper arm.



I find that it is easiest to begin this technique with a circuit that includes only the parts of my body that are making the base structure upon which the rest the pose sits. Once I have that circuit flowing, I can move on to a circuit of the entire pose, which is more difficult.

Note that when we reach a limit of discomfort and have to exit a yoga pose, it is because the place of greatest effort in our body got tired. The more we can equalize our effort throughout the pose, the longer we will be able to comfortably hold the pose, and the deeper our meditation will become.

You can repeat this cycle as long as you can hold the pose. Equalize, light up, repeat. No matter how precisely we equalize effort throughout the pose, when we pass through the cycle again we will find even tinier differences of effort to equalize.

Well. Here you are. At home. By yourself. Holding a pose comfortably for far longer than you thought you could when you were in class following the orders called out by the teacher. Not injuring yourself. Not spending money. With a nifty mental tool for calming and focusing your mind. Meditating. Deeper and deeper.

You can think of the energy in the circuit as qi, or ch'i, or prana. Or as "the vital energy that flows through each organ and system of the body." Or as nothing more than a useful metaphor for deepening your yoga practice without injury.<sup>3</sup>

It doesn't matter what word you use, or which belief you hold. The effect of your yoga practice will be the same.

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3. In traditional Chinese culture, qi or ch'i is believed to be a vital force forming part of any living entity. Prana is the Sanskrit word for breath. In Hindu philosophy, it also means the "life force", or "vital principle" which permeates reality.

# BALANCE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

Here is a little exercise which can really help in deepening your meditation.

- Keep your eyes open but not focused on anything.
- Focus your awareness on everything outside your body: the light, the sounds, the temperature, the movement of the air, anything and everything.
- Now focus your awareness of everything inside your body: places of tension or pain, places of relaxation and comfort, the movement of the breath, the pressure of the floor on your skin and bone, anything and everything.
- Now, try to balance your inner and outer awareness.
- Repeat.

Seek finer and finer balance. See if you can make the barrier between inner and outer more relaxed and supple. And thinner. Until all that is between the internal world and the external world is a thin sheet of rice paper. Now, make that disappear.

## NOT “JUST STRETCHING”

A student at a school for circus acrobats once told me how silly he thought yoga was. “All you are doing is just stretching,” he said. “We do that at circus school all the time.”

“Well,” I thought to myself, “I guess all you are doing is stretching.”

The difference between “just stretching” and doing yoga is in the breath and the meditation, not in the physical action.

If you are using your breath, to calm and focus your body, to calm and focus your mind, you are not “just stretching.”

Now, as long as you are here, focusing on your breath and calming your mind, you might as well think about how to sustain yourself comfortably for extended periods of time, which will probably involve some stretching...

# THIRD EYE

Gently move your awareness and attention to your third eye. Keep it there.

Breathe.

This can be surprisingly calming.

By “third eye,” I mean the space on your forehead directly above your nose. Some variation or other of the idea of this “third eye” can be found in many different meditation traditions, from Christian to Hindu to Taoist.

You can subscribe to any or none of the beliefs of those traditions. I myself don't worry about it all that too much.

But I certainly notice that, for whatever reason, when I move my awareness to that place, my awareness changes in subtle ways.

# LET THE WORLD GO BY

Many meditation traditions teach a similar approach to handling the mental distractions that come when you find your mind wandering into some well-known rut of worry or obsession or habit. Don't be judgmental. Don't try to banish the thoughts. Just relax, observe, and let go. Return to the breath.

Try letting go of the world around you in a similar way. Using this approach, doing yoga in a place full of noise and distraction can actually be a useful tool for letting go of all that and calming the mind.

So your roommate is cooking dinner. Or your kids are being kids. Or you are in the park and people are running their dogs off-leash around you. Or the folks on the grass next to you are carrying on about some annoying thing. Or playing loud music that you don't like. Wonderful. These are handy reminders that you can let go of all of that, just like you can let go off all the useless chatter of your mind.

Calm down.

Breathe.

Let the world go by.

# CAN YOU BREATHE?

The surest guide for whether you are pushing too hard or not is your breath.

Losing the ease of your breath is like a sort of built-in overdoing-it alarm.

Is your breath easeful? Did the pace of the breath accelerate when you went into that difficult pose? Are you sucking it in and holding it, then expelling forcefully? Are you breathing like a sprinter? Or a weightlifter? Or like a yogi, with your breath moving easily through you like a gentle breeze through an open window?

When you find your breath tensing up, don't get frustrated. Don't judge yourself or be disappointed. Just let it go. With ease and humor.

If you just do this simple thing, your chances of injury will go way, way down.

But if I never push myself so hard that my breath quickens I will never advance to the more difficult poses.

Who cares?

Remember: the one simple goal is to do more yoga the next day. Not to do more difficult poses.

And if you push hard and injure yourself, how will you get to those difficult poses anyway?

# PLAYFULNESS

Can you play in the pose?

What do we mean by play?

Can you change the nuances of the pose?

Change which foot is taking most of the weight? Move the stress six inches down your leg? Turn your internal gaze to your hips and relax them to make your lower spine more comfy? Change the direction of your gaze? Slow your breath? An infinite number of things, most of which someone casually watching you would not even notice?

Can you do all of this with ease? Does it feel like playing?

If not, back off. You are pushing to hard.

Remember, you are not in a hurry to do anything except more yoga.

# RELAX

Most yoga teachers teach poses by telling you which muscles to engage in order to go farther into the pose. Instead, try thinking of which muscles to relax.

When you begin to feel discomfort in a pose, consciously and deliberately move your attention through your body one muscle at a time, asking yourself:

- What muscles are engaged that don't need to be?
- Where am I expending energy unnecessarily?

When you find a muscle like that, consciously focus on relaxing it. See if by relaxing it you can return to a place of ease. If you can find that ease, continue the pose. And when you again feel discomfort, search for another muscle that is tensed that does not need to be.

When you cannot return to a place of ease, come out of the pose and go into another.

As always, choose your next pose by asking which pose would be the most comfortable, or which pose offers you an open door.

# SHOULD I LISTEN TO MUSIC?

I often practice yoga while listening to music. Or audio books. Or even the news, if the news of the day is so compelling that I know I won't be able to get it out of my mind anyway. Or so distressing that it helps me absorb the blow if I am deep into yoga when I hear it.

But the best sound to listen to while practicing yoga is your own breath. That thing we begin and end with, and always return to. Music can help you relax and settle into a groove, but ultimately it is a distraction from the focus on the breath.

Ujjayi breath:

- Mouth closed.
- Slow inhale through the nose with a soft ocean sound.
- Pause at the top without closing your throat.
- Swallow saliva if you need to.
- Slow exhale through the nose with soft ocean sound.
- Pause at the bottom without closing your throat.

There is a world of music just in that breath. If a yoga teacher turns up the music up so loud you cannot even hear your breath, or promotes the class on line by sharing the class playlist, that might not be the teacher you want.

# WHERE SHOULD I PRACTICE?

Yogis in India used to show off doing yoga on hot coals and beds of nails. The idea was that if you could stay calm and focused while walking on a bed of coals, or sitting on a bed of nails, then you were a yoga master.

Beds of coals and nails were actually huckster tricks, but the idea that a skilled yogi should be able to practice anywhere is not a con.

Remember:

yoga is a tool for calming and focusing the mind.

When you are just starting out, maybe you find it very difficult to calm and focus the mind, and you need a quiet studio with a sprung wood floor and incense burning. Or a beach in Bali or a Costa Rican rain forest. I have practiced yoga on beautiful beaches and mountain tops, and highly recommend it.

But the more you practice, the easier calming and focusing the mind will become. Soon you will be able to practice at home while your family or room mates are carrying on around you. Or in a park. Or an airport. Or a noisy factory. Anywhere. On a freeway.

OK, not on a freeway.

# MAKE YOUR OWN FLOW SEQUENCE

The basic idea of a vinyasa, or flow sequence, is to have a sequence you can move through comfortably between poses to act as a body reset. Like erasing a chalkboard at school so you can start in on a new lesson.

This is not a bad idea. It's just that the series they invariably use in classes, with all those push-ups and backbends, leave most of us open to injury.

I could suggest a different flow sequence to you, but why not invent your own?

Taking into account your body, your ability, your age, and your experience, find a sequence of poses you can move through comfortably to "shake out" whatever stress accumulated in your last pose and get you back to something like home base.

The process of finding your own flow sequence every few months or so will be a nice opportunity to check in with your practice, contemplate what is easy and what is hard, what old challenges have resolved themselves and what new problems have emerged.

# BE SKEPTICAL OF YOGA TEACHERS

Keep in mind that the teacher at the yoga studio:

- may have less yoga experience than you;
- may be younger than you and have no idea what the aging process is like;
- may be completely unaware of the injuries their teaching is causing because people just stop going to class after injury, rather than reporting their injuries;
- is under a lot of financial pressure to claim that this class is somehow special, and will give you a sort of knowledge you could not find on your own;
- is probably under financial pressure to push you hard and make you grunt and sweat, because that is the way to fill up your classes, and the the competition between the teachers is fierce; and
- doesn't know you or your body or your mind.

Of course, it is also possible that your teacher may be wonderful in every way.

**ADDENDUM**

# **BACK PAIN**



Back pain has been such a frequent topic of discussion in this book, it makes sense to address it in more depth before closing.

Many of us in industrialized cultures where life involves lots of sitting develop lower back problems.

Yoga can be a tremendous help.

Yoga can also do tremendous harm.

I doubt there is any reliable data available in this regard, but in my three decades of experience in yoga, back injuries have been the most common yoga injury.

Back injuries are no fun. They can be quite painful. They can take a long time to heal, and can easily move from temporary "injury" to permanent "feature." Once back pain becomes part of daily life, it colors everything. Life goes downhill.

So thinking carefully about the condition of your back, and taking good care, will be an important part of ensuring that your yoga practice does more good than harm.

# BE SKEPTICAL OF BACK PAIN STORIES (INCLUDING MINE)

If you suffer from lower back pain and have shared this news with anyone, you know that everyone seems to have their own story of the best way to treat lower back pain. They are absolutely convinced that their story is true, that their technique is effective, and that all others are bunk.

Here are two important things to know.

*It is not well understood what causes lower back pain.*

X-rays of people with lower back pain show problems with the discs between vertebrae. But x-rays of people without lower back pain show the same problems. So diagnosing lower back pain involves a lot of guess work.

*Most (but not all) episodes of back pain eventually end, even if untreated.*

So the world is full of people who tried some form of treatment for their back pain and then their back pain went away. It worked! They become evangelists for whatever it was that they did. They are certain that if everyone with back pain did this one thing, there would be no more back pain in the world.

But chances are good that their back pain would have gone away anyway, even if they had done nothing. That is just what happens with most (but not all) lower back pain.

Maybe the thing that person really did had a positive effect on their lower back pain, or maybe a negative effect, or maybe no effect at all. They are a sample size of one, and since most lower back pain goes away anyway, little can be learned from their story, no matter how enthusiastically they tell it.

And, even if you assume their favorite treatment actually had a positive effect for them, that doesn't mean it will have an effect for you.

So, be skeptical!

Take all stories of how someone cured their lower back pain with a large grain of salt.

In particular, please be skeptical of the recommendations I will provide on the following pages.

Being skeptical doesn't mean you assume something is wrong. It means you do not assume it is right.

# MY BACK PAIN STORY

My lower back pain began in my early 20s, long before I started yoga.

Lower back pain has debilitated me again and again throughout my life. I have been to physical therapists, chiropractors, acupuncturists, orthopedists, masseuses, and pain management specialists.

I was first offered back surgery at age 23, and then offered it again and again, throughout my life. I am very glad I turned all that down and did yoga instead.

Today, at 62, I am largely free of back pain, lead a very active life, and have very carefully tailored my yoga practice to keep things that way.

The last time an orthopedist looked at an x-ray of my back, he was stunned that I was not in pain. The x-ray showed that one of my lower back discs was severely deteriorated, and another was so far gone it was hardly there at all. The vertebrae were stacked bone on bone.

He offered me surgery on the spot. Even now, if I were to pick up on the phone and call, he would schedule a back surgery for me right away. He is still waiting for that call.

Back pain was my initial reason for practicing yoga at home instead of in class. It became clear to me that if I went to yoga class, any yoga class, I would likely aggravate my back pain. There would just be too many poses called that were bad for me.

Developing my home practice has been a trial and error process of many years, often centered on how to relieve lower back pain. I am happy to report that I have not had a serious pain episode for several years now.

That's my back pain story.

I hope you have some salt handy.



# POSES THAT ARE (MAYBE) *BAD* FOR YOUR BACK

Is a particular yoga pose appropriate for you?

Well, what is your goal?

Throughout this book we have suggested

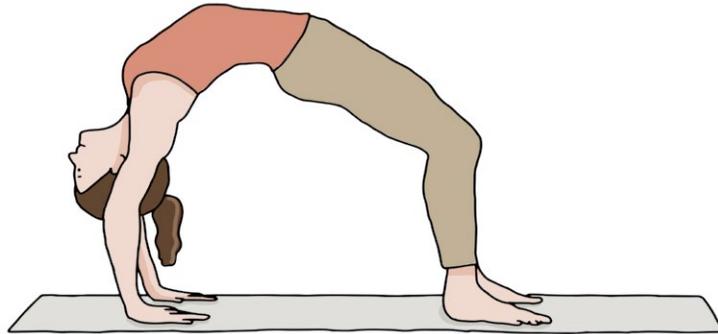
*one simple goal: to want to do yoga even more tomorrow than today.*

Yoga poses are useful because, if we practice, we can hold these positions comfortably for extended periods of time. We can use this time for a meditational practice which uses contemplation of this entire experience as a tool for calming and centering the mind.

If you can do an entire yoga practice with just two poses, while keeping your breath even and easy, your mind calm and focused, and your body comfortable, then you have a very deep yoga practice. Most of us will need more variation. And this is why we learn new yoga poses.

Which new poses should you attempt?

How about Wheel?



Yoga Journal tells us that Wheel:

*stimulates the thyroid and pituitary, increases energy and counteracts depression, and is therapeutic for asthma, back pain, infertility, and osteoporosis.*

If you believe all of that, then pushing yourself to do Wheel might make sense.

But our one simple goal is just to make it even more likely that we would do yoga tomorrow.

I have watched people injure themselves attempting Wheel for nearly 30 years. From what I can tell, there is a small subset of people in their 20s and 30s who really enjoy Wheel. Most people in this group fall out of it in their 30s. There is almost no one in their 40s who would benefit from the pose, and if you are one of the very few people still doing yoga in your 50s, just forget it.

Think about those odds. If your one simple goal is to make it more likely that you will do yoga tomorrow, then it may not make sense to attempt Wheel, no matter what your age.

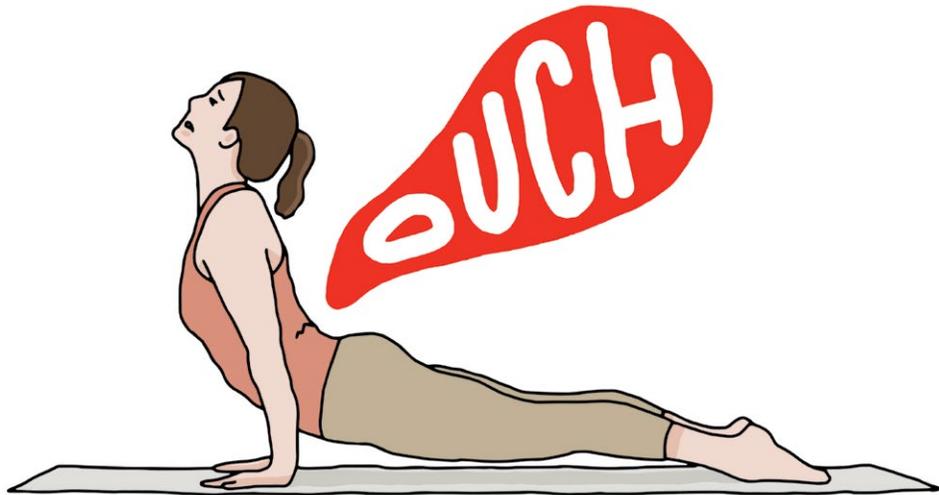
If your one simple goal is to do even more yoga tomorrow, then there is no reason to push yourself to do poses your intuition tells you might be harmful. The emphasis moves from how to justify excluding difficult poses from your practice, to how to justify including them.

What matters is that you have enough poses to keep you focused and happy in your practice. You don't need a lot of poses, nor do they have to be difficult.



**Warrior One** is second on my list of dubious yoga poses, particularly for anyone with lower back issues. Maybe if your hips are super open, you can put that torso position on top of that standing base without jamming your lower back in a way that is just asking for trouble. But I can't, and my hips are open enough to sit comfortably in Full Lotus for long periods of time.

The same is true of **High Lunge**, for the same reasons.



**Upward Facing Dog** invites lower back trouble in an even more obvious way. Just look at how your weight is distributed across the back.

These poses only showed up in yoga a few decades ago. They are not part of any ancient tradition. Why be so reluctant to skip them?

If you still want to go for them, at least don't rush through it all as part of a "vinyasa" sequence like most "flow" yoga teachers will instruct you. Be careful. Take your time. Set things up one step at a time. Protect your weakest link.

# POSES THAT ARE (MAYBE) *GOOD* FOR YOUR BACK.

**Tree** is my go-to always-at-hand pose for lower back therapy. It might not seem obvious that a standing pose like that would be so good for your lower back, but try it and see for yourself.

Just standing on one leg instead of two relieves some lower back stress. Then bend your knee with the sole of your foot against your thigh, and you create an easeful foundation. Now, use your core muscles to lift your torso up from the pelvic floor.

Don't worry about your arms. You can use them to stabilize yourself against a wall if you are not yet able to balance on one foot comfortably.

Or rest them cross ways behind your back, which puts your upper body in a super comfy position from which you can place all your awareness on your pelvic area and lower back.

Or put your arms in Prayer. Or above your head for a fuller expression of Tree.

Focus on lifting out of your pelvis and you will begin to develop the core muscles along your spine. Those muscles will then take some of the load off your spinal discs as you move through your day.

I do Tree a lot. In line at the grocery store. In line for the bathroom at a bar or cafe. In the aisle on airplanes. Pretty much anywhere I have been sitting for long enough that my lower back is complaining. It's like giving your lower back a lovely gift.

And there is very, very little chance of injuring yourself in Tree. Which is why we suggested starting your home practice with it earlier in this book.

**Lotus** is a sort of magic pose. It facilitates contemplation and meditation in a powerful and particular way. Once you can sustain it comfortably for long periods, you will find that it also makes a wonderful foundation of your pelvis, from which you can lift your torso. This is great for your lower back.

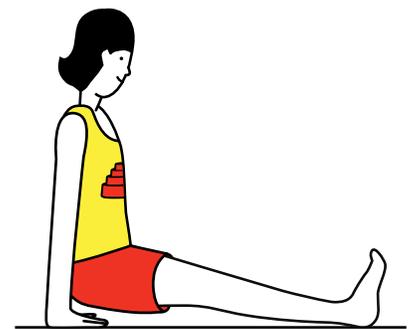
But don't force it! Getting to a comfy, sustained Lotus is a long journey, and injury along the way is a real possibility. It took me over 20 years to get to a comfy Lotus. Not a problem. See how much yoga you have to look forward to?

**Any pose that puts your back into traction.** All this means is finding a way to let your lower back hang from above. Letting your back hang from what's above, instead of sitting on what's below, gently stretches the spine, which takes pressure off the spinal discs. As a result, bulging or herniated disks may retract, taking pressure off nerves and other structures in your spine. Additional benefits follow from that.

You can pay a lot of money to go to a physical therapist or orthopedist and they will strap you into a device that straps you in to that position. Or you can spend a lot of money and buy one of those machines for yourself.

Or you just do variations on some easy yoga poses.

**Staff.** Take Staff Pose, then plant your hands on the floor and lift your butt off the floor. You only need to lift an inch to get the desired result of your back hanging from your shoulders instead of sitting on your pelvis.



*(Butt just off the floor)*

If you need to put blocks or books under your hands to get your shoulders up high enough to lift your butt off the floor, by all means do so.

If you need to sit on a block or blanket to be comfortable in Staff in the first place, before lifting your butt, do so. In this case you may need additional blocks or books under each hand to get your shoulders high enough to lift your butt off the floor.

With the right combination of props, anyone of any ability can get their back into traction this way.

**Seated Wide Angle Pose.** Just like Staff, but with your legs apart. Here again, use whatever combination of props you need to get comfy. You may need to sit on a block or a pillow just to get comfy in the basic pose. Only spread your legs as wide apart as is comfortable.

Now place your left hand on the floor in front of you and your right hand on the floor behind you and gently lift your butt off the floor. Reverse the hand positions and look the other way to do the opposite side. Use blocks or books under your hands if necessary.

Now that you have the idea, go through your inventory of seated poses, and look for new and creative ways to hang your back from your shoulders, making comfy, delicious space for your discs.

**Crow Pose** puts your back into inverse traction, hanging from above, but upside down. If you can sustain Crow comfortably, it feels wonderful in the lower back.

Crow is also a more difficult pose, requiring significant upper body strength. Just remember: if you want to learn to do something new, from playing violin to writing fiction to a new yoga pose, do it every day. If you do Crow for just 1 second every day this week, you will be doing it for 2 seconds every day next week, and 5 seconds the week after. In 20 years, just think where you will be. And between here and there: all that wonderful yoga.

To Grace Towers, Katie Miles, Marian Ekweogwu,  
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THANK YOU.

