

Home Stretch

Roll out your yoga mat at home and you'll find the freedom to experiment, to evolve, and to become your own best teacher.

By Jason Crandell

The first day of my two-year teacher training program, I experienced something akin to an existential crisis. It didn't have anything to do with awakening kundalini or realizing my true Self. Sadly, it was much more mundane: It hit when I realized that in order to participate in the program, I had to agree to the mandate to "have your own home practice."

A few days later, when I unrolled my sticky mat at home alone for the first time, I wanted to bolt. Up until then my idea of yoga was attending a class, which is kind of like being chauffeured around town, sitting comfortably in the back seat, enjoying the scenery. Practicing at home was totally foreign to me. It was as if someone handed me car keys but no map. I recognized great potential for freedom in my journey, but I was reluctant to go it alone—I was scared that I'd get lost.

Since that day of reckoning, I've talked to enough friends and students about the dreaded home practice issue to know I'm not alone. Many of us—even after we realize the benefits of a personal practice—seem to resist it. We tell ourselves that we don't have enough space or time or that we don't know what to do. Or we hold a romanticized vision of the perfect home practice and feel guilty when our reality doesn't match the fantasy.

I'm living proof that such resistance, however natural, is not impossible to overcome. Over time, I've even grown to love my home practice. Mark Whitwell, an internationally known teacher from the Heart of Yoga Association and a strong proponent of developing an authentic personal practice, describes it best: "When you practice at home you get to explore the exquisite relationship between the body, and the breath, and life itself. The whole reason for doing yoga is to enjoy this relationship, this natural intimacy with life."

The key to feeling the way Whitwell does is dropping self-imposed expectations. Your practice should be something you look forward to, and your expectations need to be realistic. You don't have to practice for an hour and a half doing the full primary series of Ashtanga on bamboo floors, surrounded by fountains and statues of Ganesh. You don't even—though there are folks who surely disagree with me—have to practice in utter silence, filled with restraint and completely undistracted every single time. For most of us, that's far from possible. But, if your time on the mat is nourishing, your home practice will become a refuge rather than another item on your to-do list. And it will take you places you may never have thought to go.

Do What You Feel

For starters, learning to practice at home solves the problem of not being able to get to class every day. If you sleep through your 6 a.m. class, you can still practice. If you miss your 6 p.m., you can still practice. Whether you have a quick 15 minutes or a decadent two hours, you can use the time you've got.

At home you can also practice whatever you want. You can do Triangle Pose five times, or spend 20 minutes in Corpse Pose. You can work on poses that challenge you—in the privacy of your very own home. My forward bends have always been pretty lousy. So, you know what? I practice them at home!

Sure, I try to stay unattached to the outcome as I plug away, but the more time I devote to these poses, the more



satisfying they are, and the more physical and energetic benefits I receive.

At the heart of it all, though, is the inner awareness you develop by practicing on your own. Without your teacher's voice guiding your every move, you can more easily go inside and witness what is happening in your body, emotions, and mind. When you delve beneath the surface of the daily events in your life and turn your attention inward, you'll get to know and experience yourself more clearly. You'll feel what your body craves or rebels against, hear your mind's chatter, and become aware of your current mood. One day in Triangle Pose you'll think, "Hmm, I'm tight and fidgety today. Actually, I'm sort of grumpy." Or, you'll think, "Wow, Triangle Pose feels really good today. I feel energetic and vibrant, like there is no clutter inside of me right now." When you clearly witness the multitude of mental, emotional, and physical ups and downs that you go through in the span of just one pose, and you begin to notice how much your experience changes from day to day, you'll learn a valuable lesson: that everything constantly changes. As a result, you'll react less to your inner dramas both on and off the mat, knowing that it is normal to fluctuate.

For most of us, it's easier to really listen and be present with what's happening inside when we're alone. Even though we may know that yoga is not intended to be competitive, it can be hard to maintain your inner focus when your neighbor in class is opening into a gorgeous backbend that feels out of your reach in this lifetime. The truth is, actually achieving that backend is not important at all, but working with your own backbends at your own pace, while enjoying your body, is.

As you develop inner awareness, you'll grow more capable of tailoring your practice to meet your needs. If you're in the midst of a frustrating conflict, you might notice that a vigorous practice moves your energy to clear your mind. But if you're fatigued and coming down with a cold, you'll sense that a restorative practice is best. Over time, you'll become your own best teacher. Whitwell puts it more plainly: "Doing yoga at home is profoundly different from doing it under the direction of someone else in class. When you're doing someone else's yoga, you're not doing your own yoga. It's a huge evolutionary step to learn how to practice for yourself."

Home Practice 101

Now that you're convinced of the importance of practicing at home, here's a guide to get you started and to keep it fresh.

Make a Date with Your Mat

Most yoga classes are 90 minutes long, so we assume that we should practice at home for 90 minutes. A long practice is great, but it's also OK to practice for smaller chunks of time. Start with 30 minutes three to four times a week. If that's not possible, try 15 to 20 minutes, which you can probably fit in daily.

When my time is constrained and I can't indulge in a full practice, I aim for 20 minutes twice a day. I may do Sun Salutations in the morning and finish my day with calming forward bends. These short intervals give me what I need to feel balanced and refreshed in the morning and quiet and calm before I head to bed.

Most teachers agree that a 20-minute practice every day is more valuable than an hour and a half twice per week. "If your time is limited, practicing for 15 to 20 minutes provides ample time to align your day and come



home to your body,” says Sarah Powers, a yoga teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area. Doing a little bit every day is ideal for managing daily stress, bringing yourself into your body, and settling your mind; its benefits are greatest when you take advantage of them regularly. A small amount of yoga done consistently gives you more accurate feedback about what’s happening in your body and mind, and it will improve your practice; the body and mind learn from repetition, not occasional dabbling.

Regular mat time also builds a habit that soon becomes ingrained. “When you do yoga at home every day, it becomes no different from taking a shower,” says Whitwell. “You wouldn’t dream of not taking a shower, and you don’t congratulate yourself for doing it every day. So doing a daily practice doesn’t have to be a heroic activity you impose on yourself. It’s just a simple, natural pleasure.”

To ensure that you make it to your mat, Powers offers these tips: First, make an appointment. Write your practice into your calendar, in pen. Second, set a timer for the amount of time that you can commit and practice at least that long. “Although you may begin your practice reluctantly,” she says, “you’ll find that 15 minutes goes by quickly, and you might actually want to spend more time on your mat.”

Rodney Yee, who teaches his own form of yoga around the world, suggests practicing regularly with a friend. “Find someone who keeps you on the mat and keeps you responsible for your practice,” he says. “And let it be a source of fun. When you feel how much your yoga practice does for you, you’ll realize that it’s a good thing to do every day because you’ll have a happier life.”

Finally, when life gets hectic, integrate your practice when you can. If you have 40 minutes while your clothes wash, fine. But if you only have the energy and time for a 10-minute restorative pose while dinner cooks, that’s OK too. Instead of falling off the wagon, use your practice to sustain you when times are tough. You’ll feel good and be more likely to come back to longer practice times when you’re able.

Have a Plan

Now it’s time to create a plan. It can be helpful to decide which poses or pose categories you’d like to work on before heading to your mat. There are a multitude of sequences you can access by visiting yogajournal.com. If you need more ideas, consult the many books and DVDs that can help you out. I’m willing to bet that even the best chefs still look at recipes once in a while when they’re fresh out of ideas and creative juice.

Seek Out Your Teachers

Pay attention to your favorite pose sequences during yoga classes and repeat them on your mat at home. Powers remembers going to her car after classes years ago and writing down interesting sequences she could explore in her own practice. Once you’ve got all or part of a sequence you like, try it at home the very next day.

Experiment with how long you hold a pose or how intensely you hold it: If you sense that you need a quiet, contemplative practice, do the sequence slowly and deeply. If you need to really move, hold poses for a shorter amount of time and repeat them. Add Sun Salutations at the beginning to get your blood pumping, or play with an inversion like Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand) or Mayurasana (Forearm Balance) in the middle of your practice. Remember, this is your time, so tinker in your own body as though you were a scientist in a lab.

If you want individual attention, Powers suggests scheduling a private session with your teacher. Think about what you want from your home practice: to balance your emotions and mental state? To work on a health condition? To improve certain poses? Ask for help developing sequences that cater to your needs. A private class can



also just get you motivated.

Keep It Simple

When you're ready to build a sequence from scratch, tune in to which body parts are calling out to you. Do you want to open your achy hips or stretch your shoulders? Would it be fun to focus on forward bends or backbends? Look at yoga categories: standing poses, forward bends, twists, backbends, shoulder openers, inversions. Choose three categories and pick four poses for each. A sequence incorporating those will take about 30 minutes. So, if your hips are achy and your shoulders are sore from sitting at the keyboard all day, do four hip-opening poses, four shoulder-opening poses, and some seated twists.

Finally, Sun Salutations are a great stand-alone series of poses to do at any time, whether you do them vigorously, by jumping back to Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose), or gently, by stepping back into lunges and choosing a low Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose). They warm you up and work your whole body, so they don't require specific preparation or cooling down.

Have a Standby

Once you've been practicing at home for a while, you might notice that you naturally gravitate toward a group of poses over and over again. Make this grouping your go-to routine for the days you're too busy or uninspired to come up with an original sequence. Yee has a faithful routine for when he's on the road. "I'll start my practice with a template of familiar and satisfying hip openers. Then, as my body wakes up, I'll listen to what is happening inside and decide where to go next," he says. "Some days it's twists and backbends or pranayama and restoratives; other days I'll go straight to inversions."

Create a Beginning and an End

Whether you practice for 15 minutes or two hours, it's important to have a beginning and an end to each session. Begin by getting quiet. Devote a few minutes—either while seated or while standing in Tadasana (Mountain Pose)—to bring your focus to your breath, to meditate, or to just feel the stillness. Pause from your busy day and come into the present moment. Likewise, finish your practice quietly by doing a few easy supine poses—either Supta Padangusthasana (Reclining Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose) or a simple reclining twist (both neutralize the spine), or a more restorative pose like Viparita Karani (Legs-up-the-Wall Pose)—and then go into Savasana (Corpse Pose), lying on your back with your legs relaxed, your eyes closed, and your palms face up. Stay for at least five minutes and come out of it slowly, letting yourself ease back into the rest of your day.

Bend the Rules

When I first started my home practice, I let myself listen to NPR until it was time for Savasana. I still occasionally integrate other things into my practice that give me joy, like—I confess—watching sports. When I allowed myself to incorporate my practice into the rest of my life, I realized that I had time to practice. If you enjoy watching American Idol or reading the Sunday Times, why not do a forward bend sequence instead of lying on the couch? If you need a little music to get going, turn it on until it has served its purpose. Practicing like this



may not bring you the depth of awareness that a quieter, more meditative practice will, but it will get you on your mat. You needn't be self-indulgent all the time, but a practice that you look forward to is an excellent way to consistently connect to your body.

Just Do It

When I encourage people to practice at home, they look at me as though I've just handed them a 50-pound bag of cement and told them to lug it up a steep hill. What's worse, they look as though they feel guilty because they haven't started hauling yet. Here's the secret: There isn't any cement and the hill isn't so steep. What's more, the hill has many paths worth exploring. Practicing at home is essential: It teaches you to witness yourself from moment to moment, to become more responsive to your own needs. It deepens your knowledge of yoga. Plus, it just feels good. Start by doing what you can, where you can, when you can. Don't let the idea of a "perfect practice" prevent you from falling in love with the practice that you have—or the practice that is just a few steps away.

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