



A Yen for Yoga

>>By Holly Holland
Illustration by Louise Ferguson

A former stress-ridden journalist whose body became as burned out as her mind discovers strength and serenity — and a new vocation — by plumbing the power of yoga.

did not set out to teach yoga when I started practicing six years ago. Like many people, I came to yoga from a place of brokenness. After 25 stressful years in journalism and publishing, coupled with motherhood and extensive volunteer commitments, my body collapsed. My adrenal glands, pushed to produce excessive levels of cortisol to sustain my unrelenting schedule, finally ran out of juice. I developed thyroid disease, pneumonia, and fibromyalgia, a disorder that causes widespread joint and muscle pain. My body was battered and unbalanced, but it turned out that my mind was weaker.

Doctors at the Mayo Clinic told me that regular gentle exercise is one of the few things that ease the symptoms of fibromyalgia. My husband suggested yoga.

“I don’t want to sit in a circle and chant,” I practically snorted with derision.

Cycling, running, softball, tennis — athletic, aerobic activities had been my passion since I was a teenager. But now I could barely get out

of bed in the morning. Reluctantly, I signed up for a special introductory rate of \$90 for 90 days of yoga classes at a local studio.

Determined to get my money’s worth, I showed up for just about every class on the schedule during that three-month period. I might have been consistent, but I was hardly an ideal student. I approached yoga with a skeptical reporter’s mind, mentally daring my teachers to show me something I didn’t already know. Most of the poses proved easy enough, at least those on the beginner’s level. Then I’d get to the end of the class and the teachers would encourage us to relax. Ha! They might as well have told me to hike Mount Everest.

The hardest position in yoga for me has always been *savasana*, or corpse pose, the supine stretch with meditative breathing that typically concludes a class. For months my monkey mind leapt from one thought to the next while I lay on the mat. I impatiently waited for the teacher to ring a chime or tap a brass bowl, the vibrat-

ing props that signaled the end of our forced focus on inner calm. My body was still, but my mental gears never stopped churning.

I was much more accustomed to getting high on the rush of deadlines and competition. Striving, multi-tasking, performing under pressure — the urge to excel pushed me onward like a horse under a whip. Yoga wouldn’t cooperate with this need.

I’ve never been through Army basic training, but I imagine the process of relinquishing control in yoga is much the same. If you want to earn your stripes, your ego must eventually yield to the drill sergeant’s commands. In yoga, the marching cadences come from focused breathing. Slow down, it says. Quiet the mind. Pay attention to what’s happening right now. Keep practicing and be patient.

On the rare days when I managed to briefly let go of my tensions and bad habits, I felt good enough to keep coming back to class. I tried different studios and varied styles. And slowly a

transformation occurred. One day I noticed that I did not automatically flip my middle finger at a driver who cut me off in traffic. Another day, while breathing quietly on my back, I forgot to mentally set the table with supper plans. Over time I stopped trying to muscle my way into poses or to use my flexibility to compensate for my lack of strength. My stamina increased. My breath lengthened. My joint pain improved.

Looking back, I realize that I had initially resisted yoga because I thought it was too “soft.” I had been conditioned to think of gentleness as weakness and slowing down as giving up. Coming of age with the first generation of females to fully benefit from the gains of the woman’s movement, I had carried my ambition like a flag into battle.

Surprisingly, yoga showed me that I could be both strong and serene. Warrior poses, backbends, arm balances and a range of dynamic stances challenged my assumption that yoga was only for the meek. In Hindu tradition, the goddess Kali is the archetype of yoga’s power to liberate us from such restrictive thinking. Known as the goddess of destruction and slayer of demons, Kali also symbolizes enlightenment. As Sally Kempton wrote in the *Yoga Journal* last October, “The yogic path is also about bringing out our strength and channeling our wildness. . . . This is one of Kali’s secret boons. In pointing you toward those parts of yourself that you have

rejected, feared, or ignored, she inspires you to transform your identity over and over again.”

I got the chance to put this knowledge into practice two years ago when a substitute instructor got confused about the time and failed to show up for a class at the Jewish Community Center. A group of 40 students waiting in the room turned to me and said, “Holly, you teach.”

I gulped. I’m not certified to teach, I told them, but I’ll be happy to just lead the class through a routine. I breathed deeply and began. At the end of the 60-minute session, they were so appreciative and encouraging that I thought, “Why not teach?”

Well, for one thing, I was approaching 50. Most of the yoga teachers I knew were spritely young things — or at least had been teaching since they were spritely young things. Was it crazy to think that a tail-end Baby Boomer could show people how to do handstands and twisted chair pose?

And then I saw octogenarian actress Elaine Stritch standing on her head in a *New York Times* photograph. Starring in a Broadway play, Stritch said that yoga enabled her to keep up with the demands of eight performances a week. She became my new role model as I started exploring teacher training programs. Ultimately, I chose a program offered at a Cincinnati studio that is affiliated with the founder of Rocket Yoga, a vigorous, free-flowing style that I had practiced

and loved. It is an energetic system that incorporates more arm balances, inversions and abdominal strengthening than a typical yoga sequence.

I gave up half my summer, slept on a friend’s couch and worked my regular job at night, spending several thousand dollars so I could complete my teacher training and obtain certification. Hard as it was, I knew immediately that I’d made the right choice. Yes, we did sit around in a circle and chant. But we also sweated, did five different kinds of headstands and practiced for hours every day. Drained of resistance and ambition, I finally learned to relax in corpse pose. I felt peaceful at the end of every class.

My goal as a teacher is to help my students discover that same inner *om*. Each person’s progress, willingness to change, and trust inspires me to learn as much as I can about yoga so I can help them practice with integrity and purpose. Because of yoga I am more patient, more centered, more joyous in the moment. I think back to the time when my now 21-year-old son lashed out in frustration at the rapid pace of my life, a whirlwind that sucked everyone around me into its centrifugal force. “Mama,” he said, “everything is a priority for you.”

He was right. But today, we both acknowledge the progress that I’ve made in calming the frenzy. I’m grateful to know that some of my yoga students are moving in the same direction.

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