

MAKING YOGA MEANINGFUL

A practical guide to getting yoga off the mat and into your life



For yoga teachers and experienced practitioners

Mark Walsh

What you can get from this book:

- The principles of effective learning transfer from the yoga mat to the rest of your life.
- The practical “how” of making asana a much deeper and more useful practice. The nuts and bolts of an innovative, “Western yet deep” approach to yoga.
- Pragmatic techniques for enhancing how much your personal practice impacts what you care about.
- Unique teaching tools to help your students enrich their yoga.



"This approach to yoga has transformed my yoga teaching practice. Nowadays, everyone (including me) leaves my classes with a clear idea of how to apply yoga to their lives, in a very practical and straightforward way. My practice has changed to the point that I could not go back, even if I wanted to."

- Jude Murray, MA, IYN yoga Elder, YA Senior Teacher, Course Director - Healing Space: Yoga for People Living with Cancer



"EYP has added a layer to my classes which enables students to explore their posture practice in a deeper way, without demanding specific spiritual beliefs, cultural paraphernalia, dogma or philosophical complexity. It's simple, practical and pragmatic yet gives people the opportunity to explore meaning and change in their lives off the mat. It's helped me make my classes more interactive and relevant to my students' lives, and has improved my relationship with my students."

- Karin Van Maanen, Yoga & Mindfulness Tutor (MSc, Dip BWY)

Welcome to the adventure

Twenty-two years ago I walked out of my first yoga class feeling relaxed and thinking I'd done some pleasant stretching that was good for my health. Now what I get from a class is infinitely richer. A yoga class for me now is not just a break from life's challenges, but a way to gain insights and learn skills to better handle everything that life throws at me. Today, yoga is improving my finances, marriage and friendships. I'm practicing moderation for my tendency to push too hard, and kindness to myself and others. I'm practicing generosity and asking for what I want. I'm practicing creativity and working on my leadership. When I'm angry with a friend and want to either cleanly express that or let it go, I know how yoga will help. When my father died I knew

what practices would help my grieving. Before I teach, I apply tools from yoga to enhance what I give. I could go on.

These days I bring my values to the mat and know of no better place to grow as a person. In yoga my body is not a machine to be pulled into shape, or an esoteric foreign temple, but a practical playground, a workshop, a gorgeous library, a fiesta, a homeschool. Seeing what's possible in yoga is like discovering new rooms behind hidden doors. Yoga can be so much bigger than it's generally presented, and so much more useful.

What I've found, very happily, is that yoga teachers and experienced practitioners can rapidly learn to expand what's possible in a yoga class once the doors are pointed out. It's actually simple for those with open minds and even easier for life's explorers and rebels. There's a movement afoot in yoga to enrich the practice, something of a revolution in fact, and I'm happy that this book is one small part of that. Welcome to the adventure.

- Mark Walsh, Brighton UK, 2017

How to use this book

This book can be read straight through as a conventional book to extract the information, however *learning about* something is a fairly shallow level of learning and there are deeper options here too. I assume readers already have some kind of regular yoga practice to play with and maybe a teaching practice, so there's various experiments that can be integrated here. This book isn't aimed at complete beginners or yoga fundamentalists who regard one style as gospel.

You may find it particularly helpful to review the book immediately before or after a yoga session for practice ideas and reflections. Most importantly it's a guide for practice, more akin to an owners-manual or cookbook than a theoretical treatise. It's a practical "how to" book. Try what's here and make up your own mind as to whether there's truth in the ideas. Don't believe a word I say, find out for yourself experientially. There's many sub-sections labelled "practice", "reflection" and "experiment" as reminders to do this. Reflections can be done in pairs and groups as discussions, and this can be a lovely way of integrating learning, being held accountable and getting support for any changes you decide to make to your teaching or personal practice. I'd love you to share this book with a colleague for mutual learning.

Links to many videos are also included. It's not necessary to watch these to understand the book, however they're there if you wish to dive deeper into any topic or clarify an idea. This is a fairly

concise book and many of the ideas are better demonstrated than explained verbally, so if an idea is confusing do take a look at any accompanying videos. You can see the concepts in action with real participants in many instances and this is usually helpful.

If there are mistakes or additions you could see that would be helpful for readers please send me these too. This book comes from a group enquiry process over several years, and will continue in that light. Within a year this e-book will form the basis of a longer traditional print book and I appreciate your input.



Introduction

How healthy do I need to be?

Yoga today has a health and beauty obsession. Health is vital for life of course, and yoga has gone too far in it's focus on this, too far for an effective focus on other matters, and too far for common sense.

Yoga can certainly aid our wellbeing, and while I've found better practices for developing athleticism, and yoga certainly has some health risks, it's still essentially "good for you". I don't think any of us are against health and we all know that yoga can help with that.

The mindfulness aspect is also central to what makes yoga yoga, and not just fitness, and this has benefits for stress management few would argue with. I'm not against beauty either I'd add, though I have concerns about yoga buying into consumer culture's version of this. As yoga has become integrated into mainstream culture, it has become complicit in advertising's body image tyranny. Modern yoga is often neurotically obsessed with a materialist middle-class lifestyle pursuit of ever increasing wellbeing as a sign of status. This is a pale substitute for a life of insight, meaning and contribution, which is what yoga is about to me. Okay, it can make you shiny and attractive, great, but let's move on and not get caught by self-obsession, vanity or the social media validation of the manipulated body. "Spiritual materialism" is the term coined by Chögyam Trungpa for pursuing egoic ends using spiritual methods, and modern yoga is prone to this in many cases.

Of course there are many yogis just quietly practicing their art away from the hype who I'd like to acknowledge. I think a lot of us who've been in yoga for a while, are tired of the mono-cultured skinny girls appearing in magazines today¹. While many still flock to yoga-gyms for the perfect butt, and people refer to the calorie burning guide on the wall in my local hot yoga studio, many are seeking something deeper. Many feel lied to about the spiritual promises of yoga too, who found only fitness and pretence. I've noticed that such people have started to form tribes in the last few years, and my own teaching practice 'Embodied Yoga Principles' (EYP) was formulated as a response to this need.

¹ try a quick Google image search for any major yoga title.

Reflection (or discussion if you prefer): given a law of diminishing returns in health practices, how much health focus is optimal for you in yoga? Can a focus on health take you away from other values you may have around yoga? When does a health focus become a type of orthorexia?

Handstands...so what?

Here's the key question for this introduction:

"If yoga doesn't improve the rest of your life what's the point?"

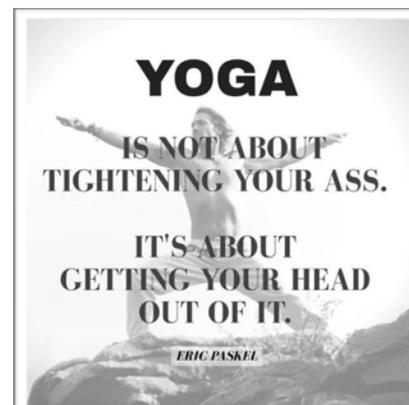
I mean, how stretchy do you need to be? There are certainly many people who need to get back to basic healthy bodily functionality, but I'd argue that if you can pick your groceries/ kids up, you're strong enough. If you can easily pick up a dropped pen (or whatever) from the floor, maybe your hamstrings are long enough too. Yoga is enjoyable but also costs time and money, and frankly I need a better reason to do it than just to turn myself into a human pretzel or impress my Instagram followers with bad gymnastics. How much does getting your feet behind your head really help?



Another pitfall beyond related to athleticism is getting seduced by the endless pursuit of technical excellence. This is sometimes called the trap of technique. While yoga like anything can be refined and there's beauty in any art for its own sake, I wonder what ever increasing refinement serves? I've sat in on long technical arguments about say the exact hand position in downwards dog, and seen books with titles such as "the perfect chaturanga", and just thought:

"Who gives a shit?"

Back when my main focus was the martial arts I used to ask, "who off the mat really cares about your wrist lock skills?", or more brutally, "what's the point in having a great punch if you use it to hit your kids?" The big question I have for anyone who'd developed massive strength, flexibility or



Himalayan asana OCD is this: "SO WHAT?!!". I appreciate this could seem confrontational but frankly it's surreal to me to spend so much energy on pointless crap. I really don't get it. If you picked up this book I'm guessing, you also have your doubts at least so let's move on.

Yeah but what's yoga anyway?

Good question, and we're basically exploring this. I'll argue here for the reintegration of many older practices that were classically part of the other limbs of yoga besides asana, as well as some new practices inspired by other embodied arts. What I mean when I say "yoga" for now though, is modern postural yoga, i.e. what most people think of when they hear the word "yoga" today. If what I describe here is not what you call yoga as it's a break from tradition, that's fine too. Let's not get sidetracked with definition wars.

Are you spiritual?

So beyond an obsession with health and beauty, what can yoga be? A spiritual practice? Of course, though this can be hard to define! I've also seen that some practitioners interpret spirituality as meaning sticking Eastern feathers up their asanas and pretending to be ever so Indian chickens². To many, the Eastern exoticism of yoga is appealing, while to others this is a barrier. I would argue that painting a thin Asian veneer over our lives usually isn't helpful, though as a committed long term Buddhist myself I'm certainly not rejecting the various wisdom traditions from Asia. Let's just not dress up. Many people I've seen practicing yoga in Western countries confuse surface appearance, superstition and dismissing scientific and rational values entirely with becoming more spiritual, and I'd reject this wholeheartedly. I've also found that a pragmatic approach strongly linked to real life, bares excellent fruit for those not inclined towards cross-cultural immersion and impersonation. For me spirituality is about *what is* and *what works*, not fantasy and escape.

See comedian [JP Spears](#), my old [Are You a Spiritual Wanker](#) and [Problems with Western Spirituality](#) videos, this [yoga transmitted diseases](#) one, Carol Horton's and [Matthew Remski's scholarly work](#), and this [Yoga Whoring](#) article for more on the politics and problems here. Others have moved this discussion forward now, and it may even have gone too far ([see the excellent Carol Horton on this](#)) so I don't want to dwell more on criticising yoga now, better instead to offer something of value.

² to ironically steal a Zen phrase.

Reflection: Let's face it, we are all guilty of this one at times, so in what way are you a spiritual materialist?

A yoga that actually matters?

If we're not going to fall into traps of wellbeing obsession, athleticism, technical neurosis or faux spirituality, we'd better be pretty clear on our own values. I often start yoga classes by asking people what it is that they care about. Aside from health (again, fair enough but limited) people often say it's their kids, families, work, sex lives, politics, friendships, etc. The usual core interests of humans! People say the same kinds of things all over the world actually. Few say being able to do the splits or becoming enlightened masters. After asking this I then state, "so let's do the yoga that most impacts the things that matter to you." i.e. a yoga that isn't bloody pointless, according to our *actual values*.



My challenge to yogis is not, "do this because I say so", that's just more of the same old BS, but to ask people to connect to what matters to themselves and do a yoga that relates to that. This is a book detailing the specifics of that.

Business training is the other side of my job, and a useful set of questions that I learnt to ask in this context are around what training participants actually want. As a stress management and embodied leadership trainer of very busy people in corporate and humanitarian organisations for the last ten years, I've found not wasting their time is key to success. I've discovered that even seemingly conservative people will try all sorts of weird stuff if the goals of said weirdness are clear. Having taught senior police officers to meditate, lead trauma work in the House of Lords, and with several Armed Forces, and taught yoga-influenced embodied leadership work to senior executives in global corporations, I've become convinced that having clear aims are vital to achieving them!

After developing this mindset, the looseness of purpose of many yoga classes started to bother me. It started to seem out of integrity in fact. How can you say that you're ethical when you don't know what you're taking money for?! One of my mentors Gary Carter, usually starts his anatomy or yoga workshops by simply asking people what they've come for. Crazy eh? Surprisingly, often

people don't exactly know (as well as being shy to say when they do), and clarifying both their intention is helpful, and then the fit between that and what's offered. Determining and hopefully making a match between what people actually want from a class and what you're offering is key, and while you can mix-and-match, and different people can take different things from a class, optimal form does follow function. Different methods better match different goals, and you can't effectively chase five rabbits at once. There are many worthwhile things that can be done under the banner of "yoga", and knowing which one or two you're prioritising is a vital primary task.

Reflection: Why do you do yoga? What's your aim in a yoga class? Try and state this concisely. If there are several aims rank them in importance - values are competitive.

Key tensions in making yoga "practical"

Let's look at the challenges to address before we get to the practical techniques you can use to get yoga off the mat. Understanding these tensions will help a lot with transfer of learning into daily life.

Yoga-Jitsu vs yogado

Is what you're doing an aim in itself or a path? In Japanese martial arts there's a distinction between a "jitsu" and a "do". A *jitsu* is a technical combat art (e.g. ju-jitsu, ken-jitsu, aiki-Jiistu) and a *do* is more for personal development (e.g. judo, kendo, aikido). If you're just trying to stretch in yoga that's a *jitsu* and fair enough, though this book isn't really for you. If you're interested in yoga as a way to grow or transform as a person, then yoga is a *do* and you're in the right place for trying to figure out how to do that effectively!

It's also worth noting that technique is always seductive. Any technique to be used as a basis for a *do* needs to have a degree of complexity to engross us and provide challenge, however in this you can get lost and revert to doing merely *jitsu*.

Reflections: is your yoga a jitsu or a do? What makes it so? How would you know you'd reverted to a jitsu from a do?

Gateways, travesties and deceptions

Yoga with a fairly modest *jitsu* aim like getting fit can still of course be a stepping stone to other things. For this reason, I'm not against many approaches to yoga even if they're a bit limited, as they can act as "gateway drugs" to other deeper practices. Such yoga practices are like using a Michelangelo sculpture as a door-stop, but it can still attract students and lead them further along a path. After all, at eighteen I was a drug dealer who wanted to learn to fight and this got me into martial arts, and that motivation evolved into a life-long spiritual journey and a professional path to help others.

Where motivations are unlikely to evolve is where an art could be called a travesty. A travesty is where the higher is sacrificed for the lower; where a method points actively and fundamentally away from possible depth. If a form of yoga focuses primarily on and celebrates the shallow it will always be egoic, and worse provide a pseudo-spiritual excuse for that. Simply calling something "yoga" doesn't stop it being unhelpful for growth, so we must at least be pointed in kind of the right direction.

In order to call BS on this kind of thing we need only be honest with ourselves and others, it's usually pretty obvious. Self-deception is important here, and when I see people doing abs work and glute tightening exercises to get the perfect magazine body, but who are dressing that up to themselves as a spiritual practice, I worry. This is what is so nefarious in much of modern yoga, it's a kind of "second matrix"³ to keep people trapped while convincing themselves they're free. I actually find those stating cleaner explicitly stated *jitsu* motivations such as, "I'm just here to lose weight", more likely to find a gateway to depth.

You can see more on these distinctions [here](#):

Reflections: How has yoga been a gateway for you? How do you see people going against what you think is the fundamental aim of yoga? How do you kid yourself?



³ an idea from the Matrix films - a second deceptive simulation within a primary deceptive simulation.

The fundamental challenge - container vs transfer

In any transformative art there's a tension between the "container" and life transfer. The container is what makes a practice, a practice and not just life. It's the limitations that make it effective as an educational environment. A yoga or aikido class for example is a simplified place you'd go where there's special rules, language, ritual, a different social structure (often a more defined hierarchy), and critically things that are removed (e.g. talking or sexual activity). It's an odd simplified place! It's also a safe place where consequences don't matter. If you mess up a martial arts technique in the dojo you're not killed as in a life and death fight, and if you fall over in tree pose you don't lose your job or your partner. By engaging in an essentially inconsequential activity we are free to explore, grow and use the art as a vehicle for growth. By making it physically, financially, and relationally as safe as possible we can take psychological, emotional and existential risks. Trust is key here which is one reason why a teacher's ethics matters so much, and if they keep their word and make classes predictable around things like timings (start and end classes on time damn it flaky yoga teachers!).

I sometimes joke that the reason yoga is special is that it doesn't matter. A yoga class is a safe place where we can work on ourselves. Practice is not performance, to use a sports analogy. Like sports people, we also have a coach in yoga who's dedicated to supporting us, giving us feedback etc. In life we're generally on our own. What a gift yoga is, and despite this book's title the advice here, is in a funny way, to make a class less meaningful, if you'd like it to be transformative and actually more meaningful!

Note too that practice is not application, which is why we still need some kind of container to grow. Application is the sports person's big game, and it's not the place to learn as it matters too much! Some people tell me "my business is my practice" or "parenting is my yoga", but I'd argue that what they lack is the following in trying to grow while "on the fly" in life:

- safety (your actual life matters too much)
- consistency of practice (it's all a bit random out there)
- control of variables so as to keep in a sweet-spot for maximum learning (e.g. try telling your kids to be 20% less annoying...)
- dedicated expert feedback and non-partisan coaching (not the job of people you just bump into)

This is why going to a yoga class isn't pointless even though it's very different from "real life", and it's real life that matters. It's a deliberately unrealistic, consequence-free place to learn. Now the rub - this fact is also the central challenge to overcome in ensuring it does its job in improving

your actual life. If we learn within a format too different from daily life, there's a real risk that we won't learn anything that we can take outside at all. The challenge is that by providing a context that's not like life so as to focus on learning, we may miss life learning entirely! The less realistic a place is the harder the transfer to daily life becomes. The context can become too different, and learning is context dependent at least to some degree⁴. It's naive to believe that learning on the mat always moves across to life - to put it bluntly you can be very flexible and still be an asshole. The fact that six year old Chinese gymnasts and Olympic weightlifters are not enlightened, should make this clear! Stretching alone doesn't affect your personality or build life skills.

So what's left out for better and for worse? In the average yoga class, verbal and social elements are missing, and these are critical to everyday life. Most of our challenges involve others who we talk with! This absence in yoga is partly due to the historical nature of yoga as a solitary practice, and again the issue of simplification - it's really hard to focus while chatting and interacting! Similarly, furniture will likely be absent (chair yoga of course being an exception) and technology nearly always is. Once more, this is mostly historical, but most of the average person's day is spent in this context now. I sometimes get people to stand in mountain posture holding their mobile phones to bridge this gap. I'll be talking more on bridging practices like this later.



Other areas such as sex and money are usually denied entirely as part of life in a yoga class and can move into the psychological shadow. I think there's a correlation between the taboo of money in yoga and how incompetent and sometimes unethical many yogis are with finances! Maybe it's just some of the ones I've met. We are not wondering for alms in ancient India but live in the real world where money is a major part of life, so why is money ignored? I will return to these themes later.

This book is about the factors that enhance learning transfer generally. A key one I'd like to introduce early is the idea of working with deep principles that can be applied to different situations, rather than just isolated techniques. Bridges I've touched upon and will come back to. Another idea is that of frequent review, which is why yoga needs to be a recurrent practice. Others we will develop as the book goes on.

⁴ There's some fascinating psychology studies on this if you're curious. E.g. where people learn something underwater and can't recall it on land. Google that shit.

See also, this TED talk on [learning vs performance](#).

Reflections: What are the major differences between your life and your yoga class? How can you build a better "container" for your class/practice? How can you loosen it at times?

Holiday, classroom or transcendence?

Another related tension in a yoga class is between the idea of yoga as a holiday, and as a classroom. Many people come to a yoga class to forget about their lives and to just have a break. I understand this and sometimes just want to chill in yoga myself! This aim however is fundamentally at odds with the idea of yoga as a place to learn about how you live, and as a place to learn to live more skilfully. Learning even when fun, is challenging, a holiday not so much. These divergent aims can be combined to some extent - e.g. letting people rest and invigorate before tackling the tricky stuff (a strategy I often employ when people crawl into class saying they want to grow) - but there is at least a tension between them.

Another tension is between transcending life and improving it. One teacher I know says, "I don't want to improve the dream I want to wake people up!". The idea of rising above worldly concerns has a long tradition in yoga and other spiritual disciplines. Some people would actually define spirituality as about transcending life, while others would say the real work is in the mud and shit and menstrual blood of the real world! There's certainly a bias towards what could be called the transcendent or the monastic path over the householder path (family and career) in many traditions we inherit connected to yoga. Personally I view both as valid and am familiar with both (I was essentially a full time celibate and penniless live-in aikido student for some years for example, have stayed at Buddhist monasteries and my mother was a Catholic nun (long story) and now I'm a married man who directs several companies). These days though I find the juiciest learning is applying a skilful practice in daily life, at work and at home among the washing up, tender embraces and the dirty laundry. ⁵

You can learn more on the practice [here](#), and [here's a video](#) on why we need more than yoga holidays.

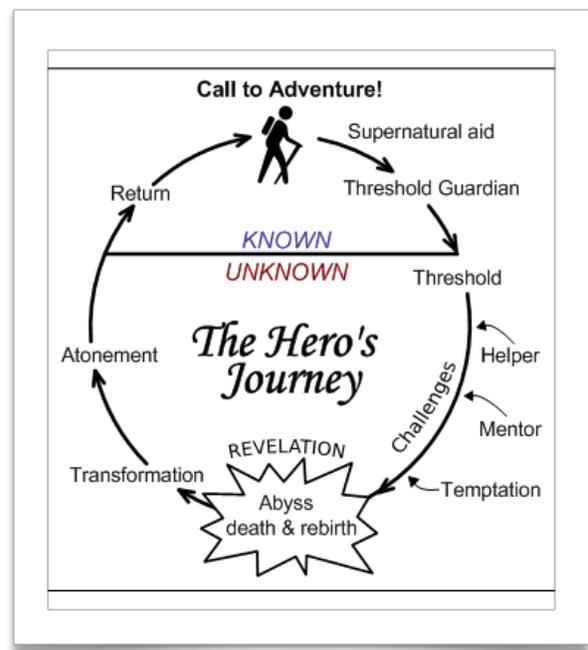
Reflection: Which of these models best fits your yoga practice? What would you do to make a class more effective in being a holiday, and in being a classroom?

⁵ If you've seen the Zen Oxherding pictures you may draw a parcelled to "returning to the marketplace"

Hero's Journey Parallel

A model that may be helpful here is The Hero's Journey, developed by the mythologist Joseph Campbell. In short, all symbolic journeys, rituals and stories have a structure that we seem predisposed to - a kind of archetypal pattern of meaningful growth and transition. The stages are complex but can be simplified into three main parts: leaving home, having an adventure and returning with a prize. The journey goes from the familiar (known), to the unfamiliar (unknown) to the familiar again, where we go back to transformed (integration). A yoga class or workshop can be seen as a miniature mythic journey matching this pattern.

The return home where the transformed hero brings the gifts of his adventure back to their community, is usually considered the hardest part of The Hero's Journey. This is also often the part done badly or completely ignored in the adventure of a yoga class. The average yoga class if relatively competently taught, will take people gently away from daily life to immerse them in the magical foreign land of yoga, but will end the class with them deep in relaxation in the symbolic "belly of the whale" (abyss stage) of savasana, without bringing them or the gifts of the class home. What's missing is integration and return, hence this book, which attempts to clarify what can be learnt from a yoga class and integrated into life.



Reflection: How has your yoga journey over the years been a hero's journey?

Experiment: Track your own classes on this map.

Practice: Incorporate this model into your classes.

What works

OK, so what actually works in getting yoga off the mat?!⁶

⁶ Here's an [overview video on the subject](#) of making yoga useful if you prefer a video format.

Intention is powerful but not all-powerful. Having the intention when going into or out of a yoga practice session of wanting to transfer the learning off the mat is a good start, and it's well worth reminding people of this possibility at the beginning and end of class as a teacher. This "book-ends" the practice. Intention alone can be surprisingly powerful in directing our efforts, however alone it usually isn't enough and can get easily forgotten without such things as mid-class reminders.

Related to this is the motivation. If what's truly motivating our practice is to improve our lives and benefit the world, this helps a lot! While a method is still needed, motivation provides the fuel for the work, and focuses our sights on what is most helpful for this goal.

Experiment: Set a clear intention of getting your yoga off the mat for a week/month. Clarify your motivation and remind yourself of this at the start of each practice. See if this makes a difference.

Practice: Incorporate this into your regular practice routine.

Health foundation

Health matters and is a foundation for our lives. For me, what matters is not excessive strength or flexibility but that I have energy for my core relationships and work. I'd also note it's easier to be ethical when feeling good! Health is a valid part of yoga of course, and *part* of what we bring off the mat. This aspect though is well addressed by others and requires no conscious effort to transfer, so isn't the focus of this book.

Reflection: how is your yoga a health practice? How is it unhealthy?

Yoga as medicine

The modern field of yoga therapy come from a long tradition of addressing health issues using specific postures and yogic practices more generally. BKS Iyengar, one of the giants of modern postural yoga was very much in this mold. However, it's hard to separate out wisdom from superstition and determine what really works, or establish how traditions have developed their orthodoxies. I'm not a big fan of medical claims made by yogis referring to "ancient wisdom" and do hope that some of the valid aspects of this field will be scientifically validated in the future. People have made a start on this. I tend to work more with growth rather than a pathology model and am not qualified to give medical advice. The trend of offering postures as medical cures with great certainty while insufficiently qualified, is one in yoga that I don't wish to add to. In terms of psychological challenges, there are some areas I've seen that can be helped consistently, so I feel some confidence in offering suggestions, though even these I offer as complimentary explorations and certainly not one-shot works-for-everyone, stop taking medication fixes! Here's a few videos on various common psychological issues:

Anger

Anxiety

Confidence

Depression

Grief

Experiment: Look up the yoga “medicine” for a specific reoccurring issue you have and see if you can prevent it or use yoga as a complimentary “medicine” when you next suffer from it.

The benefits of ANY practice, community and place

Part of the benefit of consistently doing a practice comes not from the practice itself, but the very act of doing something consistently to benefit yourself. Anything works!

Imagine you believed that folding napkins (or painting fences or anything) was a highly beneficial thing to do for your health and spiritual growth, so you started doing it every morning without fail. This would give you a sense of taking control of your life (see ethics section later), reinforce your sense of self worth, build your discipline and your self-trust. On top of this, what if you went to a beautiful napkin-shala to do it regularly away from the stresses of your life, and did it with a lovely group of other “napkinis”, that you felt a sense of belonging due to your shared commitment to the way of napkins. These people would also likely be interested in other aspects of personal growth and usually have healthy lifestyles, so they'd be a good influence more broadly. I think you see my point.



Yoga often respects the benefits of place quite well, being done in ordered and aesthetic studios most often, though urban practice misses the positive influence of nature for practical reasons. Retreats in nature abroad are popular for this reason among others. As practitioners, we can also shape the space of our home practice at least to some degree, making both a supportive container (e.g. a clear section of living room with some yoga type stuff in) and also in

loosening this by practicing at times where we live and work and by placing practice reminders in other areas. The environment we're in has a huge impact on us, and can't be underestimated as a factor in change and psychology. I lead a year-long course called The Embodied Facilitator Course, and all modules of it but one each year are in the city. The countryside module is always radically different and is usually where participants go deepest into the work. Similarly, while the course content is almost exactly the same, the course is very different when done in Moscow compared to in London. In terms of creating a "container" as discussed earlier, place is a huge part of this. The field of eco-psychology is worth looking at if you'd like more on this subject and I can recommend [Dr Adrian Harris' blog](#) and [portal site](#).

Community is often done less well in yoga, and the practice is often a hyper-individual lonely consumer island, in its modern context. I've mostly practiced yoga in a small town in classes I have gone to for ten years on and off, where I knew most other attendees and the teachers intimately, so was a little shocked at the cold, factory-like "come and go" culture when I started exploring yoga in major cities. It felt like I was buying grey "units" of yoga from strangers who would never learn my name. Community is a big part of what positively influences students off the mat, and I'd argue that it is well worth nurturing; e.g. with after-class tea, pot-lucks, ritual, community service projects etc, as well as on the mat with relational practices (more on this later). I'd recommend the article "[Why every yoga studio needs a soup kitchen](#)" for more on the value of community. Yoga has replaced many of the spiritual practices of traditional religion but few of the vital social functions. We do not grow we inter-grow, so the importance of community can't be overstated.

Reflection: How does the place and community of your yoga practice benefit you? How could you grow this benefit?

Direct skills transfer

There are a few practices that one can take directly from yoga and be used in life. The most obvious of these would perhaps be breathing techniques. Some of these can be done as quick breaks from life's activities - for example, taking a few minutes away from a computer in the work-day for alternative nostril breathing. Even better perhaps than breathing techniques are techniques of self regulation designed to be used "in the moment" without taking a break. These are common in the martial arts and often referred to as "centring". See [this article in Elephant Journal](#) for example.

Sadly, many practices from yoga are not very useful in daily life, as we can't easily do them on the fly. I can't easily have a quick savasana in a family argument or crowded train journey for example, hence the need for other methods in this book. The more general skills from yoga such as body awareness are of course extremely useful and will be discussed shortly.

Experiment: Take five one-minute breathing breaks everyday for a week, using a technique you're familiar with and find helpful, e.g. belly breathing to relax with a long exhale, or chest-breathing emphasising the inhale to invigorate.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the basis of learning all other skills. It's discussed more in the next section of general life skills but it's so fundamental as to deserve an extra note. Many yogis have now been influenced by both Buddhism and the modern secular mindfulness movement, and see yoga as a type of mindful movement workout. In order to change something, you must first be aware of it, so any attempt to work on ourselves and our lives follows from here too.

Yoga is, I would argue, by definition about awareness, and you might think mindfulness is a given, however many yoga classes discourage feeling and build numbness. They do this though:

1. Excessive intensity (Who wants to feel a screaming body? Who can feel subtle emotions beneath this intensity?).

- It's increasingly common for yoga to be a very intense workshop, sometimes in heated rooms, very loud music etc.

2. Uniformity/ authority (conforming to shapes and to an authority figure rather than following sensations in the body doesn't build self-awareness).

- The norm in modern yoga is to be told what to do and make the same shapes as everyone else.

3. Sexual and emotional suppression⁷ (these are bodily and if ignored we become numb).

- E.g. missing out the sexual organs from body scans, and never pointing to the whole emotional drain of life in a yoga class.

4. Body "beautiful" objectification (the body as commodified performance is not felt).

⁷ often confused with transcendence.

- this mainstream culture is fully expressed in the advertising of almost every yoga studio I know of, and encouraged during class in many.

5. A unsafe, non-supportive community (the mindfulness of the people we're with makes a huge difference to our own and if we feel threatened we can't practice interoception).

- communities differ wildly in how committed they are to awareness as an aim of yoga, and predatory teachers are sadly too common.

These are all culturally standard in much modern postural yoga and reducing them leads to greater transfer of mindfulness into daily life. Take intensity for example; while this calls people to the body in the moment off the screaming hamstrings, it actually builds numbness and doesn't transfer well into regular activities where such full-on feelings aren't present. For this reason, and because string sensation can cover uncomfortable subtle emotions it's also addictive. EYP teacher [Lucy Sabin's article](#) fleshes out the these "anti-mindfulness" factors for those wanting more on this, but if we reverse them we could say that a mindful yoga practice is generally:

1. Moderate (though this could still mean "dynamic" or challenging depending on a person's ability).
2. Internally lead with the felt-sense respected as the ultimate authority.
3. Sexually and emotionally aware.
4. Addresses the body as subject (is embodied) and is accepting of all body types.
5. Done in a supportive ethical community.

Note too that there's a key ethical axiom woven into mindfulness when relating to ourselves, each other and the planet, rather than seeing these as objects. Other principles such as consent and kindness flow from this embodied perspective. This way of approaching yoga encourages ethics at the level of both being and worldview, as we'll return to it.

Reflection: How many of these mindfulness support factors does your current practice have?

Experiment: Take a class with mindfulness as the primary focus and notice the impact of this.

Practice: Make mindfulness the foundation for all of your yoga practice if it's not already.

Emotional awareness

Being aware of the emotional domain is not always encouraged in yoga which is a pity. Every posture has an emotional aspect that can be learnt from - warrior pose is not child's pose, and

the names are not random! I will cover this in more detail later. For now, I'll just say that for optimal transfer of yoga's benefits to life, awareness of the emotional layer in yoga is needed. While emotional awareness can be thought of as a sub-set of body awareness, one also needs to bring attention to the second foundation of mindfulness of subjective "feeling tone" (the quality of valence). For example I will often say, "how do you feel, physically and emotionally?" to highlight this distinction and build the basic emotional intelligence skill of emotional awareness. I use verbal and non-verbal check-ins, ask people for one to three words on how they are (banning "fine", "good" and "okay" to build emotional vocabulary, but encouraging people to pass should they not want to share) or asking for thumbs up/middle/down to show mood in a simple manner. Raising hands on a "scale" of high (hand right up) to low (down) subjective energy, can also be used to quickly gage the state of the group. "Make a noise" is another good one for less shy groups. There are also more creative/poetic ones like "what type of animal are you now?" and my friend and colleague Jude Murray likes to ask what kinds of tails people have today! These types of exercises provide great information for teachers on how the class is and what they might need, as well as helping students build state awareness.

Reflections: What is the relationship of emotions to your practice? Does your practice stress emotional expression or regulation?

Experiment: Teach a class with a primary focus on emotions.

Practice: Incorporate things like regular feeling check-ins to build emotional intelligence in your practice.

Yoga sandwiches and snacks

A concept I use regularly in classes is that of the "yoga sandwich". This idea involves encouraging increased awareness before and after the class. This opens-up the timeframe people pay attention to, and helps the class learning more easily bleed into life. To refer back to the container vs application model, this method loosens the edge of the practice, creating two transitionary periods that are not as all-or-nothing as container and life. This increased but not full focus, creates a middle-ground between where you can start to be aware and apply what you learn in yoga without having to do it all the time. You could of course set reminders to do this at other times and I recommend this, but immediately around a class is an obvious opportunity. Taking little yoga "snacks" that you've set on your phone/computer as times to remember what you know from yoga is also helpful and there are plenty of technologies that can help with this.

To draw attention to the “bread” of the yoga sandwich, I ask questions like, “what *posture* were you in on the way here?”, or “be aware of your breath on the walk home”, or ask yourself tonight “am I being kind?” for example. For the daily “snacks” people ask themselves similar questions. Perhaps the most fundamental questions based on our awareness and choice model are: “How am I? How do I want to be?”

We’ll expand on this in the piece about bringing ethics off the mat.

How I came up with the yoga sandwich notion is quite illustrative. I had the idea while rushing to a relaxing yin yoga class one day and being rude to the receptionist on the way in. I thought to myself, “this is silly, I should at least practice yoga on the way to yoga!” This highlighted to me the lack of integration of my own practice and the need for better transfer. Similarly, I regularly see people jump impatiently out of a class *immediately* after savasana, clearly caught in the same habitual patterns they were in before they entered. This gives me the impression that their class benefits completely ended the very moment the closing bell chimed and the teacher said “namaste”.

[Yoga sandwich video](#)

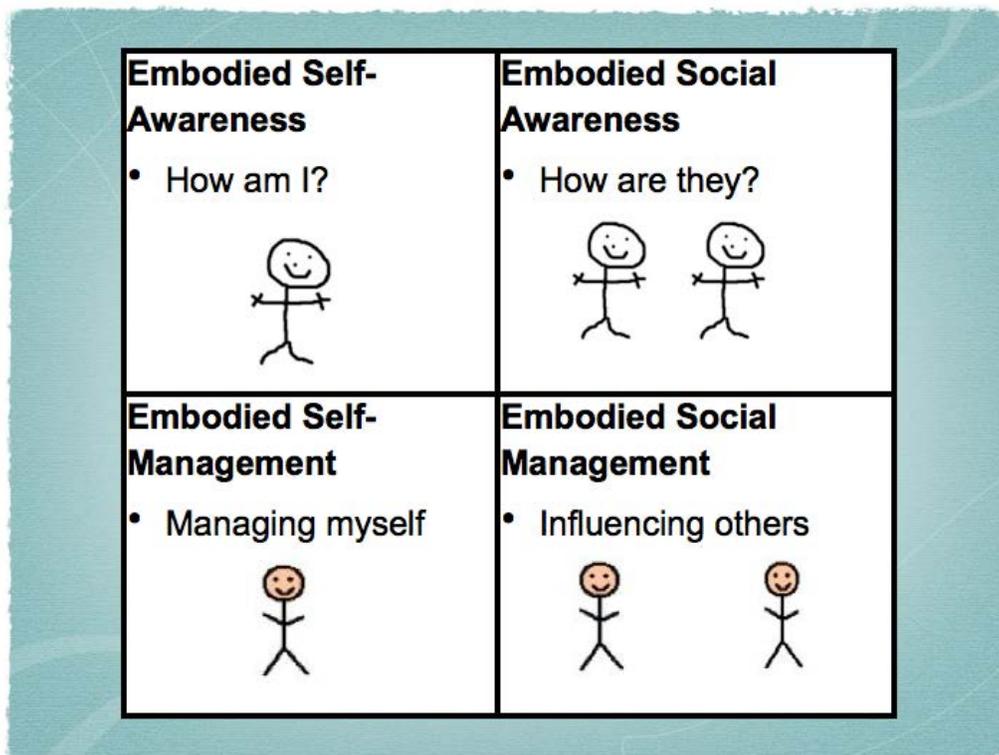
Experiment: Try the sandwich method for one class and set up yoga snacks for a week.

Practice: Use these ideas regularly.

Learning general life skills

One perspective on yoga that I find extremely fruitful is that of seeing the mat as a classroom for life skills. As well as the more specific skills of yoga like learning alternative nostril breathing, or fire-breath for example, we can also grow our more general embodied competencies. This is where *jitsu* meets *do* as we learn useful skills that are relevant to our wider life off the mat. The model below adapted from Daniel Goleman’s model of emotional intelligence is of embodied intelligence. It shows four broad categories of skills we can learn in any embodied art, yoga included. Within any of these four boxes are sub-skills; for example you can be more or less skilled with breath, movement, visualisation or posture across all quadrants. [Video with more on this here.](#)

The top two quadrants are mindfulness of self and other:



Body awareness is one of the great gifts of yoga that can transfer to life and build other related competences such as emotional awareness, empathy and intuition. In yoga we relearn to feel ourselves so we can feel our values, needs, wisdom, and also others. Body awareness is the foundation of all the other skills and even without all the other tricks in this book, yoga can help people tremendously by building this competency. You can only change what you're aware of and we feel and lead others based upon body awareness. It's a teacher's job to point people to this and provide the supportive conditions previously described.

Note the right hand mindfulness quadrant is social - practicing **awareness of others** - less common is traditional yoga and Buddhism. This can be introduced into yoga classes simply, in such ways as asking people to notice the group generally, or notice the group's breathing or mood, to give two examples. In a way all group yoga classes are social activities, it's usually just this is minimised and ignored. Full partner and group yoga practices where asana is done in relationship are of course possible too. As relationship is key to life I regard partner work as essential to an integral approach to yoga. For historical reasons this is often a blind spot, though

the growth of practices like Acro Yoga and mindful partner dance in recent years give me hope. I will discuss more on this later.

A yoga class is also a place where we can simulate challenges and learn ways to **manage ourselves** and also learn non-attachment to pleasure (bottom left quadrant). I believe improved self-regulation to be one of the best gifts of modern postural yoga and framing relaxing in the face of challenge as a key life skill adds to the transfer to daily activities. The yoga mat is a place where we can safely simulate and learn to better recognise and manage the fight-flight-freeze-fold response. If you have any stress at all in your life this is worthwhile! This is done in yoga by providing physical challenges that are difficult but not overwhelming (the leaning zone discussed shortly) and helping people relax into these. This is also the basis of what could be called "discipline" or as BKS Iyengar said, "the pose begins when you want to leave it".

As any Buddhist knows however, there are another set of problems in life other than those caused by aversion, those that are caused by grasping. This is how we cling to what we like and create suffering as a result (as all things change). Except in certain forms of neo-tantric practice grasping is usually ignored in yoga, but can be easily practiced by asking people to note what favourite postures they don't like letting go of (e.g. savasana) or want to jump into, and asking people to breath and let go of this. Yoga classes involve change and pleasure so provide many opportunities for working with attachment. The trick is once again to learn to relax as the clinging response is very close to the fight-flight response, but in this case to relax and move on better, not stay. "The pose begins when you *don't* want to leave it" one could also say.

While often ignored, if social practices are added, **embodied leadership**, impact and influence become skills we can acquire in yoga (bottom right in illustration). As yoga teachers we are often working with area as we take the energy levels of groups up and down, use our voice to guide the groups emotions, make use of humour, etc. For many teachers this is a skill that's picked up unconsciously and it can be worth focusing on the various elements within this broader category. I've known teachers for example who were unconsciously communicating panic through their gestures and voice, and wondered why they had few students!

Students can also be given simple exercises to help with embodied leadership in class during partner work, e.g. asking them to help relax partners, or to take a turn in leading the class.

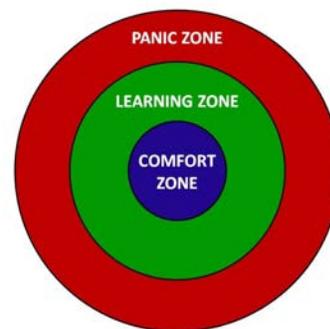
Reflection: Use the illustration to list the main life skills you're learning in yoga, and underline which are most important to you and fill in any gaps.

Experiment: Design additions to your yoga practice to fill in any gaps and stress that which you most need in your life.

Practice: Make any successful experiments a long term practice,

Practice ladders, learning zones and and bridging practices

To learn any practice effectively and to teach safety, it's important to start gently and build your way up step by step. This is a known idea to most yoga teachers who (hopefully) don't throw students in at the deep end but instead have sets of increasingly difficult postures. While I think the idea of trying to get to a particular shape is not that helpful, the notion of ladders of difficulty/intensity is. When learning a skill, e.g. staying calm under pressure, keeping in the learning zone of appropriate challenge, i.e. not too easy or too hard, is critical. This is done by sensitively calibrating as you build a skill, starting easy and making it engaging but not overages by building up from this. Competence is safely gained working with small controllable increments of challenge. The trick is not traumatising people physically or psychologically by doing too much too soon, nor to do so little that they're bored! A practice that never challenges people will also be completely useless for the challenges of life except to serve as a restorative holiday. In order to build a life skill like centring through yoga, understanding these concepts is critical.



Another useful idea is that of bridging practices. A bridging practice is one that's needed to overcome state dependent learning, the notion that our learning can be quite specific to time and place, and is where we loosen the container with increased realism. To go back to the example of learning to relax under pressure, this may involve for example adding a controlled verbal element. Without this the learning stays stuck on the mat. I have people choose mild insults or triggering compliments to have people throw at them for example.

Without this bridge many people get good at staying calm under the physical pressure of intense asana, but unable to convert this to the verbal relational domain of regular life. Hence the need for a bridge of realism.

Reflection: How much of your yoga practice are you in the learning zone? What areas of your life seem untouched by your yoga?

Experiment: Adjust your practice to make it more or less challenging and find your sweet spot. Design bridges where necessary.

Practice: Incorporate what you find useful into your practice and classes.

Form vs freedom

There are two fundamental types of embodied practice which build awareness in complimentary ways, and build complimentary skill-sets for life. I call these form and freedom practices. Unfortunately, many people only engage in one and often ignore or demonise the other.

Form practice is the most common in yoga and involved following a guide as accurately as possible. These challenge our own habitual patterns, building discipline and reveal them by showing how we deviate from a set pattern (see deviation method later). As well as most yoga, some partner dance, karate katas and formal meditation are examples of form practices.

Freedom practice, or process work, on the other hand is about following sensation in the body and going with what is easy and feels good, or perhaps what is simply intuitive. Awareness is built through tuning-in and the skill of going with the flow is built. If form is about emotional containment, freedom is about expression. Examples of freedom practices outside of yoga include the martial arts of Systema and capoeira, 5Rhythms, Authentic Movement and improv comedy.

People usually have a personal and even political bias towards one of these two methods, though this may be a matter of historical accident or personal prejudice. While both bring benefits, too much form can make people rigid (feel free to cough the “traditional” yoga style of your choice under your breath now), and too much freedom can make you somewhat wild with a blurred sense of boundary. It is worth examining your own practice through this lens for balanced personal growth.

Reflection: Is your yoga more of a form or freedom practice? What is the cost of this?

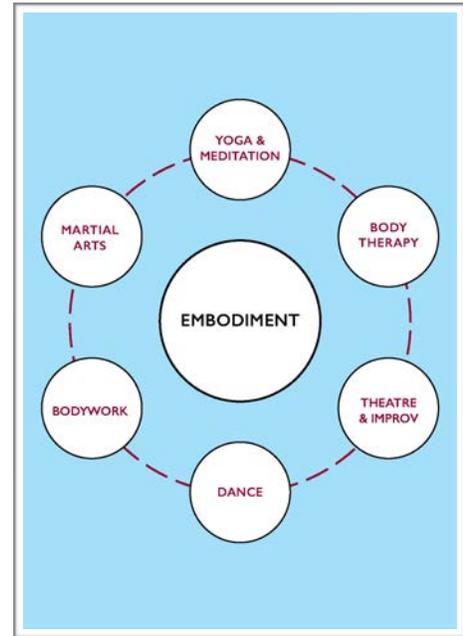
Experiment: Try the opposite of what you normally do. This may involve trying a new class (e.g. Iyengar or 5Rhythms).

Practice: Shift your practice to what you need and that which aligns with your values, not just what is habitual (this is the message of this whole book really).

Embodiment

The perspective at the heart of truly getting yoga off the mat is that of embodiment - we've been pointing to this through the whole book. This field is my life's work and personal obsession. The word is trending now in yoga and while I believe many yogis have a rough alignment with this way of viewing things, few have a rigorous theoretical sense of what "embodiment" actually means, or know how to work with it practically.

Most briefly, embodiment is *how* we are. It refers to the manner of our being - how the body is more than just a "brain taxi" , and an integral part of who we are. It refers to the subjective aspect of the body as lived experience, and not to our height, weight, size etc. Embodiment refers to how our history has been made flesh, and turned into a set of potentials for action and relationship. Embodiment is about body awareness, but not just of the body as a thing but about being aware as a body - as an aspect of ourselves. Our sense of self, perception, cognition, emotions, social interactions and spirituality are all mediated through the body. We're embodied in place, culture and in relationships as well as by situations. Embodiment sees the body as a verb - a process and set of relationships, not a thing. As a dance if you will. It has various sources (see illustration) that have cross-fertilised relation recently.



By what criteria could we assess if a form of yoga is embodied? For me, if yoga or any other art is to be considered "embodied" it must meet two criteria:

1. Be awareness based.
2. Work on the self through the body.

These criteria differentiate *embodied* arts from merely *bodily* pursuits and are at the heart of any yoga that I'm interested in. You may also hear the word "somatic" used interchangeably with embodied - from the Greek for the body in its emotional, social, political and spiritual wholeness, as opposed to *sarks* - which is more like a "hunk of meat".

[A more in depth video definition of embodiment can be found here.](#)

Why this perspective is critical for getting yoga off the mat is that through this lens one is not simply exercising in a yoga class but developing one's way of being in the world. Beyond mere health, what we are/can be working on in yoga is our most fundamental manner of being. This possibility is at the core of many of the techniques I describe. Embodiment goes deeper than skills acquisition as it points to working on ourselves, and not just the things we can do. It's about the tool user not just the tools, so is a cut deeper.

While simply shifting to the embodied perspective of "what is the way of being I'm revealing and developing now?" it is massively helpful for getting yoga off the mat, and having a balanced postural set is also important. The postures you work with can be seen as a language for working with yourself and students. In Embodied Yoga Principles we use 24 main postures which act as an archetypal map of some of the key aspects of being human. I have found the classical yoga repertoire incomplete and lop-sided in this regard, with some very important aspects of being covered by asana (e.g. warrior and child poses) but with many missing (e.g. joker and saying no). Having a more balanced range of possibilities, using novel postures and poses taken from other arts (we use a Karate one for "no" posture for example), enables better life transfer as we see ourselves from different sides. We see how we are always "in" a posture, and a wide set gives us a wide range of choices to adapt to life both in the moment and long-term.

Note that a wide range of ways of being are needed for a healthy balanced life. These could be called "energies", though I'm dubious of the term as it has so many uses, or archetypes - deep psychological templates of meaning. I've mentioned warrior and child (aka surrender) postures as two examples, but there are many needed not in the classical yoga repertoire, and others common to yoga that have little emotional and psychological resonance. In EYP we use 24 core postures that form a balanced set. A map of the human psyche if you will. All EYP postures can be seen cross-culturally, both in art, and expressed spontaneously in life. This set can be expanded, adopted and used flexibly, though I've found the majority of challenges people face in life can be worked with using this group and it provides a framework with sufficient but not excessive detail. The "postures" can also be conceptualised as fundamental movement patterns as they're not static.

The EYP postures are grouped as twelve yin, and twelve yang postures, to form a fundamental framework. In bringing yoga off the mat a mix of yin (e.g. gentle restorative or releasing) poses and yang ones (e.g. dynamic active heat-building) is helpful. Certain skills are best learnt in these different contexts. Working with attachment for example is best learnt with luxuriant

extended relaxed poses (where we cling) and managing fight-flight aversive responses best learnt in intense physical asana (where we resist and tense up).

Some examples of postures we use in EYP are shown in an appendix - authority pose, warrior pose (variation on the classic warrior 2) and yes pose - and examples of naturalistic and artistic expressions of these archetypes too.

A quick survey of many of the EYP postures is in the following videos, but you really need to attend a teacher training to work with them safely:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Syn50PknPNk&t=155s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZdPIReEEUw&t=55s>

An embodied perspective suggests we choose the postures and style of yoga we engage with regularly with care as “practice makes permanent”. From this point of view, a class is about “building” ourselves and the somatic foundation of our lives. The danger of course is that most people are choosing their practices unconsciously based on reinforcing habits, and are simply deepening their neuroses, rather than building range and finding balance. Embodiment is also the perspective from which the next section on embodied enquiries flows, as it sees the body as a source of untapped wisdom.

Reflection: What do you embody? Ask several people who know you well from different areas. What do you want to embody? List four key qualities. What embodiment is your current practice building?

Experiments: Visit some other style of yoga than you are used to, or other embodied practices (e.g. dance and martial arts styles) and note what embodiment they are building. Teach a class with this perspective primarily in mind. What changes when you do?

Practice: Adjust your practice to build the way of being you would like. Incorporate this perspective into your teaching and help students build desired embodiments.

Ethics - reflections, enriching asana and yoga sandwiches

This is the most important section of this book.

Ethics have long been considered an essential part of any transformative effort. Sadly though, ethics have lost favour in modern times as they are not so easily packaged for consumer culture or consistent with an egotistical yoga ethos. In a culture that sells a lack of restraint as freedom, ethics can even seem old-fashioned. Ethics traditionally constituted two of the eight limbs of Patanjali's yoga (yamas and niyamas), yet are rarely mentioned in most modern postural yoga classes. Likewise, they are a major chunk of Buddhism (one of three sections of the eightfold path) - itself often reduced to mindfulness in a way analogous to yoga's reduction to stretching.

However, ethics are usually seen traditionally as purely what I've categorised as application (how you live) and what is missing for me is a way to practice them more consciously under controlled conditions to develop the skill and habit. You can though have a dedicated reflection practice (e.g. nightly journaling) or discussion group for example as some Buddhists I know do, and Buddhist monks and lay people have frequent restating of vows in many traditions as reminders! I also believe strongly in mentoring, supervision, and communities of accountability in yoga (e.g. the online peer network and leadership council of EYP). Communities may have norms of mutual accountability around a shared code (e.g. Buddhist friends are welcome to challenge me on any of the lay precepts). The lone wolf is often unethical in my experience no matter what they tell themselves.

I also argue that as asana has become the most accepted and concentrated form of practice for most yogis, it's vital that we reintegrate ethics back into it. This is my thinking with this book generally actually: if yoga has become asana, let's enrich that! In EYP there are several methods of integrating ethics as a practice.

1. **Practicing ethics on the mat!**

Encouraging people to make their practice consistent with their ethics is perhaps the most obvious place to start. A yoga class is part of life, and like any activity develops general habits of being. What we're practicing in yoga therefore matters, and it's



important to bring attention to this if we'd like to be more ethical. Asking people to reflect during class if their practice is kind or honest for example, is a simple way to do this. Ethics begins at home. The reason that self-care is the foundation of ethics is that we are the person that we practice most with. If we want a habit of kindness, honesty, love of whatever, it's our primary relationship with ourselves where we develop that.

Another way to make a simple ethical thread through class is to have people question the intensity of their practice throughout as a major awareness theme . I'd argue that in any safe and ethical class students make choices about how much to extend themselves, whether to try more challenging postures, when to rest, etc. These choices around intensity can be used as an ongoing reflection related to self-care - does someone push themselves too hard, or actually not enough for their wellbeing. As is typical for EYP we also ask people to make this link to life, and a person's "yin and yang" tendencies of character as a method for insight (more on these later).

These suggestions flow from an embodied perspective as practice is seen as building a way of being. I will talk more about this shortly.

2. Another method of **linking ethics to asana** is to link core virtues, precepts or ethical codes to particularly relevant postures. Here are some examples:

- You can ask people if they're being "honest" about their capabilities when in a pose (e.g. does one's hips come up during a seated twist indicating that they can't really turn that far while keeping the form).
- You can use the attainment or "failure" to perform a pose to look at pride and shame (balances are great for this as they are clearly either done or not done).
- You can point to people's desire for a pose to explore restraint or greed (this can be done with many poses but ones where a "target" suggests itself like a seated forward bend where people will naturally try and reach the foot, or binds where you either can reach or not, are best).

See [*this video*](#) for more examples.

3. **Empowerment.** Most fundamentally, the type of practice where students make active choices is implicit ethical training. A choice rather than conformity based practice empowers people to be actively ethical, e.g. in respecting their own limits. Such a practice builds both a sense of

freedom and personal agency, and also self-responsibility. Yoga is potentially a great gym for empowerment and responsibility, as in any class there are many choices a student must do in regards to intensity, rest, posture choice, etc. Yoga can teach people to make choices that look after themselves, self-care being the foundation of ethics as discussed. With a consent-orientated partner practice, yoga can also reinforce treating others as having agency and boundaries themselves, and respecting that.

This very fundamental life frame is actually quite rare as most people have been taught to obey authority, push through and essentially violently objectify themselves and others, off the mat as well as on it. The standard guru-model as exemplified by the most common yoga traditions such as Iyengar, hot yoga and Ashtanga Vinyasa, etc, teaches people not to listen to or trust themselves, trains in conformity/victimhood and is fundamentally disempowering. Note too that abuse from teachers is endemic in such systems. The growing catalogue of anecdotal and video evidence I know is disturbing to people who've given their lives to systems that claim non-violence as their first ethical precept, and yet we must face facts.

Without a true culture and practice of choice, yoga is at heart both abusing people and also teaching people to be unethical. To train people to tolerate being done to, is to make it normal for them to do this to others. Such abuse does not always perpetuate thankfully, but it can, in a way analogous to sexual abusive survivors who have higher rates of perpetration themselves. Please do not read this as victim blaming, or saying that all victims abuse, but it is a passionate case for encouraging choice for the good of all.

4. Embodiment and Subjectification. An embodied perspective is ethical and non-authoritarian at its core. Embodiment by definition is about treating oneself and others as subjects not objects. Ends in themselves and doesn't mean what Kant noted. Embodiment is at heart relational and points us towards a relationship intrapersonally, interpersonally and with nature. An object can be done to, but a subject has agency, so consent is required from a person but not from a chair! Similarly an embodied perspective puts us in touch with the feeling body, and engages empathy for self and others⁸.

Ethics is also built into the human embodied experience, in that the body responds to unethical behaviour such as cruelty and dishonesty with weakness, and empathy is an embodied

⁸ it could also be argued that a depth approach to yoga where one identifies as pure awareness common to all, rather than the individual ego, encourages ethical behaviour by breaking down the self-other illusion (and why would you hurt yourself?) and while I'd agree with this, it's also dangerous if misinterpreted that as you I can do what I want to you/me?!

response available only with feeling. Becoming more embodied is tuning into this ethical “detection system” more effectively. I am indebted to my primary mentor Paul Linden for this unique somatic perspective on ethics, and he has a number of fun embodied experiments which prove this (see videos below). Perhaps the greatest mistake of modern times is the mistake of conceptual separation of power and compassion, when these are just “the same thing spelt differently” to quote Paul. This is really quite a radical claim as people tend to split the world into the cruel but effective, and the weak but nice; and this is a grave mistake. Yoga and other embodied art can give us the felt expense of their unity and this is more compelling to people than any book on ethics.

[Paul Linden video showing the physical impact of ethics.](#)

[Here is another.](#)

Embodiment and empowerment go hand in hand as people must first feel to make informed value driven choices for themselves, and a culture of respecting choice and finding things out for themselves nurtures embodiment. Empowering people to feel and to choose are not add-ons, or just a style of doing yoga, but inbuilt ethical training itself. A wide variety of problematic issues that we see in yoga like people pushing themselves to injury, or teachers not seeking consent to adjust students, or gurus sexually abusing students, stem from operating in a disembodied manner.

5. **Service intention.** Doing yoga for others rather than self-centered reasons dramatically enhances it as a practice. This is a seemingly simple mindset shift but is profound. Tibetan Buddhists are keen on this method in meditation committing in such ways as, “May any benefit gained from this practice be for the benefit of all sentient beings”.

6. **Yoga ethics sandwich.** Lastly a concrete practical method. You can ask people to reflect at the start and end of class on the last/next few minutes or hours, on how ethical they were. Did they “steal” time from someone or were they a little rude to the studio receptionist for example. This opens up the concentrated mindfulness of the class to the wider context of life. I call this a “yoga sandwich” the (gluten free organic) bread being your life either side of the class. It's a way of deliberately loosening the edges of the container of the class and making the ethical awareness a less all or nothing practice. Gradually this space can be opened up to include more and more of life.

[Yoga sandwich video](#)

Reflections: How is your on the mat practice consistent with your values and how is there a gap? In what ways could you get more ethical on the mat? How does how you do asana reveal your ethics? What poses do you find particularly revealing for our ethical flaws? As a teacher how do you empower and disempower students? Please reflect deeply on how an embodied approach impacts ethics.

Experiment: Try some of the practical ideas given here, e.g. the yoga ethics sandwich.

Practice: Integrate some of these ideas into regular practice and teaching.

Three big taboos

How do we look at sex in yoga? Well, short of more direct tantric practices I find there's usually some opportunity for practicing restraint in class, in gaze and thought. I suspect I'm not alone in having to spend some energy in not looking at yoga-pant-clad butts for example. I remember one class in Stockholm where I was surrounded by so many smoking hot and likely lovely and smart women; my entire practice that day was about focus! The key thing here is to acknowledge, yes red-boldded man, not a transcendent asexual yogi, and work with that reality.

Social opportunities around yoga provide further chances for both restraint and ethical expression. We need to start talking more openly about this as I've come across predatory instructors (EYP teacher's ethics code dictate "no fucking students full stop") and also communities where all active (especially male) sexuality is frowned upon, and this side of us denied completely - an equally unhealthy extreme in my opinion. I've made mistakes in this area myself and I think sweeping sexuality under the carpet is not good for anyone.

Money is another taboo (even bigger than sex I'd say actually) but an easy one to look at around yoga as people generally pay for classes! This can be made part of the mindfulness practice and not an unpleasantness to get over and done with. Simple things like being honest about if you qualify for a concession, and paying with a spirit of generosity make the five minutes before or after class when you hand over your cash a much richer experience! Donation based classes are particularly juicy for this and bring up all kinds of patterns, e.g. around scarcity. There are three basic embodied capacities that are particularly relevant to exploring more - giving, containing and receiving. In EYP these are three postures, and they're also comparable with the three main Hindu deities of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. I've found that people's issues with money

are directly related to these embodied capabilities and without addressing them no amount of book learning or talk will help.

Yoga of money video

Unfucking yourself around money

On marketing yoga

One taboo that is addressed in yoga or at least can be is death. Corpse pose can be used as a death meditation and I like to start classes with a cheerfully brutally honest, “you’ll be four hours closer to your death by the end of this workshop, what do you want to get for it?” Death brings us closer to purpose, kindness, gratitude and life generally, and after a corpse pose death meditation I like to ask questions around these themes.

Death meditation video

Reflections: What is your relationship to these taboos?

Experiment: Share openly about one of these areas that you usually don't (or share more deeply) with someone you trust.

Practice: Integrate these taboos into regular practice and teaching.

Insight and enquiry

One of the main benefits we can get from a yoga practice is increased self-awareness. Yoga has a way of teaching us about ourselves by revealing our patterns for living. What we do on the mat tends to show up what we do off the mat. Yoga is holographic, it's a microcosm. The fact that a yoga class is a simplified, ritualised and less consequential area of life as mentioned previously, is also precisely why insight can occur with greater ease and clarity. Life is messy and important, so it's hard to see the patterns of our habits. Life is too complex and we're too involved. As a mindfulness practice, yoga is not just a revealing metaphor for our lives but also helps us access embodied wisdom.

Most long-term yoga students have made the connection between what they do on the mat and what they do off it at some time, however it's rarely a focus in asana classes. In Embodied

Yoga Principles we specialise in this aspect and use several methods to near ensure that it happens quickly and with depth.

EYP Enquiry Methods

A yoga posture or flow can be used as an enquiry - an active process of investigation. There are three main sets of questions that we use to explore tendencies and possibilities through yoga postures. All of them are built on a foundation of mindfulness:

1. Familiarity enquiries
2. Deviation enquiries
3. Application enquiries

Here are two quick overview videos of enquiry methods:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cH42aKBAgUo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOCILoz9pVk>

1. Familiarity enquiries

The first set of questions is around asking if a pose/ way of doing a pose or flow, is *familiar*. The key thing here is whether someone feels at home in the pose as a habitual way of being; i.e. if it's their default embodiment. Our emotional comfort level often reveals what we tend to do, in the same way that an old pair of shoes fit comfortably. I remember the first time I did a warrior pose in a yoga class and thought, "finally, one that's my style!". Child's pose (or surrender posture as we call it in EYP) on the other hand took me years to grow to love. Neither were *physically* difficult for me so what was revealed was an embodied *emotional* preference relating to my disposition. Any of those who know me will not be surprised by this story!

Familiar and enjoyable are two different aspects that shouldn't be confused. Postures may feel enjoyable if they are longed-for but are not familiar, or familiar but not enjoyable if we're sick of being limited by them. The body is sometimes very definite in a response to a pose, emotionally *shouting*, "HELL YES!" or "HELL NO!!" with gusto! It can also show up as a more subtle resistance and as a teacher when people are reluctant to do a pose, quit early or want to keep doing a pose (without obvious physical causes), this can be what's at play. The body doesn't lie, to steal a somewhat overused phrase from dancer Martha Graham. As a teacher you can easily point

people to how the body reveals tendencies, but without suggesting the link people may well miss it for years. It's one of those things that is obvious when pointed out!

People may immediately feel at home or ill at ease in a posture, or they may find that a **comparison** brings this out. As well as postures, ways of doing a series of postures (e.g. a sun salutation) can also be compared. *How* you do something is a good definition of embodiment actually and often comparing styles of movement brings this out more clearly. I use the four elements model as one way of contrasting for example, where people are asked to do a simple asana sequence in four contrasting ways:

- earth: slowest, stop-start, formal, exact, belly breath, lower body emphasis.
- water: slow, flowing, receptive, relaxed, sighing breath, hip emphasis.
- fire: faster, pushing, sharp, vigorous, goal-oriented, chest breath and arm emphasis.
- air: fastest, light, playful, creative, humorous, spontaneous, high breath, head and hands emphasis.

They can then easily see which one or two of these tendencies is a pattern in their lives, or in particular aspects of their lives (e.g. they're fiery at work). People can then reflect on the strengths and weaknesses in their unconscious approach to solving life's problems (another embodiment definition), and how they might build range and grow underdeveloped qualities.

There is a complicating factor here that needs to be considered. When people object to the idea of embodiment it's usually because this hasn't been explained so I'd better had! We are relational and are always shifting as we're embodied in time, place, human relationships, culture and environment. We have a core personality that's embodied, but we also shift across contexts, so we may not be learning about our character, but our response to one of these other more transitory factors. The first time you make any of these enquiries it can be hard to know what's contextual and what's an insight into your deeper patterns - it could just be today that you love or hate warrior pose for example depending on what's going on in your life. After my father died I loved the surrender of child's pose and found it helpful in my grieving process. In my usual warrior manner that was typically easy, but was too much like hard work. When on holiday this preference reversal also occurs, as it can in deep winter. On the whole though, viewed over time I still have a personality that expresses as preferences (e.g. for warrior pose), as does everyone. The diagram below illustrates that we can be conceptualised as being embodied in layers.

As an aside, we've already noted that people often pick their style of yoga practice based on what's comfortable, and this can deepen patterns to the point of neurosis. If you've ever met an uptight Iyengar yogi, driven Ashtanga/hot yogi, or exhibitions Acro yogi you know what I mean ;-)

Obviously you can't generalise completely reliability and people may object to these examples, but you can see patterns at least across wide samples in my experience.

Another layer is culture and certain patterns may not be as obvious when expressing them in whole groups, or become more obvious if you go against the grain of your cultural background.

Teaching in various countries I've consistently seen patterns of

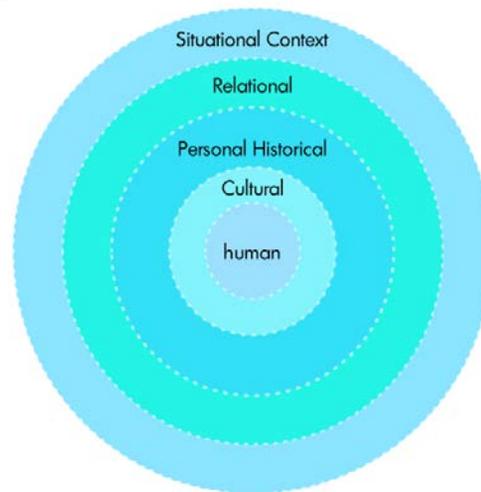
embodiment, for example in which EYP postures people in different countries struggle with. Authority pose below for example is nearly always difficult for Germans for example (World War 2 hangover), and when I led self-care pose in Moscow recently, every woman in the room cried (due to the pressure on women to look good while being hard on themselves there). While there are endless sub cultures (e.g. class or ethnicity), and people may have complex cultural backgrounds, it's dishonest to deny culture completely. While we must of course be careful of stereotyping, some gentle generalising is possible. Influenced by both postmodernism and American hyper-individualism/ melting-pot theory, I've noticed that there can be some resistance to this, but as ever, don't believe me, observe and test.

2. Deviation enquiries

The second way we can use a posture to learn about ourselves is to notice how we consistently do it differently from the form demonstrated. The usual approach in modern postural yoga is to dictate a shape and have people copy as exactly as possible. This emphasis on form isn't bad per se, and can aid our discipline for example, but does miss a trick.

What I've noticed over the years is that the mistakes people make are not random. Some deviations from a form simply show physical limitations and individual anatomical differences of course, but many show up personality patterns. The body reveals honestly once again. I jest, "see that "mistake" ...that's you that is!"

Environment



Returning to warrior two posture for example, I've been a fellow student in class for some years where two people have consistently made two very different "mistakes", despite being corrected weekly. Their eyes, brains and arms both work fine, so why does one always lean forward and tense her arms, and the other lean back while not extending her arms. Having got to know these two people off the mat I'm clear this pattern relates to their personalities - one over and one under-confident. One that tries too hard, and one that takes it a bit easy. One tries to take too much space socially, the other is terrified of being seen. Note too that neither has noticed this pattern of mistakes or thought to connect it to their daily lives. Some gentle pointing out from the teacher again - always as a humble enquiry not as a firm conclusion or labelling - is often necessary in this regard.



Deviation method video overview

Some postures are better at showing up patterns through deviation than others, no posture is a real classic for showing up patterns from EYP (shown right) that comes from karate and may be new to many yogis.

Shown below are common "errors" I see, where people reveal patterns:

<p>YANG</p> <p>NO - Common mistakes</p>				<p>YANG</p> <p>NO - Common mistakes</p>			
<p>Body turned to one side front hand off centre (avoidant)</p>	<p>Front hand limp, body leaning back (timid/fearful/yin)</p>	<p>Side hand passive facing down (passive/ non aggressive)</p>	<p>Front hand pushing, (aggressive)</p>	<p>Front hand to one side (defensive)</p>	<p>Front hand too open to one side (too open)</p>	<p>Side hand forwards and aggressive front hand off centre</p>	<p>Side hand forwards (overly aggressive)</p>

3. Application enquiries

The third set of questions we ask in EYP relate to directly linking a posture or series of movements to life. Typical questions include things like:

“In what ways does this (e.g. warrior “energy”) show up in your life? Not literally of course but as a way of being.”

“Where do you need this in your life?”

“Do you need this at work, in your romantic relationship or with children?” (I call these the “big three” as people are often very interested in at least one of them).

“What about with friends or politically?” (Many EYP postures like saying no and taking a stand have direct political application).

“Is there a place you overdo this and need less of it?”

“What benefits would more of this energy bring to your life? What do you fear it would bring more of?”

“What kind of warrior (or whatever) do you need to be in your life?” “Do the posture that way”.

This method can be seen as using yoga postures as a kind of embodied life coaching. As someone who has coached for ten years and has practiced yoga for twice that, it seemed like an obvious combination to me. In my experience, this process is surprisingly easy for most though greater ease and deeper insights come with practice, as accessing insight through the body is a skill that can be improved like any other. Note that this process is not *thinking while doing yoga*. It's accessing intuition from a mindfulness base, and being open to embodied insight. Sometimes I find myself remembering important insights I've forgotten - I primarily see personal growth as about bringing wisdom back to the fore, and am also often struck by new insights that would not have come without the assistance of the posture. From the point of view of warrior pose for example, we can more clearly see the benefits and applications of this way of being, than when slumped in a chair in a different mode.

Sometimes insights come as clear words like “you push too much Mark!” or “do this more”, though I find if people are merely thinking out loud rather than expressing body-based insight, they sound far more wordy and have a different tone. At other times insights come as images or as a non-verbal felt sense. If during an enquiry process nothing arises as occasionally happens, though rarely for sincere practitioners with some practice, then this is itself interesting. Delayed

responses are also possible where people in life later suddenly have an “ah ha” moment realising, “ahhh, this is the posture that I need”. In any event people are working at the embodiment level throughout an enquiry, “marinading” themselves in the “sauce” off the pose and having it sink into their being subtly, so the practice is never wasted.

It's important during enquiry processes that people are physically not overwhelmed. If a posture can not be held more or less physically comfortably for two to three minutes, it's unlikely to produce a fruitful emotional and psychological enquiry. I suggest people moderate postures and provide alternatives to support this principle.

Reflections: How do you do some of these enquiries already? Do they ring true for you?

Experiment: Try some light familiarity and application enquiries in your own practice and classes.

Notice your deviations and explore if they're significant. See what's useful for you.

Practice: Integrate some of these ideas into regular practice and teaching, though we ask that you don't attempt to teach the full EYP method from a book as it isn't safe (see below as to why).

Using questions like, “is this familiar?” and “where does this show up in your life?” can however be integrated safely.

A word of caution

This enquiry process is outlined for your use, please do not try and teach it to others from this book. This requires further training to do it well, and you will likely damage people and get into deep waters very quickly without this training.

Sometimes people who've not tried the EYP approach ask me if such a simple method can work. I answer that the biggest problem we find is that these methods work too well actually. Such enquiries have a way of side-stepping our defences, and very quickly reveal deep and sometimes emotionally triggering patterns. New students are often surprised and half joke that an EYP class is like doing a year of therapy in an hour. While this approach is not at heart therapeutic it's certainly potentially exposing, even destabilising to personal growth work. Certain precautions are necessary in gatekeeping, pre training warnings, ethics, emotional maturity and trauma education for teachers, etc. I would not recommend junior or less grounded teachers, those without psychological training beyond asana, or those working with vulnerable

populations who try this approach without more in-depth training. While there's much you can take away here and I wouldn't be making this book available if I didn't want people to adopt EYP methods, approaching this section with care and humility is a must unless you wish to harm people. Refer to the next section for more. Trauma education is something I'd recommend for all yoga teachers, and while in a few cases this is being taken too far into a type of PC-policing and paranoia, the majority of yoga teachers are still undereducated in this regard. The video below is a good place to start and many others offer specialist courses now such as in [Boston with Bessel Van Der Kolk's group](#), and with [Sarah Holmes de Castro](#) in Canada and the UK.

[Trauma intro for yoga teachers video](#).

Space, processing and social witnessing

Having space to reflect on what you're learning during a class is very useful for spotting, clarifying and assimilating learning. Often insights happen in a yoga class but there simply isn't time to really "catch" them, let alone properly digest and assimilate the insights. Many yoga classes either move too quickly, are too intense, or are so overly focused on technical details to make little space for anything else in attention. Of course, these methods for enforcing attention to the body have their benefits in avoiding distraction, but come at a cost.

Just slowing a class down often gives enough time and energy for insights and it's why EYP is most often combined with hatha, yin and gentle vinyasa yoga.

People can also get easily overwhelmed with both skills acquisition and insight if not given sufficient time to "chew and digest" learning. What helps people mentally and emotionally process the often very rich leading of an EYP class is the following. Without them people can't sustain an emotional challenging practice for long, and get overwhelmed, even in a single class, so I'd regard it as a matter of safety and efficacy to include them:

- Periods of stillness and silence (introverts especially need time away from the social engagement).
- Frequent brief lie-downs in corpse pose or active rest (doing "nothing" does a lot!).
- Walking around the room (simple yet effective).

- Free stretching, noise making or even dancing moments where the body is encouraged to follow its own process rather than a form.
- Regular breaks (every 1.5-2 hours) with healthy food and plenty of fluids. In nature if at all possible.
- Focused verbal debriefs (many people process out-loud). See below:



Usually yoga is practiced in silence except for the guide as mindfulness is easier this way and we all need a break from the chatter. Sadly, this non-verbal container also really limits integration and life transfer. I've found that the other extreme of long sharing circles and endless talk isn't helpful either, as it takes people up to their heads and the base of insightful body awareness is lost. What I've found very helpful however are short focused windows of mindful communication. I usually time a one-minute bell for two people to both share their insight and listen attentively.

A focused question to guide this sharing also helps and I start each paired debrief with a moment of private body awareness and centring. I know this may sound short, and feels it to people at first, but people find it's soon easy. I often include a group sharing period after the 1-1 sharing for peer-led insights, so people don't feel alone in their issues, and for further reflection.

As social animals there's something almost magical that happens to our clarity of thought and ability to be with emotions when we're given caring focused attention. Counsellors and therapists train for years to develop this capacity and we all give and receive it to different degrees with loved ones. It's not just that we think out loud, but that loving connection draws more out of us. People have much deeper, better articulated insights when someone listens to them with care for even thirty seconds, and feel resourced to go to difficult new emotional territory. The power of social witnessing is huge, and yoga misses a huge tool of the Western therapeutic tradition to ignore it.

Note too that this expressing and witnessing is not talking about yoga but is a type of yoga. It's skill building communication yoga. In expressing authentically and directly in these debriefs,

yogis are learning important life skills. The short times actually helps as it encourages people to go to the heart of the matter. Another benefit of having students witness each other of course is that the listeners have a chance to practice the vital skill of empathy. This is a critical skill for such diverse areas as sexual relationships, conflict management, leadership and parenting, and it can hardly be overstated how important it is. I will talk more on other relational skills later.

EYP debrief/ integration process video

*Experiment: Try some of the ideas given here, such as verbal debriefs and integration breaks.
Practice: Integrate some of the ideas that worked for you into regular practice and teaching.*

Micro Postures

Long-term embodied practice shifts our manner of being. We can also use postures to shift our state in day-to-day life. Now, we can occasionally take a full yoga posture to shift ourselves, finding a quiet room to do a hanging forward bend to let go of something, or one can do the famous power-poses similar to asana like warrior two to boost our confidence, however this is not always possible. If you suddenly pull a downwards dog in a business meeting for example it's going to look a bit odd! What we can do though is a very, very scaled down version of the posture that engages the essence of the pose. It's like a key that sets off the essence of the pose, without needing to do it fully.

A core principle here is to ask is, what is the smallest version of a posture that is socially acceptable in the context you're in. Subtle yet key aspects of a pose like gaze, hand position, spine and breath can be non-obtrusively worked with in daily life. For this reason, it's important that a teacher stresses these less obvious aspects of asana.

Micro posture is often better shown than told (see the video below) but some can be easily imagined. A forward bend can simply become a very slight flexion and soft "ahh" breath, and a micro warrior pose involves putting one foot forward slightly, extending the fingers and focusing

the gaze. I call these very refined subtle versions of postures “micro poses” and they're super useful for daily life.

One way of thinking about this is that practicing macro poses (regular asana) is like bringing archetypes closer to the surface by reviewing and dusting them off, that can then be more easily accessed by micro postures that merely suggest them. Another perspective is to think of micro postures as buttons to trigger patterns that you've invested in; like making a withdrawal from an “account”. In time, just thinking about a posture is enough to illicit very subtle yet very powerful body-mind changes immediately during the action of daily life. A regular practice of asana of course helps you to remember to do this! Micro poses with time and practice merge into a creative flow of body use which aren't limited, nor have set shapes.

An almost Jungian view of yoga postures as ways of accessing deep fundamental psychological patterns may be unfamiliar, but opens up the use of micro postures to access their potential at any time. I believe that this is a unique approach to yoga in the modern world, though there's really nothing new under the sun, so let me know if you're using this approach already!

Micro posture video.

Reflection: Where do you see people embody aspects of yoga postures in daily life?

Experiment: Try making your own micro-postures for postures you practice that have a resonance for you.

“Do yoga like your life is”

I wanted to give an example of how easy it is to bring life onto the mat and therefore yoga onto it by describing one creative exploration I work with. One simple yet profound exercise I use to connect a yoga class to outside life is to ask people :

“Do yoga like your life is”. Then, “do yoga like you'd like it to be” (awareness and choice again). This quickly and sometimes a little painfully brings the reality of a person's chosen existence to the fore on the microcosm of the mat. It also quickly brings in values and any gap between current behaviour and what someone holds as important.

Video demo of people doing this exercise.

Experiment: Try this

Standing, walking and sitting

The Buddha said that mindfulness should be practiced in the four basic positions of life: standing, sitting, walking and lying down. The vast majority of our day and activities can be considered variations of these four modes, and if we're to transfer practice into life we need to practice in all of these modes. This goes for yoga postures as well as general mindfulness. Modern postural yoga has a balance of prone, sitting and standing postures but neglects walking. Equally, certain postures may only be explored in one of these fundamental positions. Warrior for example can also be done sitting, useful if you need to be warrior-like when say seated at a desk at work. We spend more of our days seated now than in the past, and while this has health consequences and is worth minimising where possible, the reality is we need to practice for this position. If you've never studied chair yoga I highly recommend it. For teachers, this also makes your yoga accessible to wheel-chair users, people with certain injuries and other groups who can't stand.

Postures can't be done literally when walking in most cases, but the essence of them can be expressed this way. If you understand the essence of warrior posture (to keep with this example), it's obvious and straightforward to walk in a warrior way. Direct cues can be used for gaze or spine shape, muscle tone, attitude for example; and other aspects such as arm position moderated but still employed. Being able to practice yoga while walking creates many small windows of practice throughout the day. Again, this comes from a Jungian archetypal view of yoga poses, and an embodied perspective.

Here new Yoga and walking and sitting videos to illustrate.

Experiment: Try walking and sitting "in" different postures.

Practice: Integrate chairs and walking into regular practice and teaching.

Relational Practices

Daily life involves other people. We don't live in a cave in the Himalayas. Equally solo practice does not always translate across well to relationships. I discovered this after my first silent retreat; my new peaceful state lasted about an hour after the retreat ended and I started talking with people! Given the need for skill with others and the lack of translation of solo practice (the context is too different to return to the container-transfer model) it follows that we need to have a relational practice if we are to improve this central aspect of our lives! This could be tango or aikido, but can easily be yoga.



I'd start by saying that a yoga class is always relational anyway so you might as well get more skilled in working with this aspect. You can't stop people "socialising" in the broadest sense, and while attempts to minimise it in yoga have their place, I'd argue that we must also embrace this reality. Take leadership, authority and followership. If you're in a yoga class you are working with these themes, people are following you as you teach for example and may have issues around this. It's quite obvious to an experienced teacher when say, a student has a pattern of habitually trying to please you, or habituating rebelling, that you're working with their relationship to authority as much as their hamstrings. In EYP we have an exercise around this where people are encouraged to first conform and then rebel and notice which is most familiar. This is just one example of existing psycho-social dynamics in a standard yoga class, and doing yoga at home alone is quite different from doing it in a room with others even if you're trying to ignore each other. I notice for example that challenging postures get harder without the subtle yet powerful nonverbal social support a class





brings and I often can't focus for as long or as deeply at home alone. Many people who already "know the moves" in yoga go to group classes for this reason actually.

So given that this social "layer" is occurring, what can we do to explore relationships through yoga? Well, many postures can be made relational to look at our patterns as per the solo enquiries discussed previously. Actually, there are only a few types of relationships possible between people when stripped down to their most basic level. Some of the simplest of these are extremely powerful to explore. To be witnessed and ignored during a posture may utterly change it for people for example. Let's go back to our favourite warrior pose; this may feel easy when done on my own, but I may start smiling and flopping when witnessed doing it (a pattern I often see among young women for example who have been conditioned to not be fierce when men are watching). Some may find it supportive to do warrior pose in a group, while others access this energy better on their own. I have already mentioned leader and follower as dynamics and these can be explored by letting one yogi lead another, or lead the group for a time; each person showing one posture and then examine how that was for them. Again we see patterns of familiarity and deviation and can make links to the rest of life in exactly the same way as when it occurs during solo enquiries.

The seven sets of relational patterns we explore in EYP are:

1. Witnessed or ignored
2. Cooperation (several variations) / opposed or competed with (two variations shown below for warrior)
3. Supported (+controlled variation) / undermined
4. Contrasted or polarised (e.g. yes and no poses)

5. Complimented / criticised (both evaluating, shown above in trio practice)
6. Exaggerated / reduced
7. Lead / followed

Introduction to partner work video

Relational dynamics video showing how warrior posture can be used in various types of relationship.

I like to explore both cooperation and competition in yoga as two sides of our nature; another yin-yang polarity. Competition is somewhat controversial but can be done in a safe, fun manner



which brings awareness to this side of life. As competition is somewhat demonised in yoga, and

many people have painful histories with it at in places like school, there's usually some resistance to yoga competitions. I would note that often the people who say it's not spiritual etc., end up the most competitive during one of EYPs fabled tree-offs or planks offs (illustrated). We use a wide variety of competitions, some of which can be seen in the video below:

Yoga competition video. And another.

Learning **cooperation** is of course important too, and many more standard partner yoga practices can be used to explore and develop this capacity. Acro yoga is a practice more often associated with fun and games, and for cool photos, but it's also tremendously rich for looking at trust, connection and safety to give just some examples.

One senior Acro teacher I know asked me why he felt so emotional after a day of practice and I answered that he'd been dealing with some of the most fundamental issues of the human psyche all day!; trust, safety, connection etc.! I'd go so far as to say actually, that an Acro teacher who doesn't bring some of these key depth themes into the light a little at least, is playing with fire, as they will come up for people as I've seen in classes many times.

The psychology of Acro Yoga video.

One way I reveal people's personal patterns in EYP is through highlighting participants process in the exercises themselves. This is a good way to work particularly during partner practices. For example, when people take or leave a partner for an exercise, I call attention to how they do this. Some people will enter fast and others slow, some will wait for a partner to come to them, some cling when leaving, while others will leave abruptly to give a few examples. As ever the microcosm of the training can reveal patterns in wider life. Because people tend not to manage themselves during such moments while "defences are down", habits are often very honestly revealed. This "meta" way of working is somewhat advanced especially if spontaneous, and can seem humorously exposing or infuriatingly clever! In a way you can reveal pattern doing anything this way.

Another simple yet profound exercise I use once people have a little EYP experience and get the basic idea, is to ask people to make the posture that they make for others. For example, being generous, shy, pushy, taking space, being charming, etc. Most people have at least okay self-awareness (especially if yogis), and already know their patterns, and sometimes you can just

drop the sophisticated methods and ask them. By reducing what they do in the complexity of life to one or two simple shapes, people are confronted with a clear, sometimes brutal honesty. Less is more and this exercise usually reveals a lot.

Video demo of this exercise.

I'll end this section by saying that sometimes the simplest practices are the best. The pictures below show two EYP teachers sitting back to back to explore connection, support, leader-follower and various other interpersonal issues. You don't need dramatic forms, just a basic partner set-up and increased awareness of how you do that, and how you'd like to practice that. Awareness and choice as ever.

Reflection: How do relational dynamics already operate in classes you attend/lead?

Experiment: Try some of the simple relational practices here, such as sitting back to back or doing warrior pose in pairs of various kinds.

Practice: Integrate some of the ideas that worked for you into regular practice and teaching.

Additional notes and miscellaneous musings

Silence, music, incense etc.

The physical and psychological environment of a yoga class includes all the senses. Music and scents can even be thought of as “packaged mood”, and there's no doubting the power of an evocative piece of music or beautiful smell to shift our body-mind.

In some movement arts like 5Rhythms or Nia (two conscious dance practices) music is key. In my own coaching courses we have a full-time DJ whose job it is to positively influence the training process through mood alteration, and music has become increasingly popular in yoga classes⁹. The use of music ranges from subtle embodied tasting (Derek Beres I believe specialises in this) to overwhelming aerobics style blasting. Many traditionalists would say that yoga should always be done in silence as this helps you tune into the body, and there's wisdom in this: we do live in a culture addicted to noise, and the subtlest aspects of embodiment are often most easily explored when the background noise outside the body gets turned down. I do believe however

⁹ there are even apps to organise your music by emotional influence now

that there's a place for using music (or scents or incense) to support the opening of different aspects of ourselves. The danger in using such external stimuli can be seen when we refer back to our container-transfer tension. If you become reliant upon any particular external stimuli that you can't easily replicate (Enya or sage in a business meeting anyone?) then life transfer become more difficult. Music and scents can be supportive but ultimately we must not become addicted to them as crutches, any more than Sanskrit or special yoga clothes.

Shadow practices

Lives can be wrecked by disowned parts of ourselves that we deny, repress and project. This can then show up as either blind infatuation (golden shadow) or irrational over-the-top triggering. We react badly when people represent a part of ourselves that we would rather not look at. Jung called such disowned parts of us "shadow", and this idea is similar simply to the unconscious but implies active repression. Working with shadow is largely a Western therapeutic notion and is nearly always missing from Asian arts. Such work is best done in 1-1 relationships, however it can be touched upon in yoga. "Do yoga like someone who irrationally annoys you" for example, is one way I play with this. One reason that so many yoga and meditation teachers, Western and Eastern, end up behaving unethically is the lack of shadow work. No amount of mindfulness work will bring these aspects of ourselves to light, and shadow content has a way of easily pushing aside even long-term training.

Reflection: What do people who trigger you embody? Is there a positive side to it? E.g. arrogance annoys you, but you could do with more confidence.

Experiment: Do yoga like someone who annoys you (for no good reason). Nobody traumatic. Or like someone you have a crush on? How is it?

Practice: If you're teaching depth approaches to yoga I highly recommend completing at least a year of therapy with a qualified professional, and being aware of your own shadow process ongoing with students.

Technology

One thing that has changed since the time of The Buddha is technology! Many of us spend much of our day using computers, tablets, phones etc, yet these are not incorporated into yoga. Bringing technology into a class is easily done with phones, and people can for example try

standing in mountain while looking at their phone rather than the usual unhealthy hunched position. From a “holiday” model of yoga this makes no sense of course, but I’d argue that while seemingly radical, it’s an essential bridge to modern life if we have an educational model.

Phone yoga video

Experiment: Try some yoga holding a phone, how is it?

Practice: Integrate some tech bridges into your practice and classes, at least from time to time.

Being attractive

If think if they were honest, a major motivator for many people in starting yoga at least, is to be more sexually attractive. Given yoga’s potential “higher” goals this can seem very shallow, but I could also argue there’s nothing wrong with this very human urge. I would however suggest that we do two things:

1. Bring this desire out into the open rather than pretending it’s not real.
2. Actually get some effective strategies of it!

The first point is that the urge to look or feel sexier through yoga is often hidden under a thin and partially dishonest spiritual veneer. People sell their products and gain followers with porn, cover of sharing spiritual wisdom, and convince themselves that they haven’t bought into consumer body image culture while spending hours each day on living up to its ideals. LET’S GET REAL. If looking or feeling sexier is part of your practice FINE, I am not going to judge, but be honest! I sometimes ask this question to people I think are kidding themselves: “If yoga made you ugly, but at no risk to your health, would you still do it?”

Given that being more attractive can I believe be a valid aim, why not ask what actually makes a person more sexy? I’ve researched this quite thoroughly in straight and gay communities worldwide, and found some consistent factors that are not just “in the eye of the beholder” or obvious like basic health. Many embodied capacities consistently found attractive such as confidence and openness, matter much more than simple physical ones, and these can be reliably built through yoga. A lot of this concerns polarity and yin and yang, but further detail is

beyond the scope of this book. Suffice to say it's very possible to build attractiveness from a values-driven "inside-out" perspective without buying into consumer body-image culture. There's a lot in the Beauty Blackbelt video series I made with my wife, and are available free online for those that want more specifics.

Beauty blackbelt videos can be found here.

Yoga for attractiveness video.

Reflections: Where does sexiness come from? How much of the effort you put into yoga (if any) is driven by wanting to be attractive? Be honest about this, and notice what it brings up. Another way to explore this is to ask, "if yoga made me less attractive would I still do it?"

Experiment: Design a yoga practice with the sole aim of being more attractive, what does it involve? Design one to be uglier, how's that?

Practice: Integrate some of the ideas that worked for you into regular practice and teaching.

A note on work and purpose

Another aspect of life that people are massively interested in is their work. Weirdly I note people tend to forget this in yoga, maybe because of the implicit holiday model, and have to be reminded to work with this key part of life! Rather than being an escape from a despised or draining work-life however, yoga can be used as a tool to put people in touch with purpose and values, and to enrich and steer the work a person does. Any embodied practice will do this to a degree actually as we're constantly being given messages about what we care about and what we don't from the body. When deeply embodied the idea of turning up to a job you hate every day simply for money is unimaginable. Likewise, in yoga we're given the tools to self-regulate during the scary process of finding our passions and following our bliss. In EYP we use many postures to work with purpose such as working with openness to be receptive to what is asked of us. We also have a specific posture to engage passion if this has been deadened and another for exploring what you have most deeply to contribute. These can also be useful in work around attractiveness too not coincidentally - both below. For those who've already found their calling, self-care and being seen posture are often useful. I've lead quite a few courses on this subject such as the Purpose Black Belt online course, and many EYP workshops, and it's a juicy topic.

Passion posture video, and generosity posture

Reflection: How does your yoga bring you closer to purpose and contribution to the world?

Experiment: Try some of the postures in the videos to explore your own purpose as an enquiry.

Practice: Integrate some connections to work and purpose into regular practice and teaching.

Can yoga be a complete practice?

I've endeavored to make Embodied Yoga Principles a truly integral life practice. An integral life practice is an idea developed by Ken Wilber et al, where one practice becomes a vehicle for the many different types of development that a person needs. This is not strictly necessary as you can of course add practices to balance out your practice and yourself, but I think it's desirable given you only have so much time to at least touch a good number of the major bases (e.g. the four aspects of embodied intelligence) with one core practice. For this reason, I make a passionate case for the inclusion of such things as relational practices into yoga as standard in this book. Even as an embodiment professional, I struggle to do more than a few yoga classes a week and maybe one aikido or dance class.

Even with what we could call a wide-spectrum yoga we could still ask though, "what's missing from yoga? For me therapeutic work come close to the top of the list, and while money and sex can be touched upon in a standard yoga class, some kind of conscious intimate and financial/business practice is helpful. While a free movement practice is possible in yoga nothing really beats a good dance and I do 5Rhythms at least once a month for this, and dance socially like your dad at a disco any chance I get. I also find the comedic aspect of yoga missing (we can take ourselves a bit too seriously right, and American cultural dominance doesn't help with this), and while EYP is often more playful than most yoga, comedy improv is a great adjunct. Fitness wise there's worlds missing from yoga but others can comment far better than I on this and it's not the book's focus.

Reflection: What's missing from your yoga?

Experiment: Try adding something to supplement your practice for a few months and see how your life changes.

Exploring concepts through yoga

Working through the body is a great way of exploring the concepts and beliefs you hold as it makes the abstract concrete and cuts away bullshit to make the complex clear. The “do you like your life is”, and “the posture you make for others” exercises illustrate this, and you can also expose the heart of how you conceptualise anything else this way. Gender is a good example of this. You can ask people, “do the posture that’s most manly/womanly/whatever to you”. Now this sounds like an impossible question but people usually quickly take a stance and it will reveal a lot. I did this in Russia once and various brought out various gender role conversations in the culture without making anyone bad. This provided a safe way for everyone from conservatives to my radical feminist lesbian interpreter to examine the topic. You can also explore culture this way, asking what it is to be French/Dutch/Spanish/whatever and to do yoga more like that, then not like that at all. This uses the “how” of yoga not the “what of postures” - both are possible in exploring concepts. Exaggeration and contrast is a basic Embodied Yoga Principle that I first saw clarified by [Leadership Embodiment](#) founder Wendy Palmer, and it’s a useful method for bringing subconscious or implicit concepts to the fore.

You can explore ANY topic this way really including delicate “hot topics”. What I enjoy about this method is both its speed and sensitivity as you don’t need to impose your own views on anyone.

Other extended explorations

The “do yoga like your life is” exercise and concepts method are two of what we call “extended explorations” in EYP. This is where we take time to explore a theme.

A real favourite is the four elements personality exploration mentioned earlier, but any typology can be used this way - e.g. 4/12 archetypes, DISC, enneagram, etc.

“Legacy pose” is an exercise where people are asked to stand as if they were posing for a 100 metre-high sculpture to be placed in their town square. This reveals a lot about how people view

such things as success and being seen. Another exercise we do to explore social relations is having people do a posture while a group applauds, and I mentioned how we use criticism and praise briefly in the partner section. We have other variations in this area. These types of exercises brings up people's patterns around shame and pride and let's them work on these aspects.

I've also made use of yoga classes creativity to explore class structure and inequality, splitting the group into three different sections, each with different privileges. Some have mats, some not; some instruction, some not; some snacks and water; some not, etc. This is inspired by the work of Barry Oshry who works with systems theory in business, and Jen Elliott's classic "Brown eyes, blue eyes" racism simulations you may be aware of. When practiced through yoga it's a lot of fun, and with a deep social meaning.

There are dozens more that we use in EYP, but I hope these examples convey some of the scope of what's possible on a yoga mat! Imagination is the only limit really as once you understand embodiment principles, they can be used generatively to create new exercises to match topics and different groups. We are a long way from downward dog now I know! Some may say what I do isn't yoga as it's not traditional - whatever that means (though it's still fundamentally about union) or because I incorporate so many others traditions. It doesn't really matter to me, but yoga is as good a name as any, and much of what's here has been successfully combined with more mainstream yoga by EYP teachers across the world.

Conclusion and resources

What I've tried to do in this short e-book is offer ways of enriching asana in the modern world. There are of course other types of yoga besides asana, and some like service yoga may need to be added as adjuncts for a complete practice, however much can be integrated into the popular format of postural yoga as it exists in the West today. My view is that it's better to enhance what's already accepted, and deepen what's already practiced.

I've outlined some principles and practical techniques for getting yoga off the mat and I hope that you find these useful. For me, what's most important in yoga, is using it to benefit my life and the world, and not just my hamstrings. Clarity around the theory and applied specifics of this topic has been vague in the yoga community and I hope I've moved the dialogue forward a

little. My hope is that this short book attracts people to explore the practice of Embodied Yoga Principles specifically, and more generally stimulates rigorous discussion on this topic, and more creative practice in the yoga community. Do have a look at the videos linked and subscribe to the Yoga for Your Whole Life Youtube channel as many of these ideas are better shown than told. There's [a FB group](#), [Instagram](#) (sorry no handstands on the beach though) and listings of [EYP teachers](#) and [teacher trainings](#) around the world; I'd like you to try some of these ideas with a teacher face-to-face.

Most of all though I hope you put some of these principles and techniques to use to benefit your own life. My sincere wish is that they add to your practice and make a positive difference to your corner of the world. Talk is cheap, and this book's content is in the tasting, so give it a go and test it out! Not all the techniques will work well for everybody, though all those presented here have been proven effective with cross-cultural and diverse groups over a number of years, so I'm confident that I'm not talking utter shite.

I see the exploration of what yoga can be in the modern hyper-connected world as a collective project. Much of what I've written here has come through the EYP teacher's community and our explorations over the years: many thanks to my peers there . We've researched this niche thoroughly, but planet yoga is a big place and if more of us interested ourselves in this topic link up we could really make some progress together. [I'd love to hear back from you](#). So, if you'll forgive one last provocation, let's all make yoga less pointless.

RESOURCES

Here's a few places you can deepen your knowledge of this books content:

SPECIFIC TO THIS APPROACH:

[EYP main site](#)

[EYP teacher training](#)

[Yoga For Your Whole Life YouTube channel](#)

[EYP Facebook group](#)

[Articles and blogs on the EYP site](#)

[Embodied Facilitator Course](#) - the year-long embodiment training I run

Book (this short e-book is extracted from an upcoming longer paper book on Embodied Yoga Principles, get the EYP newsletter to hear about its eventual release).

MORE BROADLY:

[Off The Mat Into the World](#) (I hear good things about this group but haven't trained with them)

[Yoga Service Council](#)

[Matthew Remski](#)

Podcasts -

[The Embodiment Podcast](#) (NEW - check it out!)

[Liberated Body interview](#)

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Thanks to the growing EYP Community, especially those who have contributed images, video links, edits etc. to this book.