
PERSONAL PRACTICE: GETTING STARTED

Why start a personal practice?

When we practice yoga with others in a class or workshop, there is a wonderful group energy that we both contribute to and tap in to. The teacher is guiding you through a well-planned and structured class, and even though options and modifications may be offered creating an element of choice for each individual student, there is still a sense of being guided – we don't really have to think about what to do next.

Your personal practice on the other hand is all about you! It's about tapping into and creating your own energy, designing a practice to suit your own unique needs, and sustaining your own growth, resilience and wellbeing. Rather than a class that's been designed with 10 or more students in mind all with very different needs, your own practice is dedicated entirely to you – your body, your mind, your energy levels. You set the tone, the pace and the purpose.

Ultimately, your personal practice forms a supportive and transformative part of your journey, whether that journey is physical, emotional or spiritual.

“Practice is about building up a threshold for being with everything just as it is” Donna Farhi

Your practice can be the highlight of your day, but it can also feel like another thing to do on your ever growing to-do list. So how do you get started, create momentum and keep going when obstacles arise?

The first step... instead of thinking of this as prioritising yoga, can you think of it as prioritising YOU? Seeing yoga as a gift to yourself, rather than another responsibility.

Getting started – some tips and ideas (these are ideas, not a checklist - take what resonates)

- Intention – remembering your ‘why’

Setting an intention can be helpful in creating stable foundations for your home practice. There are many reasons why people practice yoga, and your personal reason is at the heart of what you do and the choices you make.

Pause for a moment to consider why you do yoga, asking yourself the questions:

How did I feel when I started doing yoga?

What transformation have I experienced from my yoga journey so far?

What transformation or growth would I like to experience?

How do I want to feel?

See what arises – you can always come back to these questions, and you'll find that over time your intention may well change, and you can come back and revisit this meditation again.

When you begin to get clear on what you want from your yoga, you can develop your own intention – something that you can return to and commit to every time you practice.

- Time

A personal practice doesn't have to be an hour every single day. What realistically works for you? Perhaps it's 30 minutes twice a week, or 10 minutes of stretching every morning. Find out what time of day and duration works best for you.

Are you a morning person and happy to get up a little earlier to practice when the world around is quiet, or do you prefer yoga at night to release the events of the day and go to bed with a clear heart and mind? Make it practical for your life, your energy, and your routine.

- Place

Finding a dedicated space can be helpful, and it doesn't need to be huge – enough to roll out your mat. It can be useful to keep your mat and kit here if you can, so that you're ready to go. Ideally this should be a place where you won't be disturbed (although pets may have other ideas!), so let others know about your new routine and ask for some quiet, undisturbed time. Turn off distractions such as mobile phones.

- Keep it simple

As you begin to develop your own practice, keep it simple and uncomplicated. Throughout the course you'll learn some principles for creating an effective and safe practice, but for now have a beginners' mind. Each time you step on the yoga mat is a new moment and a new beginning.

- Enjoy the process

After all, your love of yoga is why you do it! Remembering to be in the present moment, connecting to the movement of your breath, so that you can truly embody your practice. Allow joy to flow in and through you and light up those parts of you that long to shine!

- Accountability

Yoga is unity, and while a personal practice is indeed all about you and your needs, it can be so helpful to seek support and support others. If you're feeling stuck, reach out to the group – sometimes being open and expressing it to others is just what we need to become unstuck. And if you're feeling accomplished, reach out to the group and share your experiences – your tips and ideas may be just the inspiration someone needs that day.

A note for introverts: it's ok to prefer learning and experiencing through reflection, and reaching out isn't always easy. So do what's right for you, but also know that you are here to shine and your gentle thoughts may resonate with others and be helpful for their journey too.

- Just start

Sometimes we can spend so long reading, planning, getting inspired, and getting things "just right" (for example sourcing the perfect stationery for our journal!) that we lose our motivation and never actually get around to doing the thing! So, today start – do it. See where it leads you and grow from there.

"You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step" Martin Luther King

- Thank yourself.

Thanking yourself for showing up – close your practice in a way that feels right for you (e.g. bow the head to the hands, create a blessing, chant Om) and with an intention to carry yoga with you into the rest of your day.

Knowing what to do...

This can be tricky – there are so many postures and so many practices to choose from!

So come back to your why.... Knowing what to do becomes a little easier if you have a clear intention. For example, if your intention is to maintain mobility through the joints, a simple joint freeing sequence (pawanmuktasana) would be ideal. Or if you want to bring some calm into a busy life then a couple of restorative yoga postures and a guided relaxation at the end of the day would be a perfect way to soothe the nervous system. Perhaps you want to work on a particular asana (posture), so breaking down the posture into its layers and stages and working through these is a good way to get to know a posture, explore it and allow it to grow and deepen.

Alternatively think about what it is you love to do in class. If you find it hard to remember postures or sequences then jot things down after class, making a note after class of what it was that you practiced.

And importantly, ask yourself “what nourishes me”? What are the practices that bring me most benefit? What brings me to balance?

Listen to your intuition and the instincts of your body – what is your body asking of you? Does it crave rest, does it need to be energised with a practice that shifts stuck energy, is there a particular part of the body that needs some attention?

Remember, there are no rights or wrongs. This is your yoga.

When you feel uninspired just sit on your mat and breathe – where does that lead? It could be a few moments of stillness, or the body might intuitively begin to move. Maybe read a yoga book or article – it’s all yoga. Often if I’m stuck or resisting practising, I find that resting in swan (extended child) can lead me to cat, then dog, then a standing forward fold. A simple, but effective, practice.

Safety considerations: if you are taking care of an injury or have a particular health condition, always follow the advice of your doctor or health professional – finding out from them what should be encouraged to help healing and what should be avoided. Please speak with me or your own yoga teacher for advice on modifications or omissions.

What does Patanjali say?

Well, Patanjali says quite a lot about practice! We’ll explore that more throughout the course, but one particular sutra that springs to mind is in Chapter 2, sutra 16:

Future suffering is to be avoided (2:16)

BKS Iyengar tells us that “yoga is a preventative, healing art, science and philosophy”. Through consistent practice our suffering can be overcome.

A final thought...

If the term 'personal practice' doesn't inspire you, can you think of something else that makes you feel more motivated? Resilience Routine, Radiance Ritual, Yoga Indulgence (a particular favourite from Eve Johnson). It doesn't matter if it sounds silly and isn't in Sanskrit! If it helps to get you on to your mat then that's what counts. Share your ideas with the group!

Janice Procter, February 2022