



# 10 STEPS

## to a Daily Yoga Practice

I have a daily yoga practice. Most mornings I get up and practice asana (postures), pranayama (breathing) and meditation before breakfast. But that doesn't mean that I always find this routine easy, or that it's always been this way.

There have been long periods in my life where I haven't had such a rhythm in my day. And there are some mornings when the pull to fire up my computer and get going on my latest project feels stronger than my desire to unroll my mat and be with myself. I know I'm not the only one who feels this way. Many of us have the best intentions when it comes to developing our own daily yoga practice, but finding the motivation to do so can feel challenging.

### START SMALL

Whether you're starting a home yoga practice for the first time, or you are on your journey back to a daily yoga routine, my suggestion is that you start small. On the first day, commit to practicing for just five minutes. Five minutes can have a profound impact on your day, and you'll probably finish up already looking forward to the next practice. After a few days of practicing for 5 minutes, add an extra posture or practice and slowly start to increase the time you spend on the mat. But there's no rush. Take it slowly and easily, and allow your practice to unfold.

### SET YOURSELF UP SO IT'S EASY

Do yourself a favour and make it really easy to practice yoga. Have a set space that is clutter free and clean, with enough room to easily roll out your mat. If you have to clean up a room and move around the furniture, you're probably less likely to practice. Keep any props you need close at hand. Try scheduling your practice into your calendar, set a reminder alarm and tell your family or flatmates your practice schedule so they know not to disturb you. They may even remind you if you forget!

If you're practicing first thing in the morning, go to bed at a time that will make it easy to get up when you want to practice. Try leaving your yoga clothes next to the bed ready to put on first thing, and if it's winter put the heater on a timer so your yoga space will be invitingly warm.

### DECIDE WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO GIVE UP

There is a finite amount of time in each day, so it follows that if you're going to add something into your day you need to subtract something else. What are you prepared to give up in order to have a daily yoga practice? Sleeping in? Your morning facebook session? Reading the paper? Ironing your clothes? Watching TV? Getting clear on what you're prepared to give up will

make room for what you want bring into your life.

### SET AN INTENTION

Getting clear on your intention for a daily yoga practice will help you to achieve it. Take some time to find your personal intention, and keep these three important points in mind when you language it; 1) state it in the positive, 2) be clear and concise, 3) state it in the present tense (as if it is already true).

So instead of saying 'I won't slack off' (negative statement), or 'May I enjoy my daily practice' (not in the present tense), try 'I enjoy my daily yoga practice.' This subtle shift in language helps us to embody our intention and gives us the felt experience of enjoying a daily yoga practice, which is helpful when we are in the process of creating a new habit.

### CREATE A SIMPLE RITUAL

Creating a short ritual is like giving ourselves a signal that we have decided to practice yoga. It helps us to let go of what we were engaged in previously, and to consciously move into our practice with present moment awareness. Try lighting a candle, playing some music, slowly rolling out your mat, saying a mantra, stating your intention, burning incense or essential oils or simply chanting om. You could also finish



your practice with intention and ritual too. Chanting another om, blowing out the candle, mindfully rolling up your mat, folding the blanket and putting it away. Find a ritual that resonates with you and fits into your day.

#### **MAKE IT ENJOYABLE**

Choose postures and practices that you actually enjoy doing. If we enjoy our practice there is an intrinsic reward built in to the practice itself, so we will be much more likely to actually do it. Usually there are a few practices that we know are good for us, but that we do not particularly enjoy (for me it is Salabhasana, the Locust Pose). My suggestion is to put the practice you enjoy the least in the middle, so you're starting and ending on a high note.

One great piece of advice that Ashtanga Yoga David Swenson gave is to finish your practice before you are sick of it. If we finish while we are still enjoying our practice, there is likely to be a sense of anticipation for the next practice, and we are much more likely to find ourselves on the mat if we're looking forward to it.

#### **MAKE IT A HABIT**

We are creatures of habit. It's just the way that we are wired. Habits help us to navigate the world. We would be lost without them. Whilst the nature of habit means that it can be difficult to change patterns that are not serving us (like eating junk food, watching too much TV and living stressful lives), we can also use our tendency toward habit to our advantage. We can develop a new habit by consciously choosing to act in a new way, and intentionally repeating this new behaviour over and over and over again until we're neurologically wired in a way that makes the new behaviour feel natural and automatic.

So we can develop the habit of a daily yoga practice simply by committing to a practice every day, and each

time we do so, reminding ourselves that we're taking a step closer to it becoming easy and automatic. The jury is out on how long it actually takes to establish a new habit. One study in the European Journal of Social Psychology found that it took between 18 and 254 days to develop what the researchers called 'automaticity'. So hang in there, and do not despair if it takes a few months for the motivation behind your daily practice to flow.

#### **LISTEN OUT FOR THOSE THOUGHTS**

As human beings, we have these wonderful things called thoughts. They help us to make sense of the world and they do a great job of getting us from A to B. But sometimes they pop up and undermine our most sincere efforts to live a life in accordance with our deepest heartfelt desires. The thoughts I'm talking about sound a little something like this.... 'I can't do it,' 'I'm just not that kind of person,' 'I don't really want to do yoga anyway,' 'I'm not good enough,' 'I'll do it next year.' You know the ones, right?

When these thoughts arise, invite them into your yoga practice. Sit down, close your eyes, take a few mindful breaths, and sit back and watch the way these unhelpful thoughts enter and leave your awareness.

#### **SEEK INSPIRATION**

While repetition has its benefits in a yoga practice, if the mind becomes bored, it loses its focus and the desire to practice weakens. To keep inspired in your personal yoga practice, take your focus outwards. Attend a yoga class in your area, have a private yoga session, practice with a DVD, do a 30 day yoga challenge, go to one of the many new yoga festivals, join an online yoga course, read an inspiring book, practice with a friend or join a facebook community.

Practicing yoga with my children gives me endless inspiration as they make up new animal poses every time they get on the mat (and demand I try them too). Granted, there is not a lot of pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses) when we practice together, but there is a lot of fun and novel ideas.

#### **PRACTICE RADICAL SELF LOVE AND COMPASSION**

Self love and compassion are beautiful and very personal ways to practice the yogic precept ahimsa (non-violence). Many people bully and humiliate themselves into creating change in their life, as they believe they need to discipline themselves to do so, but this doesn't actually work. A much more effective way to bring about change in our life is to be loving and compassionate to ourselves.

"Self-compassion is not the same as being easy on ourselves. It's a way of nurturing ourselves so that we can reach our full potential" says Dr Kirsten Neff, Self-compassion researcher.

If you are feeling like skipping your practice, instead of using negative and demanding language to get you on your mat, speak lovingly to yourself, like you would to a beloved child. Gently encourage yourself to step



New research is being published every day about the benefits of a regular yoga practice. These benefits include (but are not limited to) an increase in strength and flexibility, improvement in respiratory and cardiovascular function, a reduction in stress, anxiety and depression, a decrease in chronic pain, improved sleep patterns, and over all an increase in well being and quality of life<sup>2</sup>.

on your mat and remind yourself how good you will feel once you're done. After you have finished your practice, take a few moments to notice the effects on your body, breath and mind, and express gratitude to yourself for taking the time to practice yoga. As well as this being self compassionate, it also acts as a kind of reward, which provides us with motivation to continue.

If you miss a practice, don't beat yourself up about it. Speak kindly to yourself. Tell yourself it's ok to miss a practice once in awhile. In fact van Jaarsveld, Potts and Wardle, the habit researchers, found that skipping the odd day did not disrupt the habit forming process. Gently and lovingly remind yourself how great it feels to have a daily practice and that tomorrow you can step back on the mat.

#### REFERENCE

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- 2 Woodyard, Catherine. *Exploring the therapeutic effects of yoga and its ability to increase quality of life.* International Journal of Yoga, 4(2), 2011.

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