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7 Things I Learned From Practicing Ashtanga Yoga

I continue to learn from teachers and tradition, although I've also understood that some things are more personal than what is taught.

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A few years ago, I decided that I needed a project. I was itching to learn something new, something that would challenge me. It had been a few years since I had begun practicing yoga somewhat consistently, and I was enjoying the mix of vinyasa, yin, and hot yoga classes that I was taking at my local studio. But I wanted more structure and consistency so I would be able to observe my progress over time.

Enter ashtanga: a decidedly structured style of yoga comprised of a vigorous sequence of postures that are practiced in the same way, in the same order, every single time.

Thanks to the online teachings of [Richard and Mary Freeman](#), I learned the ashtanga primary series in my basement during the 2020 lockdown. The videos focus on building familiarity with each pose little by little through repetition. I can't say it was the most thrilling yoga program I've ever undertaken, but it is the one that has had the most significant long-term impact on me.

As I got into the habit of practicing more often, the predictability and repetition of the poses began to represent stability at a time in my life otherwise marked by chaos. If I could carve out a small measure of control on my mat, I found, it would go a long way toward helping me feel grounded.

I distinctly remember a moment a few days after a deeply upsetting event in which someone I knew suddenly and unexpectedly passed away. At that moment, practicing ashtanga seemed like the last thing that I had the mental and emotional strength and space for. Yet after a few days, against the overwhelming urge to stay curled up on the sofa, I decided to try. I pulled myself up, rolled out my mat, and set about practicing the series.

Amazingly, I began to feel a level of connection to myself and a clear presence in the moment that I had never felt before. Flowing through the familiar rhythm, with nothing but the sound of my breath to guide me, I was able to access my suffering and the reckoning with what had happened. A surreal sense of unbelievable gratitude washed over me as I understood that I was alive. I was there in that cramped kitchen with my mat wedged between the tiny table and the fridge, moving and breathing, existing in this tenuous state of being that we take so much for granted. I had never contemplated nor fully recognized the depth of that reality until I stood on my mat that day.

I would be lying if I said that I've begun every yoga session since that day with ecstatic ease and never had to motivate myself to practice. There has, in fact, been a lot of negotiating, dragging, and avoidance that I have sometimes given into. I mean, it's hard to be physically and mentally disciplined.

But no matter how much coaxing and cajoling is required to bring myself to the practice, I always feel better afterward.

7 Things I Learned From Practicing Ashtanga Yoga

In my experience, ashtanga is not an easy style of yoga to begin and stay with. My journey began partly because I sought more control over my yoga practice. However, all

the unexpected lessons and insights I have received along the way have reinforced the futility of my efforts for control.

Ashtanga has been something I have found to be like a mystery that reveals itself a little more every time I practice, and therefore a little more of myself is revealed to me every time as well. My relationship to it through the lessons I have learned has morphed and shifted in the years since I started. Here are some of the biggest things I've learned along the way.

1. Ashtanga is not so much about learning the poses, but what you learn about yourself from doing the poses.

The practice of ashtanga will test your limits and confront you with yourself. You will discover your strengths and weaknesses and learn to accept yourself exactly where you are in any moment.

You will come face to face with your ego and learn to keep it in check. One of the ways this happens is by trying too hard. If you push yourself too far past what is the proper expression of a pose for you at that moment, you may reach past your limits and injure yourself.



The practice of ashtanga allows you to challenge yourself and to become comfortable with what works for you.
(Photo: Counter | Getty)

I learned this the hard way by overextending myself and then eventually having to pull back and adjust when I noticed pain and irritation. Sometimes you don't even realize you're overdoing something until it starts manifesting as discomfort, at which point you're presented with a great opportunity to learn more about your body and what it needs moving forward.

It might not manifest as an immediate injury, but if you continue to practice a pose with improper form, you will feel that imbalance over time. This is true in all forms of yoga, but due to the repetitive nature of the movements, ashtanga is an especially potent way to learn this lesson. If you have improper form in your Chaturanga and are regularly practicing it the 60 times that the primary series has, it won't be long before you begin to feel it.

With practice, you learn to prioritize what your body actually needs, and you become less attached to what you think you need to do to measure up to an external standard.

2. It can help you reshape a punitive relationship to exercise.

Our contemporary exercise culture is inundated with messaging around pushing yourself to the limit. It also has a strong emphasis on image, whether that takes the shape of how you look or what you can do.

With ashtanga, the potential for injury if you push yourself too far serves an important purpose. It creates a natural barrier to overstriding in order to reach a certain ideal of performance, even if you have to experience the adverse effects of sidling up to that barrier before realizing you need to back off.

The concept I hear from a lot of teachers is to find a level of “comfortable striving” in the pose—the idea that you’re putting forth effort but not trying too hard. While it took some time for me to understand what this actually means, it has guided me to find the most nourishing shape for my body in each pose, which then allows me to access deeper and more releasing expressions over time.

The level of care and attention you must exercise to practice the series in a safe and therapeutic way has the potential to positively influence your relationship with your body. You become more focused on what feels good and what you can actually do comfortably, versus what the person on the mat next to you or in your Instagram feed is doing.

3. How you practice a pose will look different than how someone else practices it.

The way you may see an experienced practitioner move through the poses is not the only “right” way. I’ve learned that the correct way for me to experience a pose means I’m not pushing past my limits. I can somehow find the effortlessness within the effort.

As with any style of yoga, ashtanga has the potential to be therapeutic to the body and mind, but only if it is approached with an accepting and compassionate mindset.

If a pose doesn’t feel right, you don’t have to perform it the way you see it demonstrated. You can work with a teacher on an adjustment. That doesn’t mean you’re not doing the

practice correctly, it just means that you're tuned in to your body and prioritizing that over trying to appease your ego.

4. Let yourself benefit from the help of a teacher.

It's worth going to class in person every once in a while because you'll likely receive insightful feedback and adjustments on your form.

This was something I missed out on by starting my practice at home. Shortly after beginning my practice, I noticed a pinching feeling in my shoulder. I sought out the expertise of a teacher and she helped me understand that I was overloading my body with all the Chaturangas when my muscles were not strong enough yet to bear so much weight so repetitively.

My teacher recommended that I do more knees-chest-chin modifications, and the shoulder pain went away. Over time I was able to start adding back in the full Chaturangas.

Even with excellent online classes, without a trained eye helping you understand how proper form is supposed to feel in your body, it's easy to start practicing poses improperly.



Ashtanga yoga is an intensely personal practice, yet it also brings the benefits of community. (Photo: Counter | Getty)

5. Practicing with others can help shape your relationship with Ashtanga

Going to a studio where I feel comfortable and have access to fantastic teachers and familiar faces has helped me build a sense of community around my practice. This has added another level of dimension and meaning to it.

I'm currently traveling across South America, and although I am unable to stick with one studio long term, visiting studios in different countries and cities has been a great way to benefit from different teachers' perspectives.

6. You can find a way to make ashtanga sustainable for you.

Ashtanga, in the most traditional sense, requires a certain amount of dedication and adherence to routine and rules. It takes about 90 minutes to complete the primary series and the approach typically recommends practicing six days a week, except for Saturdays and during the new and full Moons.

Even though I began practicing ashtanga because I craved structure and control, it initially felt pretty overwhelming. I found myself starting to put off my practice because

of my “all or nothing” mindset. If I didn’t have enough time to practice the full series, or if it just felt too daunting that day, often I would not practice at all.

When I was honest with my teacher about this, she suggested I practice just the opening Sun Salutations and finishing sequence, which all together takes about 30 minutes. This helped me integrate the practice into my life in a more consistent way.

I’ve learned to mold the practice to fit my life rather than adhering to what tradition mandates. Others may find a lot of fulfillment in the latter—9 pm bedtimes and all! But at some point in my ashtanga journey, I realized I needed to tune out the noise of how other people think it should be done.

This was an exercise in learning to respect and appreciate what I could do and wanted to do, instead of only seeing the value in total completion in perfect accordance with the tradition. These days, I alternate my practice days with weight training and hiking, two other movement practices that bring me joy and in which I find great meaning and fulfillment. I no longer feel an inflexible attachment to how things must be with my practice, and this has created space to find a new level of enjoyment and fulfillment in it.

Some teachers insist that the series must be practiced a certain way and must be followed to a T, while others have a more relaxed approach. I’ve realized that even the “T” itself varies from teacher to teacher. I learned that it’s best to listen to and consider different perspectives, while also asking myself what feels right for me. I can learn from teachers and the tradition itself, but I’ve come to understand that the real yoga comes from practicing in a way that meets me where I am.

7. Let go of perfectionism.

While ashtanga may seem to have a serious and structured attitude around it, it really should bring you joy and fulfillment. If it starts feeling like nothing more than an obligation, maybe it’s time to rethink your approach and consider how you can bring more lightness and fun into your practice. Try to leave space for laughter and surprise, and see your practice as a time to play with movement.

I have learned that I don't need to practice in the same way every time or even all the way through the primary series. Maybe one day I feel like stopping at [Bhujapidasana](#) and spending a while playing with that movement, and then just skipping to the finishing poses instead of completing the entire series.

Or maybe I feel like devoting a lot of attention to the subtle mechanisms of my jump-backs and taking extra breaths there, leading to a slower pace than what you would follow in a led class where the teacher calls the count.

For this reason, I like Mysore (practicing at your own pace in a class environment) and home practice a lot because they give me all the freedom to linger, savor, and experiment.

For me, the practice is an ongoing experiment. What will my body and mind allow for today? Movements I've been working on for months with seemingly no progress will all of a sudden happen almost effortlessly, without any obvious explanation or change of technique. It's a mind-body conversation at its most nuanced form, and it's a pretty fascinating process to observe.

Ashtanga has the potential to be a powerful opportunity for growth because it attracts perfectionists and then shows them the futility of perfectionism. It has humbled me and has challenged me to love myself as I am. The practice has helped me through difficult times and reminded me just how fortunate I am to have this body and this breath. Above all, ashtanga has taught me that flexibility of mind is even more important than physical flexibility, and that insight has been the greatest gift of all.

About Our Contributor

Olivia James is a Colorado-based writer, an avid yoga practitioner, and solo world traveler. Having grown up in Asia, she was bitten by the travel bug at an early age and has devoted her life to experiencing the world and learning from it. She is especially interested in writing about themes related to wellness, global cultures, foreign affairs, and the outdoors. You can follow her travels on [her blog](#).

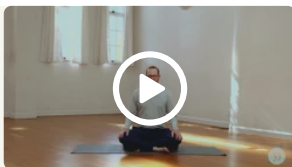


You Can Do This 15–Minute Yoga Flow Anytime, Anywhere

Ah the hour-long yoga class. It's quite luxurious, isn't it? But let's be frank—some days, it seems impossible to carve out a large chunk of time for your practice. If you ever feel this way (and who hasn't?) know this: even a few minutes of movement can make a huge difference in how you approach ... [Continued](#)

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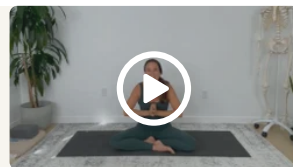
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