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Developing a home practice

Why a home practice?
Its your practice.

Home practice takes your yoga to your heart. It is your time to heal, rejuvenate, breathe, get rid of stress and get parasympathetic dominant, take a quiet moment to yourself or even share your yoga with your family.

Developing a home practice is empowering. You become responsible for your yoga.

It is also easier to adjust your practice to your day or how you are feeling. Have a stressful event that day? Breathe and meditate more. Feeling sluggish? Pick up the energy and sweat. Have an ache or pain or injury? Use some yoga therapy. In home practice you learn how to use your yoga.

And you learn how to practice for a lifetime.

As good as it is to have a guru or a teacher to guide us and progress us, sometimes their recommendation may not be best for our bodies. Especially if it is a broad recommendation meant for masses of people. These recommendations are more based on boxing something up and selling it to the masses for monetary reasons. And sometimes the recommendation may be based on the best interest of the guru or the business of yoga or something other than your best interest ... use your gut instinct! Home practice is easier to tune into your gut instinct and listen. Don't be afraid to trust your own intuition. Use your home practice to learn how to tune into your intuition.

In ashtanga we are told it is best to do a daily practice. Daily practice = 6 days per week (you get one day of rest each week), no practice on moon days (new moon and full moon) or during menstruation. So it is not really that difficult! How much practice to do each day I will address in a bit. First let's address developing the habit.

NEUROPLASTICITY

Tried establishing a home practice in the past unsuccessfully? Think you can't establish a home practice? Give it 30-40 days of effort.

This is an exciting new field of research in how our brain rewires. As it turns out our brain is quite malleable!

It used to be thought that your brains were static except during certain young critical stages of development. We now know this is not true. Your brain has the remarkable ability to re-organize pathways, create new connections and new neurons throughout our lifetime — previously we thought the brain could not generate new neural cells leaving us dumber and dumber . . . wrong,



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thank goodness :) Certain areas of our brain can regenerate neural cells, this process is called **Neurogenesis**. These new neurons that fire together wire together and create new pathways that can change habits and improve our abilities. It takes about 30–40 days for these new pathways to get established.

Your brain has the ability to move functions from one damaged area of the brain to another undamaged area, called functional plasticity. Your brain will also change shape as you learn something new — this is called structural plasticity.

The point is we have much more control over our body, mind, and brain than we realized.

Environment plays an essential role in these processes. This applies to emotional states as well; if you have a history of anxiety, your brain becomes wired for anxiety. If you develop tools to feel calm (yoga:) more of the time, those anxiety pathways are pruned away and replaced by a calm cool collected attitude.

Your brain is influenced by lifestyle, diet, exercise, attitude and emotions, sleep patterns, your level of stress many influences and you have power to choose the influences.

When we repeat a habit our brain makes new pathways, it literally rewires old habits and gives us the opportunity to establish new habits. So if you have struggled in the past with a home practice try giving it 30–40 days of effort. It takes about 30–40 days of a consistent behavior for the brain to rewire. After rewiring occurs it becomes easier to stick with new habits — although it can take up to six months for those habits to stick. Hang in there and keep practicing, it gets easier.

Tips for developing your home practice:

FULL PRACTICES 6 DAYS PER WEEK?

🕉 Intensity vs Duration

We tend to be at one of the two extremes with exercise . . . either too little or too much. There is a Goldilock's zone for exercise — we need to exercise and we need to rest. Some of the latest research on exercise points to shorter duration exercise with little bouts of intervals — the healthiest athletes are sprinters. Marathoners are not doing very well in longevity studies — not only do they have scarring on their heart — and reports of marathoners who have died of heart attacks at a young age (including a friend of mine). Also post-marathon marathoners have a high risk of illness. Clearly the data is not supporting “more is better” when it comes to exercise.

A full series everyday is about an hour to an hour and a half -- doing this 6 days per week may actually be a bit of “over training” for our bodies. Some people may wish to do that if they don't have a career or family . . . it may not be necessary though.



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Translating this to yoga — work-ins vs. work outs ;) It can be harder to do longer practices at home. This is ok, I have seen a lot of success with people do short practices at home and full practices at the studio:

- ☪ **2-3 days per week go to studio and get full practice with adjustments and progressions**
- ☪ **2-3 days per week practice at home and enjoy it ;) Softer and sweeter — and/or shorter and more intense . . .**

And on keeping a balance in our lives! Some of the latest research says staying active throughout the day with a short period of "more intense exercise" is more beneficial than sitting a desk 8 hours per day and going to the gym or yoga mat for one hour each day. One to one and half hours of exercise simply can not make up for many hours of sitting. You want to have movement all day.

Sitting is the new smoking Research on the NASA astronauts brought out a study showing people who sit for 8 hours per day have the same risk of lung cancer as smoking. Clearly moving throughout your day is a very important part of your health.

Lets talk about prana and "moving energy in your body" . . . the reason sitting is so hard on your health is that circulation is compromised when we sit for long periods. Prana flowing in your body and energy moving in your body is just a woo-woo way of saying BLOOD IS FLOWING THROUGH YOUR VEINS, LYMPH FLUID IS MOVING THROUGH YOUR LYMPHATIC VESSELS, NEURONS ARE NOT BLOCKED IN YOUR NERVES, AND HORMONES ARE SECRETING ! When you sit it is hard for the body to do these processes. One of the best ways to move prana in your body . . . stand up! When you stand up from sitting or squatting there is a minimal g-force that is applied to your body that moves these fluids through their vessels or nadis as a yogi would say. So if you have to sit at a desk for work, stand up often — drink half your body weight in ounces each day and you'll be getting up to go pee . . . These tips below will make a big impact on your health:

- ☪ Get in the habit of commuting (not only to work but to post offices, yoga, coffee shops, etc.) by foot or bike as often as possible.
- ☪ Choose steps more often. This is simple, and I notice people don't do it. I am often in stairwells that are empty . . . Or if you live in a home with steps, go up and down them often. Don't pile things at the bottom of your steps to take up the "next time" you need to go upstairs.
- ☪ Try not to sit for more than 20 minutes or so at a time! Stand up often from your desk.
- ☪ When you do have to sit, sit on the floor
- ☪ Or fidget
- ☪ Don't sit like a lady or a gentleman sit like a yogi ...
- ☪ Every 20 minutes or so get up from your desk and take a little exercise break
 - o You could do some traditional exercises like squats or lunges
 - o Qigong type movements
 - o Stretches



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Home practice carries Grace . . . do half as much and get twice the benefit :)

Time and family ... and work Most of us are taught to practice Ashtanga like we are in our brahmachary stage -- the problem is most of us come to yoga in our householder phase. Let me explain:

Phases of life -- in yoga philosophy there are stages of life:

- ॐ Brahmacharya stage – birth up through college age. This is the best time to learn ashtanga yoga! You are young, stress has not tightened you up too much yet, you build muscle easier, you heal quicker if you sprain or strain something (tendons and ligaments start to lose their blood supply around your mid-20s), and you have more time and energy. If you are in your brahmachary stage go ahead and take on a six day per week hour and a half intense practice :)
- ॐ Householder stage – mid 20s or 30s up through our mid 60s ... now we have a career, maybe a spouse, maybe children, maybe a house and a yard that needs maintained ... a family to cook for . . . during this phase we are meant to maintain the vigor, strength and flexibility we developed in our brahmachary phase. Time is less available so practices need to be shorter. The yoga texts say this is the hardest time to practice -- and even little practices will be rewarded ... hence my favorite saying about home practice ... twice the benefit for half the effort :) The Yoga Rahasya states that pranayama and breathing exercises are the most beneficial in our householder phase.
- ॐ Sanyasi stage – later in life. After we become an empty nester and If we are lucky enough to retire young, then again in your life you have another chance to devote more time to your practices. And if you are healthy you may still be able to do some of the advanced practices, however practices become more spiritual ... we go sit by the river ;) The Yoga Rahasya says practice asana up to the age of 75 . . . although there was just recently a Facebook post going around showing a 104 year old lady driving herself to her yoga class .

If you have a family and or career lets put this in perspective . . . yoga means union, union with your child or mate is yoga. And these unions are important. When you read longevity studies, the healthiest people who live the longest are those who have a “reason for being”; a purpose in their life. This purpose comes from relationships — friends, family, and romantic. Let’s keep our yoga practice in perspective.

Home practice routine options:

Pattabhi Jois used to say "sun Salutes and standing poses = no back sliding".

What to practice? Well we are Ashtangis so we have our routines ... in other forms of yoga you have to know how to sequence, it's called vinyasa krama. In ashtanga the sequencing is done for us, however we may need some advice on how you use these sequences when you don't have time



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to do it all. Some of these options are from my own experience and how I have maintained my practice over the last 20 years through different life stages, changes, good events, and challenges.

Options :

- ☪ Sun salutes and lotus flowers ... Ideally this would be 5 surya namaskar A's and 3 B's ... however in a less than perfect world where time is really tight you could do 3 A's and 3 B's ... or just 5 A's or as a last resort to just get on your mat 3 A's always include your three finishing lotus flowers and rest. Saving time for rest -- even if only 2 minutes is important. During rest is where your adrenals refresh and rebuild their fluids. If you are already busy this day (usually the reason for the short practice) then your adrenals are already pumping out cortisol to keep you going. To skip rest would only make your Adrenals work harder leading toward an adrenal dysfunction if you do this too often. Save time for rest :)
 - o The most important part of a very short practice like this is to use your breathing, moving in rhythm with your breath, and bandhas is to get into your meditative mind and calming side of your nervous system. Take your breathing and meditative mind with you! You will find your short practices very beneficial if you can do this.
- ☪ Sun salutes, standing poses, lotus flowers, and rest are a great home practice.
- ☪ I like to do an hour of practice before I do inversions, but some may be ok to add inversions with less heat -- in that case -- sun salutes, standing poses, and full closing with inversions and lotus flowers and rest.
- ☪ Sun salutes, standing poses, and half a series. But not always the same half ... for example you can split primary :
 - o One day go from Dandasana through Navasana and do full closing or lotus flowers and rest.
 - o Next day after sun salutes and maybe standing poses ... start at navasana and go though Setu bandhasana with full closing or just lotus flowers.
- ☪ A great home practice that pulls in the back bending of second series is to do Sun Salutes, standing poses, pasasana through ustrasna, full closing with inversions or just the three finishing lotus flowers and rest. Nice option to split intermediate:
 - o Pasasana through Eka pada sirsasana with closing options
 - o Next day bakasana through supta urdhva pada vajrasana or even the 7 headstands — depending on you ... with closing options.
- ☪ If you want to get in a full series but lack time you can skip the standing poses
- ☪ Or skip lots of vinyasas ...

If time is short don't be afraid to up the intensity — reduce fidgets, keep the flow, pick up and move more of your body weight — engage your body, mind, and breath. When I want a little intensity in my practice i go through all the standing poses at one to two breaths each with jumps in and out. When i do this I feel a nice cardiovascular challenge from the sun salutes through all the standing poses. And its fun :)



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Also pay attention; if you need a little nurturing, nurture yourself with your yoga practice. If you have something very stressful or emotional you are dealing with a nurturing practice may be the best practice for you. A nice nurturing practice is to use the first half of primary in this way: 3–5 very gentle sun salute A's, stepping back, use your knees or come to the floor, go to pose of a child instead of down dog. The first half of primary can be a nice nurturing practice, but skip the standing poses as standing poses are not necessarily restorative or nurturing. For the forward bends of the first half of primary, to make them nurturing, lie a blanket or pillow on your knee/s and rest your head as you do the pose breathing deep and fully. Resting your head is calming and nurturing to your nervous system.

Tune in each day, tune into what your body needs that day in your practice. Practice is not the same everyday! Some days it can be gentle, some days vigorous, some days more meditative, some days more physical. It's all good!

There are many options to make a home practice feasible. Here are few more tips to help establish the habit and re-wire your brain:

- ॐ Pick a time and make it a routine! Ideally it should be the same time every day. If you are lucky enough to make it a morning time your chances are better of actually doing it. When our time is in the evening—chitta happens (chitta is mind stuff in Sanskrit); circumstances arise throughout the day that do not allow us to get to our evening practice. If you are alternating between home practice and studio practice try to be consistent each week, i.e. m/w/f you come to the studio for 6 pm practice, t/th/sat. you practice at home in the morning. Write this schedule down! Put it on your calendar, hang it on your refrigerator . . .
 - o And better yet tell people about it. Speaking your new habits you are trying to develop is one of the better ways to make it a reality. And if your partner or child knows you want to have this time and space they may even be more supportive on helping you find that time.
- ॐ Have a pleasant space! Even if it is a little area in a room, hang some beads around or a curtain, hang some nice images around that lift you to a higher state. Diffuse some oils :) Make it a pleasant area that calls out to you.
 - o Another benefit of home practice is you can set your environment how you like it. Like it hot, turn up the heat, like it cool? Adjust the temp. Like fresh air? Crack a window
- ॐ Play music :) if it motivates you
- ॐ PLAY! Make it fun so you want to do it. And there is even more benefit in this; latest research shows those who are playful naturally are more parasympathetic dominant. So try a new pose, do something a little different that is fun.
- ॐ Switching your focus from a **physical one; I have to do this so I am healthy — to a devotional nature; practicing daily for the inner connections in a way that you feel good makes it easy to get to your mat everyday.** This is intrinsic motivation, meaning we



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have an inside calling to do our practice because we just want to. Ways to help build your intrinsic motivation are to make sure you keep your practice doable for you. Devotional practice in Sanskrit is called sadhana; which translates to "that which we can do". Keeping your practice feeling like you can do it and you are good at it will build intrinsic motivation. This means don't put a big goal on it like you have to practice an hour every day . . . Also feeling empowered through autonomy with your practice-- you are intelligent and independent enough to know what your body needs and to do that. Independence, connection, mastery . . . these elements help build intrinsic motivation. Finding the inner motivation weaves the our practices deeper into our lives helping us to remember the inner teachings of why we are doing them — love and kindness — as we operate through our days.

ॐ And weather permitting practice outside! This goes outside of traditional advice, Pattabhi Jois has said to not practice outside, but he lived in south India with bad air quality and hot hot weather. If you live in a different area, outdoor practice could be very beneficial. We have lost our connection to nature at the sacrifice of our health. Documented over and over again, the healthiest people are those who live close to nature. Being in nature instantly makes us parasympathetic dominant. The new term is "Nature Bathing". Outdoor practice does require some adjustments to your practice, you won't be able to practice as "well" as inside, balance may be off, arm balances are much harder, you may have to navigate some bugs and dirt here and there ... however I have been able to get a spot in my garden that is mostly shady the time of day I like to practice and I have managed to level it out a bit over the years. Here are some of the additional benefits to practicing outside:

- o Grounding or earthing is when our bare feet are in contact with earth -- or in contact with something that does not block earth energy from entering our body (cotton, lambskin, leather, etc.). When we are grounding there is an exchange between us and the earth, literally electrical currents from the earth go through our body that are very beneficial in our body -- they reduce inflammation, protect us from EMFs, help us sleep better, and help us feel better -- happier.
- o Do not practice in direct sunlight, but if you can find a spot of patchy shade with a little sunlight strewn through you can also get some vitamin D :)
- o Breathe in deep that fresh air, fresh air will also help you sleep better at night.
- o Being outside helps to set your circadian rhythms -- producing more melatonin at night so you sleep better and kill cancer cells at the same time ;)

Your daily practice is like your daily shower

- ॐ Miss practice one day and it's not too bad.
- ॐ Miss practice two days and you feel kinda yucky
- ॐ Miss practice three days and others notice

You hear your partner say "honey why don't you go to some yoga today?" You're more pleasant when you get your yoga ...



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And another benefit of home practice — easier to adjust around our meals! If you can do practice in a mini fasting state it is even more beneficial.

WHY WE DO PRACTICE ON AN EMPTY STOMACH

First of all having any food in your stomach makes the poses much harder to do and quite uncomfortable. Also if you have any digestive issues with the food that is in your stomach ... this would happen to produce gas . . . and as you twist or forward bend this pushes trapped air out of the body . . . One way or another ... up or downward ...

However there is also a science about having certain **periods of time each day when you fast**. Here is the research :

- ॐ When you fast your body detoxes -- **when you are not digesting you are detoxing**. This combined with the yoga poses, inversions, etc. will help to move more toxins out of your body.
 - The same organs in the body digest as detox, so if you are digesting you are not detoxing. The body gives priority to digestion, so if you are always weighing down your digestive system with food your body will not get enough detox time. We need more detox time today than we used to due to all the chemicals and pesticides in our foods and environment.
- ॐ Contrary to nutritionists advice (you will see this changing) **eating small meals all day long makes you a sugar burner and not a fat burner**. Burning sugar as fuel is problematic for a couple reasons:
 - #1 it makes you moody — or experience mood swings. You go from a sugar high to low blood sugar crash. When you burn fat as fuel you have a nice stable happy mood all day long.
 - Also burning sugar as fuel creates more free radicals (toxins) in your body than burning fat as fuel. Fat burns very clean in the body.

Periods of Fasting benefits:

- ॐ regulating your insulin sensitivity preventing diabetes
- ॐ normalizes the hunger hormone ghrelin
- ॐ **promotes human growth hormone which improves health and slows the aging process down**
- ॐ **Lowers triglycerides**
- ॐ **reduces inflammation and free radical damage**
- ॐ **Fasting has been shown to increase longevity** in animals, this is thought due to the some of the processes mentions above such as normalizing insulin levels and slowing down the aging process

Fasting is historically common–place as **it has been a part of spiritual practice for millennia**. In a fasted state we tend to more in touch with our spiritual nature.



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Modern science has confirmed there are many good reasons for fasting.

- ☪ Working — or Working In ;) in a fasted state is effective because your body actually has a preservation mechanism that protects your active muscle from wasting itself. So if you don't have sufficient fuel in your system when you exercise, you're going to break down other tissues (for example fat) but not the active muscle, i.e. the muscle being exercised. According to Ori Hofmekler, author of The Warrior Diet, you can quite literally re-design your physique when you exercise during a short period of fasting.

IF you think you can not do practice on an empty stomach you are a sugar burner . . .

- ☪ You can retrain your system -- it takes about 2 weeks of suffering to switch from a sugar burner to a fat burner -- here are a few tips:
 - Eat more fat and protein
 - Eat less carbs, grains, sugars, and processed foods
 - Gradually extend your time without food

Over time you will notice you can go longer and longer without food. Ideally if you can practice in the morning, and you don't eat after 6:00 or 7:00pm by the time you finish your practice you have had a nice long fast.

Ever notice that eating breakfast sometimes makes you hungrier? I found some information about why:

- ☪ Why Eating Breakfast Might Make You Hungrier -- The interesting aspect about eating first thing in the morning is that **it coincides with your circadian cortisol peak**, that is, the time of day when your cortisol levels rise and reach their peak telling us to GET UP! The circadian cortisol peak has an impact on your insulin secretion, such that **when you eat during this time it leads to a rapid and large insulin release, and a corresponding rapid drop in blood sugar levels, more so than when you eat at other times of the day.** If you're healthy, your blood sugar levels won't drop to a dangerously low level (such as can occur with hypoglycemia) but they can drop low enough to make you feel hungry.

I teach Ashtanga Yoga all around the world, and I will say, developing a daily practice and a home practice is a challenge for everyone no matter what part of the world you live in ... America, Europe, South America, Africa, Asia ... it can be a challenge for us all to establish this habit, but those of us who do reap many health benefits. And remember once the habit is established it is easy to maintain ... you miss it if you don't do it. Your body will ask you for it, so will your mind ... so go ahead and practice at home 🏠