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Benefits of developing a home practice

Why a home practice?

It's 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, 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 something other than your best interest ... use your gut instinct! Don't be afraid to trust your own intuition.

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

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 rewrites. As it turns out our brain is quite malleable!

It used to be thought that your brain was static except during young critical development stages. 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 — Functional plasticity is your



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brain's ability to move functions from one damaged area of the brain to another undamaged area — structural plasticity is the ability of your brain to change shape as you learn something new.

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

We used to think the human brain could not generate new neural cells, cells would die and no new cells could generate leaving us dumber and dumber . . . guess what?! It has been proven that certain areas of your brain can regenerate new cells — called neurogenesis — and create new neural pathways.

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. Use it or lose it has a good connotation here.

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.

As neurologist [David Perlmutter](#) explains:

"We interact with our genome every moment of our lives, and we can do so very, very positively."

When we repeat a habit our brain makes new pathways, it literally rewrites 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 retire. After rewiring occurs it becomes effortless to develop new habits as your brain sets new neural pathways.

Tips for developing your home practice:

First of all, 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.

FULL PRACTICES 6 DAYS PER WEEK?

Intensity vs Duration

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, but it takes many years to build up to 6 day per week full intense practices -- and it may not be necessary.

Some of the latest research says staying active throughout the day with a short period of "more intense exercise" is more beneficial than sitting at a desk 8 hours per day and going to the gym or



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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

- 36 Try not to sit for more than 20 minutes or so at a time!
- 36 Get in the habit of commuting by foot or bike as often as possible.
- 36 Choose steps more often.
- 36 When you do have to sit, sit on the floor
- 36 Or fidget
- 36 Don't sit like a lady or a gentleman sit like a yogi ...
- 36 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

Back to yoga and your daily practice.

I have seen a lot of success with people do short practices at home and full practices at the studio:

- 36 **2-3 days per week go to studio and get full practice with adjustments and progressions**
- 36 **2-3 days per week practice at home and enjoy it ;) -- softer and sweeter (and/or shorter!)**

Time and family ... and work

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

- 36 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 have more time and energy. If you are in your brahmacharya stage go ahead and take in a six day per week hour and a half intense practice :)
- 36 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 ... during this phase we are meant to maintain the vigor, strength and flexibility we developed in our brahmacharya 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 :)
- 36 Sanyasi stage – later in life. Practices become more spiritual ... we go sit by the river ;)

Most of us are taught to practice like we are in our brahmacharya stage -- the problem is most of us come to yoga in our householder phase. If you have a family and or career lets put this in perspective. First of all yoga means union, union with your child or mate is yoga.

Home practice routine options:

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



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Options :

- 36 Sun salutes and lotus flowers
- 36 Sun salutes standing poses and lotus flowers.
- 36 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.
- 36 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
 - 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.
- 36 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.
- 36 If you want to get in a full series but lack time you can skip the standing poses
- 36 Or skip lots of vinyasas ...

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:

- 36 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.
- 36 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
- 36 Play music :) if it motivates you
- 36 Switching your focus from a **physical one to a devotional nature** – practicing daily for the inner connection makes it much easier to get to your mat than going there for the physical work out (yoga is a work in :) This weaves the inner-yoga deeper into our lives where our spirituality is not so compartmentalized -- which can be tricky but “fertilizing”.



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35 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.

36 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

- 36 Miss practice one day and it's not too bad.
- 36 Miss practice two days and you feel kinda yucky
- 36 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 ...

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 ...



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

- 36 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.
 - o The same organs in the body digest as detox, so if you are digesting you are not detoxing. We need more detox time today than we used to due to all the chemicals and pesticides in our foods and environment.
- 36 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**. Your system is always bogged down with food . . .

Fasting Helps to control your body weight by:

- 36 regulating your insulin sensitivity preventing diabetes
- 36 normalizes the hunger hormone ghrelin
- 36 **promotes human grown hormone which improves health and slows the aging process down**
- 36 **Lowers triglycerides**
- 36 **reduces inflammation and free radical damage**
- 36 **Fasting has been shown to increase longevity** in animals, this is thought due to the some of the processes mentioned 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.

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

- 36 Working out (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 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 using a combination of under-eating and exercise.

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

- 36 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**.



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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.

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:

- o Eat more fat and protein
- o Eat less carbs, grains, sugars, and processed foods
- o 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.

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 🌱