

# All Roads Lead to the yoga mat

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Flowing water never stagnates just as revolving doors never rust. We too function in exactly the same way; the less we move our bodies the more stagnant we become, not just physically but also mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Yoga practice, essentially, is for everybody; whether you're starting a practice for health reasons, as a complementary therapy or managing an injury, or if you're unhappy and plugged into a life that doesn't truly fulfil you; whether you yearn for a sacred space and community to feel connected again or whether you're working in an office all day and need to move your body. Whatever the reason for starting, yoga in essence has the capacity to reach every part of our existence. Yoga has its own way of making a significant change not only

to how we see our life and others, but also on the person who is seeing. It's like accepting a rose without wanting the leaves, yoga is a whole package and reaches into us far more widely than we initially anticipate or could even conceive.

#### AND SO THE JOURNEY BEGINS

My first experience of the physical practice of asana was a somewhat unconventional lifeline although I'm sure quite common. It was back in 1998 and I travelled to Australia from London for a year-long exploration as my rite of passage into ultimately finding myself, hoping to gain clarity on my life's purpose and my path ahead. I left all I had known and all those I loved the most. I felt as if I had been pulled out from the roots and re-planted back into unknown soil.

After reading yoga philosophy since my early teens I decided to give the yoga postures a try. Yoga schools were certainly not as prolific as they are today and most classes were gentle in nature, held in cold church halls with the offering of only a couple of classes a week. I was at a friend's house and she suggested I practice with her as she pushed her yoga video into the VCR. It was an hour long and at the end of the practice I seemed to effortlessly absorb energy of peace and stillness in a way that I hadn't experienced before. I have come to understand that the essence of Savasana (corpse pose) has always been there, waiting for me to be still and quiet long enough to be able to receive it.

Something shifted for me that day and I longed to receive that energy



of bliss as much as I could. What surprised me the most was how the practice began to infiltrate and weave its way into so many areas of my life as well as into who I was becoming. It also sent me on a quest to find the answers to understand more completely what was happening to me and why these changes were occurring. As a result, I craved the practice even more. I set off on my path to find out exactly what that was and, some 17 years down the road, here I am sharing the very teachings that changed my life, sharing them with others in the hope of providing the space to receive the same gifts I too found that day on my mat.

**BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME**

The powerful practice of yoga has such a profound effect on most students I teach and often what

draws an inquisitive student to yoga isn't always the same reason that sustains the practice in the long term. With an ever increasing number of students practicing today, what really does attract a student to the ancient practice of yoga and exactly what sustains their practice?

In order to cater for the growing number of yoga students and teachers, more and more yoga schools are opening their doors across Australia every year, making it undeniable that the growth of yoga has increased significantly since yoga first arrived on our shores back in the 1950s. This includes the addition of yoga teachers within gyms, health clubs, retreat centres, corporate buildings and even in the lounges of international airports. The original yoga students of Australia in

the 1950s tended to be more health conscious, leaning towards an organic wholefoods lifestyle, naturally fit and flexible and spiritually drawn to living the ancient teachings as a guide for conscious living and who were in essence devotees of the eight limbs of yoga with strong spiritual undertones.

Today, yoga students are attracted to the practice for a myriad of reasons partly due to the increased volume of well-respected, educated research now available coupled with the changes that many people are seeing amongst the devoted students. As a result, committing to a yoga practice is included as a complementary health modality maintaining health as well as disease and injury prevention. Students aim to gain flexibility, support rehabilitation post injury, and reduce symptoms of illnesses

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such as diabetes, as well as finding a space to simply find some stillness and peace. It is even more common now to see elite athletes practicing yoga as an adjunct to their existing sport as well as health conscious students who may also be cyclists, runners, swimmers, dancers or triathletes, to name but a few.

### THE FRUITS OF THE PRACTICE

One thing is for sure, whatever the magnet is that attracts the student to yoga, something much deeper sustains the continuous, persistent return to the mat. Whether intended or not, the gifts of the practice begin to unfold and the subtle changes begin. In our modern world of the over-connection with social media and under-connection with self and others, the mat becomes a place of solace, and a time to plug back into a world of richness that is beyond our initial comprehension. The yoga mat becomes our own experience of Narnia, and an opportunity of tapping into a world rich in spirituality and vitality as we reconnect to what matters and who in fact matters the most.

In time, the yoga mat becomes the sacred space that we crave; we too begin to crave a teacher that can help guide us as we all aim to find healthy and meaningful ways of managing the pressures of day to day living.

Through the practice, a deeper sense of awareness and sensitivity to all of life begins and we begin to feel genuinely more awake, the light has been turned on and we are seeing with new eyes a greater sense of living consciousness. This allows us to live our lives with a greater

level of awareness and realisation of the identity of the true self and to courageously live in the rawness of life. Our practice then allows us to intentionally manage life supported and underpinned by a framework of philosophy in a challenging, demanding and fast changing world and confirms that the teachings of old have a place in our lives more now than ever before.

### LET THE INNER ALIGNMENT BEGIN

Clarity and realignment become more apparent and the road becomes clearer, perhaps leading to a change in our profession or a new career path, a big move to another state or country, reviewing and changing our nutritional choices, ending an unfulfilling relationship or embracing a new, more loving one. A connection and an alignment shifts as we become more in tune with our highest purpose; the whispers from our inner guidance become louder until we respond with proactive action towards our highest purpose.

Psychophysiological changes begin to become more obvious, some of which include:-

- the mind becomes clearer, more focused and we mentally manage our day to day with greater ease.
- improved quality of sleep which tends to lead to healthier nutritional choices which further leads to a greater experience of aliveness and vitality.
- immunity improves with an increased ability to ward off the common cold more than before.
- you start to cope with stress more effectively as the nervous and endocrine systems return to homeostasis and the biochemical reactions to stressful situations aren't so invasive.
- our digestive system communicates more clearly what we need and the nourishment that provide us with vitality, versus foods that are heavier and energetically less vital.

- our relationships improve and a richness in the quality of the relationships develops as we begin to favour healthy, loving, nurturing relationships while the more unhealthy, negative, unfulfilling relationships fall away.
- cardiorespiratory fitness improves, leading to the decline of health conditions that are either caused by or exacerbated by a sedentary lifestyle.

### LIVING SELF REALISED

The practice of asana shows the way of moving between the layers of existence and we start to connect and realise who we really are; recognising that the true self is beyond our physical form, we enter the state of living in a conscious liberated way. In yoga this is known as the jivanmukta and we enter into the realm of living a conscious life. We embark on a journey of rich spirituality with the recognition that all we are seeking is within; yoga practices take us much deeper with the understanding that asana is the opportunity of continuously moving energy, hence the changes of emotions and memories that rise to the surface when we practice.

### BE THE CHANGE – YOGA AND HEALTH IS CONTAGIOUS

When we commit to a yoga practice, it becomes clear to not only ourselves but also to those closest to us that significant changes at a deeper level are beginning to unfold. By the very nature of the subtle changes initiated by the practice, we are often unable to articulate the specific step by step changes that are evolving each day; however we do know that a positive shift at every level of being is transpiring. This too inspires others to seek that same.

To allow these changes to take place in the long term, it is essential that we surround ourselves with individuals who have a positive influence on our lives so that we too can be a positive change for others. Increasingly, scientific papers on social networking



research suggest that when one person stops smoking, it influences people at four degrees of separation, clearly highlighting the power of being the change that you wish to see in the world, and then taking that change out into the world. Our behaviour not only has a positive influence on our own lives but also inspires those around us.

The richness of life that comes from this ancient practice becomes the magnet that draws us back, time and time again to our mat and to our sacred space, reminding us that all we ever need can only ever come from within. The mat becomes the mirror that reflects back to us where we are in the present moment, and provides the space for contemplation and reveals the truth of where we are on our path.

#### YOGA AS A COMMUNITY

The irony of our modern world is that our most common way to connect with others in order to feel less alone is to paradoxically sit alone and connect with others through social media and watch others live out their lives on TV. Our tribal community is dispersed and disconnected and yoga has helped to create community and a sense of belonging. Our sociology has changed and so has our sense of community where we most commonly don't know who our neighbours are, or what's happening let alone connect within our community. American Professor, writer, speaker, anthropologist, and mythologist Joseph Campbell says that we're caught up in our day to day worlds and that "our life has become so economic and practical in its orientation that as you get older, the claims of the moment upon you are so great you hardly know where the hell you are, or what it is you intended". In other words, we get lost, and we need to find an anchor through yoga that can steer our ship back home, that ship being the vessel of the self!

And so, as our practice continues to blossom, we in turn do the same and as the road map ahead becomes clearer, true gifts of the practice flourish. The seeds of the ancient teachings reach out like the roots of the redwood trees, not down, but out, and towards one another, reaching for connection and satsang once more.

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