

OM IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

A short guide to taking yoga to the next level—whether you live life in the lotus position or don't know a Savasana from a Sun Salutation

BY RACHEL STURTZ

BACK IN 1974, yoga was still considered so offbeat in the United States that a “rather novel” lunch-hour class—30 minutes of poses, followed by snacks like raw carrots—made the pages of *The New York Times*. “Tense? Fidgety? Irritable?” the article asked, with just the slightest edge of snark, before quoting a few office types about the stress relief they got from the practice.

How things have changed. Yoga has long since outgrown its eccentric, peaceniky rap and gone on to settle, comfortably cross-legged, in the mainstream. Between 2001 and 2011, the number of converts in this country jumped from a reported 4 million to 20 million. And the list of benefits credited to the practice—decreased stress and depression, increased strength and flexibility—only seems to grow, confirmed by study after study. Some of us may never be ready to om in unison with our eyes closed, but now as ever, there's every good reason to explore what might happen on the mat.

LESSON | 1

MEET YOUR MAT(CH)

When it comes to variety, yoga has become downright Seussian. (Do it naked or on a log, in a hammock or with your dog!) But most classes still draw upon one of the traditional disciplines. Depending on your goal—building strength, say, or achieving inner peace—some styles might be a better fit than others. Our cheat sheet is based on introductory classes.

HATHA**DIFFICULTY •**

All modern forms of yoga stem from Hatha, the practice of physical asanas, or poses. Basic moves, a slow pace, and simple breathing make this class Yoga 101—perfect for beginners who don't know from a Downward Facing Dog.

WHAT TO EXPECT Feeling, at the end of class, like you just took a two-hour nap

IYENGAR**DIFFICULTY ••**

Perfectionists apply here. Yogi B.K.S. Iyengar created this meticulous style, which focuses on exact positioning and uses props such as blocks to help students refine their alignment and hold poses for an extended period of time.

WHAT TO EXPECT Having your form scrutinized by the instructor and learning how to make minute adjustments to improve it

**INJURY
REHABILITATION****RELAXATION****POSTURE****STRENGTH****BIKRAM****DIFFICULTY •••**

Bikram Choudhury's 26 postures (done in 105-degree heat) supposedly stretch every muscle and ligament. Bring a water bottle and keep in mind that some teachers disagree with Choudhury's push-through-the-pain ethos.

WHAT TO EXPECT A Jackson Pollock-like sweat-spattered mess on your yoga mat

VINYASA**DIFFICULTY ••••**

This heart-pounding discipline centers on Sun Salutations, but postures flow at a challenging pace at the whim of the teacher. (Power yoga, its vigorous cousin, amps up the sweat and strength-training.)

WHAT TO EXPECT Shaking like a Chihuahua during difficult poses

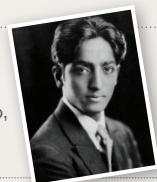
**FROM ASANA
TO MADONNA**

A hyper-abridged version of yoga's evolution (with stops in ancient India and the Lululemon fitting room)



• **2ND CENTURY B.C.** Patanjali (a pen name for one or more authors) writes the Yoga Sutras, outlining Ashtanga, practices for a meaningful life.

• **1930s** Hollywood and the literati get hooked: Yogi Bishnu Krishnamurti turns on Greta Garbo, Cecil B. DeMille, Aldous Huxley, and other celebs of the day.



• **1893** Swami Vivekananda kicks off the Progressive Era and introduces Hinduism and yoga to the United States with a speech at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago.



• **1947** Latvia-born, Bombay-trained yogini Indra Devi popularizes her gentle, feminine style of yoga.

NATALIA ROSENFELD (PATANJALI SCULPTURE); COURTESY OF GETTY IMAGES (JIDDU KRISHNAMURTI); COURTESY OF INDRA DEVI FOUNDATION (INDRA DEVI); COURTESY OF INTEGRAL YOGA ARCHIVES (SRI SWAMI SATCHIDANANDA); BRYAN GARDNER (PANTS); HARRY BATES (ILLUSTRATION)

BEGINNING

LESSON | 2

MAKE THE KARMA CONNECTION

Most of us are more familiar with the physical, pretzel-twisting side of yoga than we are with the spiritual one. But practicing the principles of Ashtanga can help ensure that the peaceful vibes accrued in class don't evaporate the minute you leave.

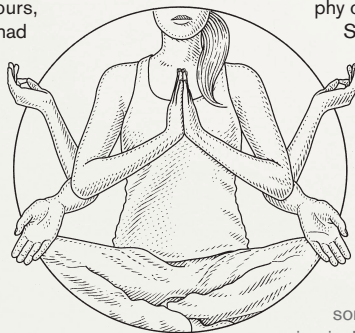
SANSKRIT FOR "CHILL OUT"?

Here's how to apply four of yoga's fundamental tenets to a stressful scenario many of us are familiar with: the packed yoga class

DAYA Compassion

"Without daya," says New York-based yoga instructor Tara Stiles, "you're subject to becoming an insecure egomaniac with no friends." (Not to put too fine a point on it.)

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE Channel daya to resist glaring at the clueless latecomer who, while unrolling her mat an inch from yours, stomps on your hand. Maybe she had a worse day than you did (sick kid, evil boss); an empathetic smile could do you both some good.



KSHAMA Patience

"Nothing fantastic, amazing, wonderful, or awe-inspiring happens quickly," Stiles says. "Keep doing the work."

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE Kshama is the concept to keep in mind when the yogini in front of you squares her Michelle Obama-esque arms and kicks up into a perfect headstand. Your own progress might be a little slow, but doing the work (inching closer to liftoff from Dolphin pose) helps keep the focus on improvement.

SATYA Truthfulness

"Be true to yourself and choose to make or break your own rules," Stiles says. ("Except for traffic lights—you'll want to follow those.")

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE Take solace in satya when a neighbor gives your blocks a dismissive glance and then recounts her guru's philosophy of not relying on aids. Hum Frank Sinatra's "My Way" and remember there's no need to modify your practice to accommodate a judgy know-it-all.

AHISMA Non-injury

"Don't push yourself too hard," Stiles says. "If you can't do something, in yoga or in life, straining isn't going to make it happen."

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE Call on ahisma when the teacher tells the class to go into Fish pose and you feel a nerve in your back begin to pinch as you lift into the chest opener. Instead of worrying about how you might appear to others, focus on being kind to yourself and ever so gently ease out of the pose.

PREACH WHAT YOU PRACTICE

Those who enjoy the restorative power of yoga know how important it can be. These organizations extend that healing to people who might need it for more than just a post-work unwind.

OFF THE MAT, INTO THE WORLD

empowers yogis to make change, whether it's by bringing Hatha to at-risk L.A. youth or raising funds to aid sex-trafficking victims in India. offthematintotheworld.org

GIVE BACK YOGA FOUNDATION

funds instructors who bring yoga to underserved segments of their own communities. givebackyoga.org

SOLYOGA

hosts a small annual trip to Nicaragua that's part dream vacation, part outreach. This year, travelers helped build a school and practiced yoga with families that had recently been relocated from their homes. solyogatrips.com



- **1969** Sri Swami Satchidananda, founder of Integral Yoga, gives the opening address at Woodstock.



- **2003** "Doggie yoga" comes to New York City. (Down Dog, at long last, is perfected.)

- **2004** Madonna reveals her newly sculpted yoga body on stage during her Re-Invention Tour. (Talk about striking a pose.)

1940

1950

1960

1970

1980

1990

2000

2010

PRESENT

- **1990s** Beryl Bender Birch, Bryan Kest, and Baron Baptiste all plug forms of power yoga.



- **1998** Lululemon is founded. Spending \$100 on spandex suddenly seems to make sense.

- **2008** Aerial yoga takes hold in the U.S., jump-starting the do-yoga-on-unstable-surfaces (think slackline, paddleboard, Rollerblades) trend.



LESSON | 3

TRICK OUT YOUR BAG

Technically, the only class requirements are stillness of mind and an attempt at good form. But with the right gear and garb, the journey to enlightenment can be a whole lot more fun.

1. HOOD AND PLENTY Terry merino wool makes the Icebreaker Women's Crush Hood a toastier take on the typical hoodie. \$150, icebreaker.com

2. ADDED PERK Recycled coffee grounds in the wicking fabric of the Moving Comfort Urban Gym Tank naturally absorb odor. (We'll take the scent of Italian roast over BO any day.) \$52, movingcomfort.com

3. PURE AND SIMPLE The CamelBak Water.org Groove uses a sustainable, plant-based filter to clean up the faucet's act. And for every bottle, \$10 goes to Water.org's efforts to bring safe water to developing nations. \$25, camelbak.com

4. HANDS ON The beveled edges of the Manduka Recycled Foam Block, made from 50 percent recycled EVA foam, are gentle on the palms. \$16, manduka.com

5. HEAVY DUTY JadeYoga makes its Elite mat from thick natural rubber, which has less grip and more "give" than other varieties. For every Elite mat sold, JadeYoga plants a tree in India through its partnership with Trees for the Future. \$105, jadeyoga.com

6. CARRY ON Hand-stitched by Fair Trade artisans in northern Thailand, the Gaiam Embroidered Yoga Mat Bag features colors and patterns that vary from item to item. \$46, gaiam.com

7. HOW FITTING The Anue Spree Capri by New Balance, made of 88 percent recycled polyester, has non-scratchy seams and a waistband that puts an end to stomach strangling. \$60, newbalance.com

8. SECURITY BLANKET Set over a mat, the Kulae Yoga Mat Towel can prevent slips—and put some distance between you and the gym's questionably hygienic pad. It's antibacterial and recyclable. \$36, kulae.com

9. WITHIN REACH Get closer to your toes (and support pesticide-free fabric) with the Wai Lana Green Organic Cotton Yoga Strap. \$11, wailana.com

FLEECE OFFERING

When the "baa code" on the tag is entered online, the wool is traced back to the exact sheep farm whence it came.



iPad Extra
Strala Yoga founder Tara Stiles names her favorite books on the practice.

PHOTOS BY BRYAN GARDNER, STYLING BY ANDRIANA VERDI