

# THE DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY OF ASANA

## - A GUIDE TO GETTING YOGA OFF THE MAT



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# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ASANA - GETTING YOGA “OFF THE MAT” - FOR EXPERIENCED YOGIS AND TEACHERS

## Introduction

This short book will help you get yoga off your mat and into your daily life. It will also help you make your practice more meaningful (according to your own values). It may seem critical of yoga at times, but please trust I am not “kicking your puppy” and it comes from a love of what yoga can be.

I was originally going to call this book *Making Yoga Less Fucking Pointless*, but my mentor Paul Linden suggested a more constructive title, and, for once, I listened to him. I wanted to expand our psychological scope of yoga and deepen our experience of the asanas.

It is for anyone with any mat-based practice, not just yoga; it can be martial arts, dance, anything. I originally worked out many of its principles in aikido, and have shared them with dancers too, who applied them in her own way. I talk explicitly here about yoga as one of the most popular body-mind disciplines, but the principles apply to any art.

These principles are the nuts and bolts of an innovative Western approach to yoga. They will make your asana more useful, deepen your practice, and help you apply your practice to the rest of your life. These are pragmatic tools for enhancing how your personal practice impacts what you really care about.

Many of these techniques are designed for experienced yogis and teachers. If you’re a beginner, you’ll still get something from them, but my main audience here is experienced practitioners.

An experienced Scottish yogi I know who does Yoga for Cancer, says, “this approach to yoga has transformed my yoga teaching practice.

Nowadays, everyone, including me, leaves my classes with a clear sense of how to apply yoga to their lives in a very practical and straightforward way. My practice has changed to the point that I could not go back even if I wanted to.”

Vidyadasa Griffiths, another senior yoga teacher, says, “normal yoga seems two-dimensional now.” And Karin, a Dutch teacher, says, “EYP has added a layer to my classes which enables students to explore their posture practice in a deeper way without demanding specific spiritual beliefs, cultural paraphernalia, dogma, or philosophical complexity. It’s simple, practical, pragmatic. It gives people the opportunity to explore meaning and change their lives on the mat, helps me make my class more interactive and relevant to my students’ lives, and improves my relationship with my students.”

## Getting Critical

Twenty years ago, I walked into a yoga studio for the first time. The class was about stretching. I felt relaxed after, but I didn’t see what else I could get from yoga. I was like “okay, well, health, that’s good....and?” At the time, I wasn’t living a healthy lifestyle. I thought that yoga was, yes, kind of healthy lite gymnastics, but I didn’t get what the big benefit was.

The yoga scene was changing a lot back then. Yoga was starting to become commercial: body-beautiful Instagram yoga hadn’t really started yet though, but when it did I wasn’t a fan! Eventually I got very critical of yoga, and kept asking what was the point? I also wondered, “well, just how healthy do you need to be?” By the time I’d gotten my own health together, I knew that health was important, but I also knew that it had to be part of something more.

Modern materialist-middle-class yoga is often neurotically obsessed with this healthiness. And its advertising promotes body-image tyranny. Just google “*Yoga Journal*” or “*Yoga Magazine*”. You’ll be inundated by

images of young skinny white women. These images made me critical of yoga. And I saw people doing handstands and I asked why are people doing handstands? Who cares? How does that change your life?

Rock-star international yoga teacher Eric Paskel says, “yoga is not about tightening your arse. It’s about getting your head out your arse.” That I like.

At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter if you can stand on your head. And sticking patchouli-scented feathers up your arse doesn’t make you an Eastern chicken. If flexibility made you enlightened, then Chinese gymnasts would be the most spiritual human beings in the world. But I don’t see a correlation between someone’s flexibility and how together they are in their life, how kind they are, or how they treat their kids or their colleagues. This disconnect made me very critical of this false pairing of flexibility and spirituality. And eventually I thought, “rather than being critical, why not put something constructive out there?”

## **Why Yoga?**

Well, first there’s the fitness side of yoga, and that’s completely valid. Nothing wrong with that, and it is limited. And there’s also the spiritual side of yoga. We might think of this as the Eastern, exotic side. And that’s completely valid too of course (I’m a Buddhist myself).

The practice I’m going to describe shortly is mindfulness-based, and for me a “yoga” practice without this at least is just exercise. This idea is of course Eastern. I have however noticed that very Eastern-styled approaches (styled being the key word here) are inaccessible to many people, and can also lead to falseness, when people pretend to be someone they’re not.

The first time I noticed this falseness was in a yoga studio in Moscow. There were loads of Russians sitting around, using Sanskrit words, playing sitars, wearing Indian clothes, and eating Indian food. It seemed

silly to me. Then I realised it was no sillier than if it had been English or American people doing the same thing. It was a kind of faux-spiritual party. Each to their own of course, and it didn't feel authentic. Ironically I would say that's a barrier to real spirituality!

I realised that there was much more to life than just health, and much more than yet another green smoothie with a pretentious name.

### **But what *is* yoga?!!**

Who knows eh?! Who gets to say anybody agrees! For me, if it's awareness-based, then it's yoga. And for me, exercise yoga is like "yoga" in inverted commas. People get into wars about this, and while yoga is many things, it is not ANYTHING. Anymore than a chicken or a spoon is anything, despite these concepts being loosely defined. Can we agree that a chicken is not a spoon? Great, then yoga is not (just) fitness.

Some people say to me, "You're not a yoga teacher!", and I reply, "no, I'm not. I'm an embodiment teacher who works with yoga and has done for 25 years..." I help yoga teachers, business people, coaches, and others create practices that matter. I step away from the obsession with well-being, from athleticism, and from technical neurosis. I just walk away from technical conversations about the "right" practice.

Instead, I often begin Embodied Yoga Principles [EYP] classes by asking: "what do you care about?"

People say, their work, or their kids...Politics...Friendships...sex.

And I say, "okay, let's do a yoga that matters for that. Let's do a yoga which is in keeping with your actual values." Nobody says "getting really bendy"!

This kind of yoga isn't about telling people what to do. This yoga is

about constructively asking, “what do you really care about? Let’s see if we can get that involved on the mat and then take the yoga off the mat to what you really care about. Yeah?”

Senior UK yoga teacher Gary Carter also begins his yoga workshops this way. He says, “what have you come for? What are you here for?”

For example: I was in a yoga class yesterday, and I wanted to relax. I wanted a mindful break from my day, and the teacher was doing an intense traditional Iyengar practice. And I realised it wasn’t what I needed right now. I could take breaks, but it wasn’t aligned with what I wanted.

EYP is about clarifying: what do you want to get from yoga?

## Dō vs Jutsu

One key tension that helps make yoga practical off the mat is the tension between nuts-and-bolts technique and philosophical path. I like to explain this tension using the martial arts terms “dō” and “jutsu.” These are the two essential elements of a martial art, or of any philosophical-and-practical movement practice.

“Jutsu (術),” means “*technique*” or “*method*” in Japanese. Aiki Jujutsu, jujutsu, and kenjutsu are *techniques*. They are combat tools. “Dō (道)” on the other hand, means “*path*” or “*way*.” Aikidō, kendō, and judō are paths for personal growth. They are the art of personal development.

Technique is seductive. People get caught in technique. But keeping the emphasis on the Dō is the key to these Japanese arts. So are you practicing yoga jutsu, or are you practicing Yoga Dō?

Are you doing the handstand because it’s a cool technique with practical utility (it might get external praise and attention perhaps)? Or are you doing the handstand to reveal and develop yourself - to explore fear,

or investigate how you handle challenges, or whatever is going on with you? How much of a dō and how much of a jutsu is your practice?

Yoga can have a modest jutsu aim, like getting fit, and there is the “gateway drug” theory that people can start there and then go deeper. There’s many approaches to yoga that I think are limited, but that lead to more profound practices. These limited approaches are however like using a Michelangelo as a doorstop. But they can still attract people and make them choose to go further.

I started aikidō because I was a criminal and wanted to defend my business interests using physical force. I needed it as a practical tool. But the structure of aikidō created a gateway into a deeper practice for me.

With the jutsu approach to yoga, we run the risk of sacrificing something great for something small. And while there is value to the gateway drug theory, I also think there are limits to just how limited you can get before it’s just utter bullshit, and it becomes a travesty.

### **Self-deception**

I’d particularly like to call bullshit on self-deception. Often, there’s a thin spiritual veneer over a practice. For example, I was recently listening to a teacher talking about hidden motives on a podcast. But I think these second motives often aren’t actually very hidden. They are, “why are you really doing your practice?” And it’s hard to be honest with ourselves. So a question we can ask ourselves is, “if I were doing this practice for self-development, or for spirituality, or for whatever, what would it really look like? Would I really be worrying so much about the leggings I’m wearing?” for example.

Sometimes people are more honest about their motives. A woman in Moscow once said to me, “you know what? I just do yoga to be skinny because I want to be attractive to find a husband.” (That’s not an unusual thing to say in Moscow). I said, “okay, well, that’s not really



the yoga I do, but if you want, you can be in my class and I can work with that.” I do work with what makes people genuinely attractive: self-love and confidence from the inside out. That work opened her up into something deeper, so in the end, I was able to work with her easily, because she was honest. My class likely wasn’t the best “fit” though!

It’s harder to work with someone who says their motivation is something much deeper, but actually it isn’t, and their behaviour shows that it isn’t. This is not just deceptive, but also self-deceptive. I still take a stand against this kind of deception. You can ask yourself: “what is the aim of yoga generally, or of my own yoga practice? How might I be kidding myself?” Because the ego takes over whatever is being done and turns it into self-aggrandisement.

## Containers and transfer

The challenge in making any art practical is the tension between “container” and “transfer.”

A “container” is what makes a practice, that particular practice, and not just life! It’s the rules, the language, and the rituals. It’s the social structure unique to that practice. It’s also the elements you choose to take away from life (like, for instance, talking or sex), in order to focus on the practice. A practice is a simplified safe space where you can practice your dō without real-world consequences. For example, if you mess up in a martial arts dojo, you might get hit, but you’re not going to get killed. You might get a bump on the head at worst. A practice takes real-world danger and real-world variables out of the equation so you can focus on your path.

Yoga is beautiful because it’s pointless. By making this practice physically, financially, and socially as safe (non-consequential) as possible, we reduce some of the psychological, emotional, and existential risks. We can build trust, we can work on ourselves, we can get things wrong, and





we can play with things. Ethics matter for yoga teachers: we make our classes safe and predictable. Even with details like punctuality. Because clear, consistent boundaries create a clear, consistent container.

Strongly-boundaried containers are necessary for safety and consistency. For safety, because your real life matters too much; and for consistency, because real life is too random for truly practicing stuff. The container keeps you in the sweet learning spot, instead of letting you get overwhelmed or bored.

A good yoga teacher provides you with a strongly-contained sweet spot that's not necessarily available in real life. Because, for example, you can't ask your kids to be 20% less annoying just because you want to work on an optimal point for your breathing technique.

A container also simplifies life by providing you with dedicated expert feedback on your practice. But the danger of a container is that it can simplify life too much, becoming too different from reality. Then you can't transfer the principles back to your daily life. There's the rub, eh!

An example of an area where embodied practice principles often don't transfer back into daily life is speech, which is not generally part of yoga or martial arts. Everyone's practicing alone on their own mat. Social skills are removed from the container for safety and for simplicity, and they might not transfer back into how we communicate and socialise verbally. Yet we spend most of our lives, both professionally and privately, communicating with other humans.

Principles don't automatically transfer back, even though we might wish they did.

In aikidō we have "six-dan arseholes;" people who are sixth-degree black belts, and yet who are arseholes. They're alcoholics, or they're hitting their kids, or they're a nightmare bully boss or total wimp employee. The principles haven't transferred across for them. They haven't generalised their practice.

And it's the same with yoga. There are plenty of advanced yogis who are flexible, strong, and skinny, but the principles aren't transferring back for them either, to make them mentally flexible, ethically strong or in good shape financially!

A few years ago I started spending more time in the yoga community beyond the local classes I'd attended for years, and I was shocked by the behaviour I saw. Even though yoga presents itself as a discipline of social benevolence, I've been treated far worse at yoga festivals than at martial arts camps or dance events. Actually even at fitness or business events which didn't pretend to be personal growth paths. The yoga world shocked me with the rudeness I encountered there and some of the financial and email ethics which frankly would not be tolerated in other domains. Have you had experiences like this? If so, what does this say about this path to growth?

## State-dependent learning

Simple changes can have big impacts on how we learn and can also affect how well we access learned information. For example, try writing words to something you learned as a song; it can be quite difficult. There are many videos of tango dancers who became crippled and can no longer walk, but they can still dance. More mundanely I often forget my PIN code but never at a cash machine thankfully, where I remember due to the context! There are also scientific studies showing that skills we learn underwater, we may not be able to do on dry land. This is “state-dependent learning” and “context-dependent learning”

Even changing our clothes can affect our learning-and-performance process. For instance, one time I turned up at the aikidō dojo having forgotten my kit. My teacher said, “train in your normal clothes.” I did, and my technique was significantly worse than normal. I realised that would be a problem if I ever had to apply these techniques in self-defence. My body and brain were so used to practicing aikidō in my aikidō clothes, that it was hard to do it wearing anything else!

Even something as simple as turning around can dramatically affect your ability to access learned skills, if you only learn them facing one direction. I’ve seen students who have learnt a skill while facing one direction be unable to repeat the skill when they face a new direction.

This is why current learning science recommends that if you really want to learn new information or a new skill, you study it in different locations and in different positions (or in different clothes). This way your brain creates more neural pathways, reinforcing the information.

There’s also a great Ted Talk by Eduardo Briceño on learning versus performance, called “*How to Get Better at the Things You Care About*,” that you can look up.

Reflect on what are some of the differences between your daily life and a yoga class? What’s missing? What’s different? How can you build a container that facilitates transferring principles back into your life?



## Holiday or classroom?

Sometimes you can choose to intentionally keep your practice's container as different from your real life as possible. Sometimes you want to leave your daily life behind and have a break, and that's great. Special yoga music, a special yoga space, special yoga words, special yoga clothes. This transcendent approach is widespread in the current yoga world.

I prefer to view yoga, not as a holiday from real life, but as a classroom where we learn how to live our real lives. I don't use yoga to rise above or beyond worldly concerns, but as a way of learning how to grapple better with these concerns.

Medieval Catholicism offered people a clear choice between these two paths. Either you could choose the monastic path, devoting yourself to Jesus as a monk or a nun, or you could choose the householder path, live in the real world, and have a family and a career.

The monastic path (or the "special holiday yoga" path) is a valid path. My mum was once a nun for seven years, and she got a lot out of it. I've met her ex-nun friends, and they're still these shiny radiant women, all these years later. There's definitely something there. I've also spent time in Buddhist monasteries myself and gotten a lot out of the experiences.

The householder path (or the "yoga as a classroom for real life" path), however, is about living in the mud and the shit and the menstrual blood of the real world. That's where I live now. I'm married, I run a business, and I live in the world.

Living in the real world takes guts. In Catholicism, the monastic path was considered the easier path, and the truly challenging path was the householder's!

Reflection: Is your yoga about taking a holiday from real life, or is your yoga more about living in real life? Does your yoga take you away from the world or does your yoga take you into the world? Both are valid, and they are not the same.

It could be a mix. You might give people a rest in “special holiday yoga” before diving into the “classroom for real life” side. But eventually you have to choose. Form follows function. What you want to accomplish defines the structure of your class. Our classes CAN NOT be all things to all people as they are optimised for certain aims. A spoon is designed differently from a chicken.

The responsibility of yoga teachers is to consciously create and clarify classes to achieve goals. Their structure has to clearly communicate the goals of your students, right up front (even though students may take away something different than the intention). **Intention, design, and marketing must all be aligned for integrity and effectiveness.**

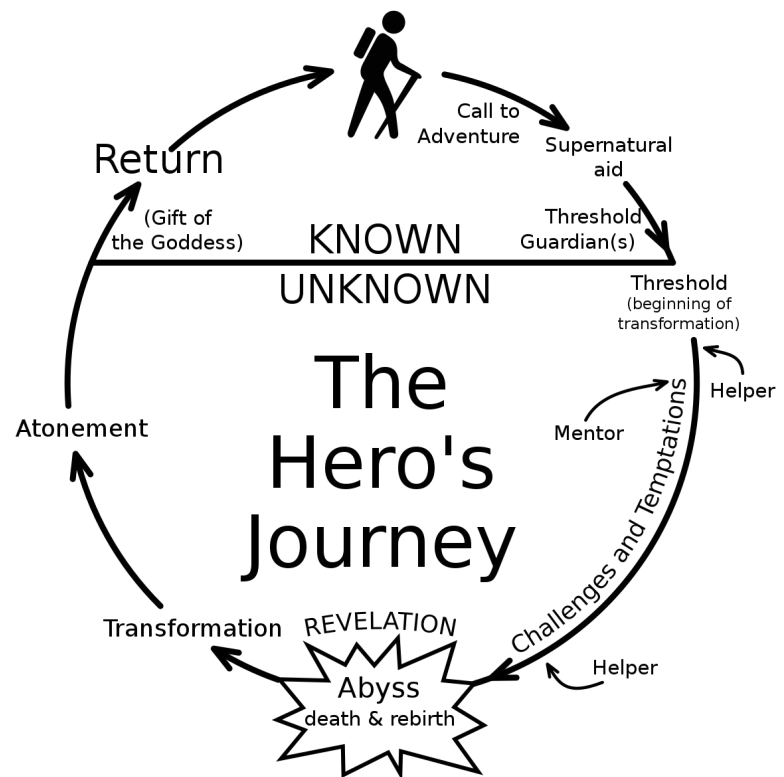
## The Hero's Journey

Joseph Campbell, a mythologist who researched patterns that remained consistent throughout myths all over the world, describes the pattern of the Hero's Journey, which also happens to yoga practitioners. The Hero's Journey (or, as the Hobbit describes it, *there and back again*), follows the Hero from the familiar, through the unfamiliar, and back into the familiar. Except that now the familiar feels unfamiliar because of the Hero's experience.

The Hero's Journey doesn't end when you've accomplished the intense bit. You may have slain your dragons and rescued your damsels, but the true tricky bit is the return home.

You can think of your yoga class as a Hero's Journey. You take people from their familiar everyday life, and they put on their special hero clothes and step into this special no-talking room and this unfamiliar

container, and they enter an unfamiliar world. They do their hero practice, experiencing the unfamiliar, and ending with savasana, or death. Then they're symbolically reborn, and they jump up and roll up their mats and check their hero Facebook status on their iPhones and return to their familiar lives. Note that in most yoga classes the reintegration of the hero back into their familiar world is usually either not done well or not done at all.



Reflection: When you build your class, how can you create an effective Hero's Journey? Is there a definite sense of stepping across a threshold into the container of the class? And afterward, is there a definite stepping out of the container and back into integration with daily life?

## What gets yoga off the mat?

So what truly helps get yoga off the mat?

**Intention** can help get yoga off the mat. It's helpful to bookend your practice with intention. Say at the beginning, "what are you bringing?" and then afterwards, "what are you taking out?" For example, once I was in a vinyasa class. At the end, the teacher said, "have an intention to take this into your life." I thought that was great. Most of the people in his class were there for fitness and he was trying to open them up to new things.

But I was also left with the question, "yeah, but how?" For people who don't know how to take their yoga into their lives, what would that actually look like? Intention can get lost, especially in athletic classes.





So it's worth clarifying intentions at the beginning of the class and also at the end of the class.

And what about a deep view of health? **Health** matters, not just for its own sake, but also because it can support our ethics and our kindness. Think of the last time you were a bit mean - I bet you were tired or hungry, or not very well.

Another way of getting yoga off the mat is by thinking of it as **medicine**. "Yoga therapy" is a field that assigns certain postures to certain ailments. However, although there are books by BKS Iyengar and similar yogis, there's also plenty of bad science, superstition, and pure invention masquerading as ancient wisdom. (For instance, the whole concept of "detoxing" or "wringing out" your liver is nonsense.)

To counteract the bad science, be sure to check out Ariana Rabinovitch's book *Yoga Myths*, and William J Broad's *The Science of Yoga* for starters.

Still, certain postures do help with certain issues, particularly common psychological issues. Although yoga can't replace therapy, social

support, time in nature, and appropriate medication, it can *support* and *help* work on anger, anxiety, confidence, depression, and grief. You can check out my YouTube videos for these issues; type in “EYP...” and the issue in question.

Some of this psychological yoga work comes from my own experience. For example, after my dad died, I found child’s pose helpful with the grieving process. I also did warrior pose to get myself up-and-about when I was feeling down.

Any practice that involves your consistently showing up and engaging with a **community** of like-minded practitioners is also beneficial to your sense of self-worth, of self-discipline, and of self-trust. It doesn’t have to be yoga; it could be anything you care about and regularly do with others who also care about it and regularly do it. You could be devoted to folding napkins every day, and that would bring you massive personal benefit. Because you’d still be learning to trust yourself and investing in your self-care. Practicing in the company of others who share your interests, your path, and your commitment, creates valuable community. Your beautiful community of napkinis who share your journey is a critical ingredient to your growth as a napkini devotee. You’ve all bothered to get off the couch and go to napkin-folding class, and dedicate yourselves to mindful self-improvement, and that’s a beautiful thing.

Community service is a traditional way to get yoga off the mat, although this often gets lost in the modern, Western, hyper-individualistic yoga paradigm. But we are not just individuals; we are all also members of our communities, all of us inter-growing as part of a greater whole. I can’t stress the importance of community enough. Check out Matthew Remski’s great article on yoga and community activism called, *“Modern Yoga Will Not Form a Real Culture Until Every Studio Can Also Double As a Soup Kitchen.”*

Creating **beauty** in your physical environment is another important factor. Most yoga studios are intentionally pleasant spaces. I, for



instance, do yoga at the local Buddhist centre, which is quite a relaxing place. The uplifting space takes me out of my messy office and the mindset that accompanies it and gives me a literal physical space where I can change my mind.

I also have a space at home that I keep clear; an aesthetic, clean space with a shrine. Having this space at home helps me bring my yoga principles into my daily life, and I recommend making such a space at home if you can't get to another one elsewhere, even if it's just a small corner.

Engaging with the beauty of the **natural world** also helps get your yoga off the mat. I teach a course called the Embodied Facilitator Course, which is divided into five modules, and one of the modules is always



done in the countryside. And the countryside module is invariably more transformative than the other modules. People go deeper into themselves, they connect more deeply with other students, they have more profound experiences, and they learn better. And it's all because of the natural environment. Being in nature changes how we embody ourselves, and is often under-appreciated in modern urban yoga.



There are some yoga **skills** that you can literally transfer from the mat into your daily life. For instance, you can take breathing exercises and eye exercises straight out of your practice and do them in the real world. (But it's tricky to pull a quick savasana in the middle of a board meeting.)

Schedule breathing breaks into your diary. In fact, stop reading this right now, and schedule a few of those in, before you forget if you like!

### Barriers to mindfulness

Mindfulness is not just another way of getting yoga off your mat. You could say, mindfulness is yoga. Yoga isn't really yoga if you're not mindful while you're doing it. And mindfulness is the basis of learning other skills. Unfortunately, there's several issues in modern yoga that interfere with mindfulness.

First, excessive **intensity** can be both disembodiment (dissociative) and addictive. On the one hand, intense sensation forces you to be mindful, but on the other hand, who wants to pay attention to a screaming body? There's a fine line.

Over-intensity also hides subtle emotional sensations. I've seen people with trauma histories go deep into intense martial arts and intense hot yoga because they don't want to feel the subtle sensations happening inside themselves. It's hard to tune into a subtle inner sadness when your hamstrings are near tearing...which may be the appeal.

Modern yoga is only getting more intense. Torture-death-screaming-rocket yoga is the latest thing, and I wonder, "is that really helping you tune into your body?" It may help in the short-term, but you're not building long-term skills that teach you how to tune in when there aren't strong sensations. This is the addictive element.

**Conformity**, which is also super-common in modern yoga, also

interferes with mindfulness. The average modern yoga class is built on Iyengar's model. Yoga classes per se didn't even exist until the 1960s. Before that, yoga was practiced in one-on-one or one-on-small-group settings. Then Iyengar popularised group practices. But the problem with group practices is, you have an authority figure whom everyone follows, and everyone tries to make the same shape or do what the authority figure is doing. That means they're not listening to their own body, and they're not practicing self-awareness and asking themselves what they need. This is the norm in modern yoga, and I challenge this.

A good yoga teacher tells people to listen to their bodies, but even then, students may still experience unspoken or assumed social pressure to conform.

Reflection: Do you truly allow for variation as a yoga teacher? And when someone takes a rest, do you say, "well done," and demonstrate social support for that choice? Or do teachers participate in subtle or not-so-subtle social pressure on students to conform?

I also wonder about the common **exclusion of sexual and emotional awareness** from yoga and martial arts. For example, I've seen the sex organs completely skipped in body scans. People just focus on legs, then hips, then belly. They've skipped an important bit! Excluding these elements creates a simpler and safer container, but does doing so also repress mindfulness of critical aspects of ourselves? Perhaps it also creates the sex shadow we see in yoga?

Noticing the emotional quality of your practice helps you notice the emotional quality of your daily life. For instance, one day I was about to go to dance practice, and I tuned into myself and realised I didn't want to go. I wondered, "am I being lazy?" I realised, I wanted to move, but I didn't want to be around loud music and lots of people. I was with a friend, and she felt the same way. So we went for a long chatty walk in the rain instead. This peacefulness was just what we needed.

Vedanā (वेदना) is the **Buddhist concept of the sensations that arise**

**when our perception encounters stimuli.** What do we notice and how does it feel? Does it feel good? Does it feel bad? Does it feel neutral? Tuning people in to their awareness is an important responsibility in yoga.

And you can play with it. For example, a teacher I like asks, “what animal are you? What kind of tail have you got?”

I play with *vedanā* by having people make a noise to express their emotion. Or I have people say one word at the beginning of class. Or I have them raise their hands to demonstrate whether their energy-level is high, medium, or low, to encourage strong participation.

What is your relationship between your emotions and your practice?

Asian arts and martial arts tend not to investigate emotions. I once taught an aikido class where we explored doing arm locks in different emotional states, and it blew people’s minds. These people had done aikido for 30 years and had never considered their emotional state.

**The body-beautiful culture** I mentioned earlier also interferes with mindfulness. You can either look inward, and focus on how your asana feel as they develop through you, or you can look outward, and wonder if that cute guy three mats over noticed how great your butt looks in your new Lululemon pants, especially after a five-day juice cleanse. You can’t do both at once.

And lastly, **community** support and community safety also determine our capacity for mindfulness during our practices. It’s difficult to practice interoception when you’re engaging in social activity, or when you’re feeling judged, or when you’re feeling threatened. You can’t look inside yourself and also be alert and look outside yourself at the same time. A lack of what trauma therapists call “community correlation” is an issue in many places I have been, especially in big cities where practice often has an anonymous customer feel.



## Mindfulness support check-list

This simple suggestions list is to help make a yoga practice that is appropriately challenging for yourself and for your students' ability, and support mindfulness. They are also ethical axioms.



- Make the practice moderate - enough intensity to highlight the body in awareness, but not so much as to create overwhelm.
- Make the practice internally-led, with the ultimate authority resting in the practitioner's felt sense of their experience.
- Make the practice appropriately sexually and emotionally aware.<sup>1</sup>
- Make the practice embodied and accepting of all bodies<sup>2</sup>.
- Encourage a supportive and ethical community

## Yoga sandwiches

Now let's look at yoga sandwiches.

A "yoga sandwich" encourages awareness before and after class, loosening the rigidity of your container. This helps avoid the risk of creating a class that is too-contained and therefore can't transfer its principles back into daily life.

One way to make a yoga sandwich is to ask people to be aware on

<sup>1</sup> That doesn't mean that we're picking people up or crying all the time during class, but rather, that we are aware of and accepting of ourselves as sexual and emotional beings even while we engage in our practice, and helping others do the same.

<sup>2</sup> variations arc big help here, with no sense of some being more "advanced"

their way to class (If it's a first class, you have to remind them to do it).

I was once rushing to a yoga class and, on my way, ignored a friend and was rude to the receptionist. I asked myself, "hang on a minute, I'm rushing. I'm being unethical. What am I doing here?" I now choose to step into the yoga mindset at least ten minutes before class begins, because that too is part of the practice. We could say our "whole life is practice" but we can't have a mindful focus ALL the time (perhaps a nice aspiration), and containers matter so the "sandwich" idea is more about a middle ground to encourage integration.

I ask my students at the end of class if there was a quality (for example, warrior pose, or openness), or an ethical exploration that we investigated in the class, that they want to bring into their evening. You probably weren't going to kill anyone this evening, but you might want to be kinder, or be more honest.

Bringing yoga qualities and yoga ethics into our daily lives is the bread of the yoga sandwich. The class is the tofu, arugula, roasted red pepper spread, and tempeh inside.

Google "*Yoga Sandwich*" for a cool video on the topic too.

## Yoga snacks

Now let's talk about yoga snacks. Little yoga moments you can throw into life.

Awareness and choice are the foundations of my work. The simplest way to achieve them is by making little "yoga snacks": ask the question (alone, in pairs, or in groups), "how am I, and how do I want to be?"

Most of the time we just need reminding. That's what mindfulness means; it's *re-minding*. The Western word "mindfulness" is a somewhat inaccurate translation of the original Buddhist word (*Sati* from Pali: सति

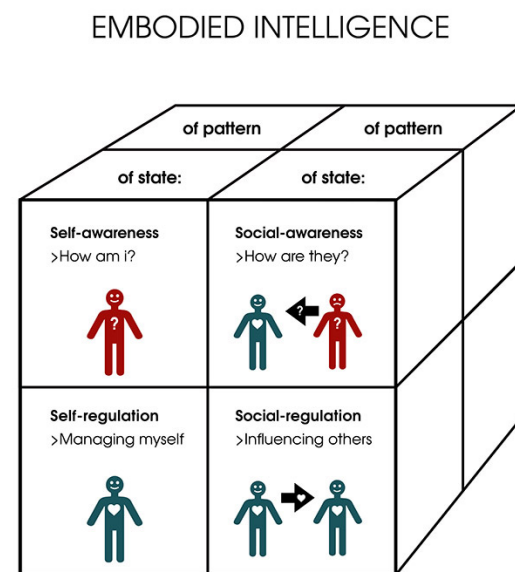
Sanskrit स्मृति (*smṛti*) which is more like “lived remembrance.”

## Life skills - Embodied Intelligence

What are the life skills you’re learning in your yoga class?

In my framework I teach embodied intelligence. I adapted my model for embodied intelligence from Daniel Goleman’s model of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a subset of embodied intelligence. If you YouTube search, “embodied intelligence,” you will find more on this model.

In EYP, we develop our body awareness. It’s worth considering what you, personally, mean by “body awareness.” For example, you could do an intense practice and become aware of your muscles, but what about the subtler elements of body awareness? What about your organs, your face, and your emotions? Is body awareness about movement as well as about posture?



Body awareness is often most noticeable by its absence. People’s posture can become rigid and they can lose awareness of how they’re moving or how they’re speaking, for example. And I’ve become aware that I speak quickly, and that the tone of my voice changes when I panic.

Awareness of others is often absent in yoga, which is typically a one-person-per-mat situation. Unless you’re doing a partner-yoga or an acro-yoga practice, you may miss the chance to develop your awareness of others. And even so, I’ve seen people doing acro-yoga who still aren’t aware that their partner is scared, or that their partner



is getting cockily dangerous. A considerate acro-yoga partner would be aware of your emotions, just as they'd be aware of your breathing.

Relational movement practices, like tango or aikido, have an advantage over solo movement practices like tai chi or standard yoga, because they help you develop awareness of others. And partner practices are also critical for developing embodied leadership.

On the other hand, modern yoga IS great for learning to regulate and manage ourselves. For example, when you're in a difficult posture, and your teacher says, "relax your forehead," suddenly the posture is easy. Self-management skills are actually so key to yoga some overdo it and become control freaks!

Still, we often miss bridging our practice into our lives. You may become good at managing yourself while you're doing an anxiety-provoking tree posture or a difficult squat, but how do you bring that self-management into your daily life with the kids or boss?

One way I use yoga classes to help regulate our daily lives is, I'll have my students think of something stressful, and then suddenly they experience fight-or-flight response. Then they can use class-time to work on regulating that response. Listen to my podcast on centering if you want advice on that kind of regulation.

Embodied leadership is a critical aspect of teaching yoga. Good yoga teachers continually influence their students' emotions. You can wake people up and calm people down with your voice, your gesture, your humour, and your choice of postures. You also influence people simply through what you do with your own body when you stand near them. Mirror neurons are responsible for a huge amount of human learning.

Reflections: here are some key questions to ask yourself:

- How am I currently doing things in my daily life?
- What skills am I building in my yoga class?

- What skills am I building in my daily life?
- What's missing?
- What do I want to add to my practice?

You might think, "I have a regular Ashtanga practice. It's good for body awareness (if not done too intensely) and for self-regulation, but not so good for this other skills... so I'm going to add a weekly dance class." Just be honest, no practice has it all, and it's not a criticism to see an art's specialism. Play with finding what ways of acquiring embodied skills suit you best.

## Practice ladders

In order to develop the concepts we've just discussed, you need a *practice ladder*. This means starting off gently when you learn a new skill, and working your way, step-by-step, up to greater intensity. This practice ladder ensures that you're not traumatising yourself or your students. It also keeps your container in the learning-zone sweet spot and out of the panic-zone or the comfort-zone.

One example of how I create a practice ladder for bridging principles from class back into real life is, I'll ask people to get their mobile phones out during class, and have them stand in mountain pose or in a centred way while holding their phone.

## Form vs Freedom

We can also view our practice through the lens of "form-practice" vs "freedom-practice." We can think of "form-practice" as a way of forming discipline, forming structure, and of forming self-regulation. We can also think of "freedom-practice" as a way of freely expressing ourselves (which tends to be underdone in yoga), and of following the natural processes of the body. Authentic Movement, capoeira, Five Rhythms, and other systems deal with this critical freedom-practice

much more than the typical modern posture yoga class.

Most people have an almost *political* bias towards one side or other of what is ideally a balanced whole, composed of form *and* freedom.

Reflection: Is your practice more form-based and disciplined, or more freedom-based and expressive?

Too much form can make you uptight, and too much freedom can make you unboundaried. What's your own personal balance?

## Embodiment

I'm chiefly interested in embodiment. This is ultimately how we really get yoga off the mat and use class-time to build a way of being in our lives. If something doesn't become an unconscious habit we have to keep remembering and this is too big an ask. Embodied Yoga Principles moves beyond mindfulness, into developing yourself through what you're embodying.

Reflection:

Ask yourself, "what is the practice that I'm building?"

Ask yourself, "what is the body that I'm building?"

What does your yoga build?

Are you building up more of what you're already naturally drawn to?

Are you building up qualities that don't come naturally to you?

What do you want and need more of right now?

This is illustrative of a risk here: I went to a major yoga studio, and I did a hard-core ashtanga class and a yin class, one after the other. I thought the wrong people were in the wrong classes; it should have been the other way around. The yang people were charging powerfully in, like, "right! I'm going to do *this* for the yang class!" And the yin people floated softly in and connected with each other for the yin class. Everybody was in the wrong class! They were beefing up the skills that were



already within their dominant and natural inclination, instead of going across the grain and developing their non-dominant side. They were embodying the wrong things and possibly deepening their neuroses, and definitely not building up the range of choices available to them.

Recently I asked my wife which postures she thought I should practice. She said, “openness, vulnerability, and letting go.” I hated that she was right but got on with it!

Embodiment is not just *what* you do but *how* you do it too. You could do a yin yoga in a driving, pushing, yang way, and be like, “I’m going to be the best at yin yoga! I’m going to yin the shit out of it!”

So you see how your mindset can either destroy or achieve your stated goal?

## **Ethics**

Ethics are an essential aspect of our transformative practice, of our morality, and of our lives. But sadly, people often take them out of their practices. Today people practice mindfulness without ethics. One real world example is practicing the mindfulness of being a sniper or a pick-up artist, which are now things!

There’s also a sub-culture today which sells a lack of restraint, which it confuses with freedom. Ethics can look old-fashioned, even ancient. Patanjali’s ashtanga, or eight-fold yogic path, described ethics as eight limbs. Together, the yamas and the niyamas of yoga and Buddhism are the classic do’s and don’ts of ethics.

## **Reflection**

- How does this part of the eight-fold path fit into your yoga practice?
- The most basic embodied ethics question is, “am I practising my yoga in a way I’d like to live?” Try this on.

- Do you have a supportive community that challenges you and holds you accountable to that question?
- How do you turn your ethics into real-world action?
- How do you make your practice kind, for example? Kind to others, but also, critically, kind to yourself?
- How do you make your practice honest? You can get creative here. For instance, if I'm doing a twist, and I'm abandoning my centre and leaning to one side, that's dishonest. There's an honesty to picking the most helpful variation, whether or not it's the flashiest one. You can link ethics to Asana in this way.
- How do you ask yourself, what's the target of my practice? Do I have pride in my practice? Do I have shame in my practice? Look at what happens with your ethics when you do a tree pose, or when you show off in your yoga.

Personal empowerment is an important element of ethics, and one that is often dangerously left out of standard yoga classes. I want students to make their own choices and to respect their own boundaries, and I teach that in everything I do, but this fundamental life frame doesn't fit the typical Guru model. Guru systems are nearly always abused...not just occasionally, but MOST if not near all the time. It's almost inevitable because of the disempowerment inherent in any system built on the idea that someone who is not you knows better than you do about your own body. This is BS, and a dangerously unethical centre for any social system. India was wrong about the caste system and was wrong about the guru system. Why is nobody bold enough to state this obvious truth after all the abuse cases and scandals I wonder?

Embodiment helps step away from the Guru model and into a mutually empowering society. With embodiment, we're *subjectifying* rather than *objectifying* ourselves and our students, reconnecting with ourselves, and feeling our own values. Our bodies have an innate sense of right and wrong, and our ethics live inside our bodies. But it's up to us to listen to them.

Listen to Paul Linden's first podcast on The Embodiment Podcast if you

want more on this topic.

Having an intention of service is important. A traditional Buddhist approach to beginning a class is to remember that your practice is for the benefit of all living beings. My own personal taste is that that can feel foreign in modern times, but you could host a personal-growth workshop with the specific intention of making this practice useful to the world.

Having this positive intention of making your practice useful for other people changes it significantly.

Ethics also speak to the big taboos that are taken out of yoga. Sexuality, for example, is usually taken out of a yoga practice (and then sometimes unhealthily put back in, especially in the Guru model, but that's another story).

How do we develop ethical awareness around sexuality? Sometimes, ethical awareness around sexuality manifests itself as restraint. I





remember one yoga class in Stockholm. I arrived early and put my mat down in the middle of the room and I over the next ten minutes was surrounded by exceptionally beautiful women. I thought, “my practice today is *not* to look at the beautiful people in this class.” For that day, I decided that restraint was my practice.

Another practice might have been to feel, “wow, I’m surrounded by all these beautiful women. That’s amazing, and it feels great,” and to notice and accept that feeling in my body without fantasising, and to practice being non-judgmentally present with my feeling.

Social opportunities do come up in yoga contexts, so we get to play with that sometimes. I think there is a middle way between the sexual anorexia and bulimia often encouraged - we are human after all - and I do suggest strict ethics with students, due to the power difference. The EYP teacher code-of-conduct is, “don’t shag your students”, very simply. I’ve seen teachers question that code, but abuse of power is a terrible thing. It’s bad for you, it’s bad for your students, it’s bad for everyone. “Cooling off periods” are an excellent idea for ex-students too, and I believe that people should be able to meet life-partners in this context if great care is taken and there is not a habitual predatory pattern. Again, we are human. Two colleagues of mine ended up getting together for example while one was officially working for the other (normally a big no-no for me like student-teacher romance), but it was clear they had a very mutual and respectful mature working relationship as peers in reality, and nobody thought it was abuse when they (after careful reflection and discussion with other members of the community) started dating. They now love happily together some years later to everyone’s delight.

Money is another yoga taboo, potentially even bigger than the sex taboo actually in the yoga world.

Exercise: Notice your breathing and how you feel in your body when you pay your £15 (or whatever) at the beginning of a class. Bring your awareness to that.

I use three EYP postures around giving (spending), caring for managing, and receiving (getting paid) money. These postures equate to the Hindu deities Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva I'm told! I also use a lot of money mindfulness exercises which are on Youtube. You can also Google a video on the "Mark Walsh yoga of money."

## Yoga as self-enquiry

Yoga can be a process of self-inquiry. Most medium-to-long-term yoga people have experienced this. There's three fundamental self-inquiries you can do with yoga: *familiarity*, *deviation*, and *application*.

**Familiarity** is when you're in a posture and you ask yourself, "does this feel familiar? Do I feel at home in this posture?" I sometimes joke that the first time I did a warrior II pose, I was like, "thank fuck. A posture they got right. Finally, one I like." It was no more right than a forward bend, but it felt familiar to me because of my personality. It revealed me to myself.

Another aspect of *familiarity* is comparison, where you compare two postures and feel which is most familiar.

When people are doing any pose, you can ask, "does that feel familiar to you?" "Not just the physical pose, but the feel of the pose? The energy of the pose?"

**Deviations** also reveal patterns. How do you do the posture? Type "No Posture EYP" or "no pose Mark Walsh" into YouTube, and you'll see there's 15 deviations of this no pose that people can do. They don't do the pose "wrong," they do it as *themselves*.

For example, open people tend to have their hands in front of their hearts, and their posture acts like a stop signal. Open people will leave their posture way open, and defensive people will have more closed

posture. Some people won't face people while doing No Posture. Some people do it aggressively. Some people are pushy. Some people are pushovers. All these patterns correlate with how people are off the mat. This is just one way yoga exposes our characters.

Some of the *deviation* stuff is easier to show than to tell, so check out the videos.

With **application**, you can turn any yoga pose into a life-coaching enquiry. Let's say you're doing no pose, or warrior pose, or letting go (forward bend), and you ask yourself, "where do I need to do this in my life?" This is an easy way to access the wisdom of the body. Sometimes personal questions come up. Sometimes they don't. But even if personal-insight questions don't come up, you're still marinating yourself in the embodiment of the posture.

If you want to use this application-as-self-enquiry process, please credit me and go ahead and put it in your classes.

The application enquiry process for warrior pose, for example, would be:

"What kind of warrior do you need to be?

Where do you need to be more of a warrior in your life?

Where do you need to be more of a warrior at work?

Where do you need to be more of a warrior in your romantic relationships?

Where do you need to be more of a warrior with regard to your children?

What would that warrior pose look like for you?"

These are the big questions for most people.

You can also get people to be creative and make their own inquiries.

## Caution

A word of caution: these processes bring issues up quickly, and can be surprisingly emotional. I was amazed when I shared a video of one of



my postures online and someone said, “oh, this is great. I’m going to do it tomorrow.” I warned them, “whoa, whoa, whoa, you just watched a three-minute video. Be careful.”

For example, I once did something around no pose and someone ran out in tears. I found them and asked what happened. They said they’d been raped and the experience in class brought up stuff about not saying no. Fortunately I have enough psychological training and maturity that I was able to sit with them and empathise, and I gave them a number of a therapist. But you need to know that that kind of thing can come up when you’re doing embodied yoga.

That particular example has actually happened to me twice, so it’s worth getting basic trauma training. The Boston Group in the United States does basic trauma training, and Sarah Holmes de Castro does good courses in Brighton and Canada which I recommend, and there’s many others. I’ve also got a YouTube video called, “Trauma Intro for Yoga Teachers.”

### **Processing and social witnessing**

You’re often moving quickly during yoga classes. Making the time to catch your patterns, to get these insights about yourself, to stop and to slow down, is really helpful. It can be difficult for all but the most skilled yogis to see patterns at work if they’re doing a fast vinyasa class. This is why I use periods of stillness and silence and savasana.

I’m hoping you’re putting your own pauses into this narrative by taking breaks from reading. A brief lie-down or brief walking-around-the-room is a good way of helping people process emotions. So is a free unstructured practice, or asking people to make noises, or making regular breaks. I find an hour-and-a-half is the maximum people can do in transformative work.

Another thing you can remember is that human brains are hard-wired

to take a little mental break from whatever they're doing every seven minutes, and a somewhat bigger mental break every twenty minutes. (You can check this out in action the next time you're watching a film, and almost set your watch by it.) And you can use this as a loose guide for scheduling your pauses.

*Verbal debriefing* is another key concept we use in EYP. People need to



speak about their issues, in order to clarify their insights to themselves, and also to feel witnessed. There's power in verbal articulation and social witnessing.

So we have frequent one-minute verbal check-ins. I'll say, "okay, find a partner, centre yourself, close your eyes, free your body, open your eyes, and look at your partner." Then I'll ask questions like, "where do you need more no or more yes in your life? Or, where do you need to be more of a Warrior in your life?" There's one question and one minute to answer, which is enough time to clarify a thought without letting it turn into rumination. "Less is more, and conciseness creates

clarity,” we say.

Allow time to process what comes up for you in yoga, through walking, dancing, stretching, or lying down and resting. In Feldenkrais, for example, you have a one-minute lying-down break every 10 minutes, to process. Because integration is mandatory. Without integration time, insights get lost and it’s difficult to transfer principles off the mat and into your daily life.

### **Micro-poses**

Another way to get things off the mat is by using micro-postures. Micro-postures/poses are the small state-change versions of the large full body postures of a yoga class. As I said before, you can’t just pull a cheeky warrior II pose in the middle of a board meeting or in the middle of a delicate conversation with your family. But you can step forward slightly, extend your fingers and do a mini-version of the posture. Type “micro-postures and EYP” into YouTube to see videos of these examples.

I have a Jungian view of yoga almost. Warrior pose and child pose are very different shapes that create very different felt experiences. The posture shapes are archetypal, and we can trigger the same feeling in ourselves whether we do the pose small or big. But we build our neural pathways to the shape by learning it big. And once you’ve gotten to know a shape, how can you call on its essence, in a tiny, normal-looking shift of perspective that you can do anywhere? How can you shift into any posture you want, just by shifting your hands, your eyes, and other subtle changes that someone chatting with you over a café table wouldn’t notice? Subtlety is key, and the energy of a pose can be activated with very small changes.

This is also somewhat like kata in martial arts, where we take the time to slowly and carefully learn a pose big, so that when “real life” (or sparring) comes along, the essence of the movement comes out naturally and quickly, even if it’s just in thought or gesture.

## Standing, walking, sitting, & lying down

In EYP we work with standing, walking, sitting, and lying down. The Buddha said that meditation should be practiced in all four of those positions and for yoga to be “off mat” it should address them all. Often yoga is done only standing, or only sitting. But it’s important to take the quality of your postures into all four of these positions. This helps bring the quality of the postures into our daily lives.

It’s much easier to get these principles off your mat and into your daily life if you practice them while sitting and walking. I for one spend most of my daily life sitting in chairs and walking. What does your warrior pose look like in a chair? The macro-pose and the micro-pose? These are important questions to help you transfer your yoga.

## Relational practices

Relational practices are an essential part of life. People are always aware of other people around them even if they’re trying not to be (for instance, within the firm container of a yoga class). People are aware of authority. Do they listen to you? Are they passively-aggressively not doing what you’re saying? Are they making conscious choices *not* to do what you’re saying because that’s a healthier choice for them? Are they self-critical or making comparisons with other people? Are they feeling ashamed because they fell over in tree pose and they’re supposed to be a yoga teacher? These social dynamics are always happening in yoga. No matter what your container is, you can’t turn them off.

We’ve also got a load of paired yoga practices, in EYP. For example, get





someone to do warrior II side-by-side with you. The first time I did this with my friend Vidyadasa, it was sooo bromantic it was unbelievable. It was like, "oh my God, I love you. We're partners, we're friends!!" But I might not want to do side-by-side Warrior II with someone else. Or I might do it competitively. Look up yoga competitions: a whole unexplored area of life. Although the idea may catch you by surprise, competition can be explored with sensitivity and mindfulness. Check out our video on yoga competition.

Cooperative practices and competitive practices are two elements of yoga and of life. The patented "tree-off" is a good competitive practice where two people try to stay in Tree Pose for longer than each other. The Plank-Off can build awareness too and is similar. Acro-yoga gives you loads to explore about core issues like cooperation, trust, safety, and connection.

You can also learn a lot by having someone hold your arms while you're doing warrior pose, standing behind you, putting a palm under each elbow, supporting you. I've seen profound realisations. People do that, and then they're like, "oh, my God, do I need support." Or they might be like, "get off me. I don't need support right now. I really want independence right now."

We also do postures around authority and around giving. I've done them with people in relationships, and I've done them with people who run a business together, and the patterns that emerge are what you want to explore and practice.

That's basic embodiment work: what do the postures tell you about your character, and how you want to live? What do you want to build? What do you want to grow into? These kinds of embodiment enquiries need to be done both relationally and on your own.

## Conclusion

So that's how to get yoga off the mat and into your daily life! I hope you've found something useful here that makes you want to try it, maybe the **Embodied Yoga Principles** training particularly, but more generally just to play with this area. Don't believe what you've read here just because I said so - test it. Find out what only you can find out. Make it your own.

This stuff is my life's work. I love getting yoga off the mat and making it more deeply meaningful for people. My style isn't to everyone's taste, I appreciate that, and don't let that turn you off the method if that's true for you. EYP powerfully and consistently works. But don't believe me - try these ideas out for yourself. Come to our workshops if you can - practical first-hand experience is a better teacher than any book, and look at the poses and enquiries free online. There are other approaches to embodied yoga out there too so check out the awesome Tara Judelle's work, and the good people at Off the Mat Into the World too. This has been one way only.





## Concluding Practice

Here's one last technique for you to play with: do yoga how your life is. This could be in a controlled way, or a manic way, or a playful way, etc. Then do yoga how you would *like* your life to be. What do you notice changing? Awareness and choice. Simple yet profound.





Thanks to all the team who have helped make Embodied Yoga Principles what it is today, my peers & all my teachers, the EFC community, the Trainers, trainees, students - what a community to be part of!

Big thanks too to Vidyadasa, Agi & Matt and all the photographers & yogis who have helped make this book possible.



**Mark Walsh**  
Brighton, 2020