

Considering Yoga?



by Ashley Bell

While many seek out yoga for stress reduction, the challenge of finding an accessible class can create its own level of anxiety for potential students. According to a 2016 study conducted by the Yoga Alliance, 61 percent of yoga practitioners come to yoga seeking flexibility, with 56 percent attending for stress management and 49 percent to improve overall health. Holistic health professionals and traditional doctors routinely suggest yoga for patients and clients who need to develop greater body awareness, mobility and stability. And yet, the prerequisite level of flexibility and strength required to safely and skillfully participate in a majority of classes eludes many, if not most people.

Vinyasa yoga (including styles such as power and flow) continues to be the most widely offered style of yoga at boutique studios and local gyms. A vinyasa class makes fairly rigorous demands of healthy, able bodies and moves at a more rapid clip than any other yoga style. Simply discerning one yoga style from the next can be perplexing as well, with studio schedules often populated with classes elusively named for elements and weather phenomenon. Here are some suggestions for those considering yoga for the first time.

1) Ask Questions

Reach out to nearby studios to inquire about beginner or fundamental classes. Yoga studios typically do not have regular business hours and often only open for 15 minutes before or after scheduled class times. Business phones rarely exist in yoga studios, because their constant ringing would be a disruption. To connect, visit a studio's website for an email address. Write to request recommendations and share your reasons for pursuing a yoga practice. Different styles have different benefits.

If there are health concerns that limit your ability to fully participate in physical activity, share that information when asking about appropriate classes. Well-intentioned health professionals will recommend yoga to those with injuries without any real understanding of the demands of a typical yoga practice. Always share information about physical limitations and concerns (including pregnancy) with instructors before class as well, asking for guidance with modifications as needed.

2) Embrace Your Beginner Status

A majority of studios only offer introductory classes once per week or in a series format. While these classes may not meet at ideal times, spending a few hours over the course of a few weeks investing in a strong foundation will allow you to benefit more fully from the practice moving forward. Practitioners who jump into a class designed for students with experience, hoping to catch on as time passes, can suffer from their limited knowledge of foundational concepts. The bad habits that result may lead to injury down the road.

If the neighborhood studio does not offer beginner classes, a few gentle or restorative classes can acquaint new students with yoga terminology and methodology in a gradual, supportive way. Yin yoga classes also move slowly enough to make new students more comfortable. Instructors take more time cuing students in and out of yin postures, and the longer hold times allow space for introducing and exploring philosophical and anatomical concepts. You may even find that these styles of yoga help you find balance far better than the complex postures pervasive on magazine covers. While vinyasa yoga has garnered the lion's share of attention, other more grounding styles continue to rise in popularity.

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3) Schedule a Private Session

If you find it difficult to make regularly scheduled classes, then arrange a private session with a local instructor. If your neighborhood studio doesn't allow for on-site private instruction, you'll find that many yoga instructors will happily meet you at your home or another mutually agreeable location. A studio may provide contacts, or you could consult your preferred search engine

to find a certified teacher in your area. When visiting instructor websites, read bios and search for instructors who have attended a 200-hour training at minimum and have been teaching regularly for at least three to five years, if possible.

While these sessions cost more than a drop-in or workshop rate (\$75 to \$125 compared to \$10 to \$35), the benefit of individualized instruction justifies the investment. To make the rate more affordable, consider sharing the session with a friend.

4) Let Go of the "Shoulds"

Many would-be yogis abandon ship after a handful of sessions because they feel as though they should glide from one shape to another with the ease of a dancer or stand unwavering on one foot like a stone sculpture. With repetition, yoga never becomes easy but rather more easeful. Standing stick straight in a balancing pose doesn't make someone an advanced student. Falling with grace might. Your yoga practice should not look like anyone else's. No one will test you on your ability to touch your toes, sit still for 20 minutes, or pronounce *chaturanga* prior to attending class, or at any point thereafter. Yoga requires that you accept today's circumstances, and from that place you can align with your potential to grow out of old patterns and into greater freedom. Remove the burden of expectations, which limit access to opportunity, and ultimately joy.

In *The Heart of Yoga*, T.K.V. Desikachar writes of starting a practice: "We begin where we are and how we are, and whatever happens, happens." It may take a few tries to find the right class, teacher or style of yoga to meet your needs; but for those who find entry into the practice, yoga can be a game changer, if not a lifesaver.

Ashley Bell has been teaching yoga in the Charleston area for 13 years. At the start of 2017, she will open Reverb Charleston, a resource for mobility, stability and stress-management practices to include yoga-inspired movement and creative arts experiences. Through Reverb, Bell aims to remove the anatomical, philosophical, cultural and financial barriers that often prevent people from connecting with embodied mindfulness practices. She lives in Mount Pleasant with her two children.

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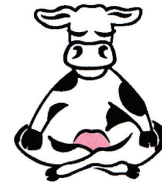
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