

# PREFACE



In the beginning, there is no substitute for sweat.

—BKS Iyengar, *Light on Life*

*I take a hard look in the mirror, noting my yoga pants and sneakers. As someone who prefers to dress business casual for teaching, this outfit is a deviation that feels both exciting, because it's freely comfortable, and a bit scary. I chose my loose-fitted yoga pants carefully today, avoiding the skin-tight pair I regularly wear to the yoga studio. Through my slow development as a yogi, I've learned that to understand your body, you have to see it; to see it clearly, you have to claim it. It's hard to see if your knee is lined up over your big toe, for example, if that knee is swallowed up by fabric. Tighter fits allow for better alignment assessment and easier movement in yoga. While my tight pants have a practical purpose, then, that they've come to rest in my closet is just one indication of how far I'd come in letting go of my body self-consciousness and claiming my body as it is. As a yogi, I understand these actions of giving myself over to my practice—worrying less about others' perceptions of my body and more about my own sense of embodiment—as a sign of growth. As a writing teacher-cum-yogi about to bring these two worlds together, however, I proceed with measure. Still standing in front of my mirror, I move my arms up and down to make sure my top stays in place. I plan to complete today's yoga practice with my first-year writing students and don't relish the idea of them seeing unveiled any part of my body that would be normally clothed.*

*Abandoning body self-consciousness is, I have found, is a very slow process. Much like gaining confidence as a writer.*

*Before I can turn away from my reflection, I see the wide eyes of someone not only excited but also a little afraid. I must admit to myself that I'm wondering if my first-year writing students will revolt after today's yoga practice with my Iyengar teacher and me. I am worried about what will happen when I display what I could never hide but for years tried to ignore in the classroom: my own young, female body. As a neophyte scholar, I only have about a decade on most of my students, and I worry that acknowledgement of my flesh could disrupt my "teacherly" authority, sending the class on a collision course toward chaos. Of course as a yogi, I realize this is unlikely and desire to push through the learned fear until it is a distant memory. My experience as a "writing yogi" is why I am doing this, giving my students the chance to incorporate yoga into their writing processes as I've done with great success. I've reached this moment because I can no longer think of writing and yoga as separate processes, linked*

*as they are by a common core of mindfulness. But, I still can't keep the old, learned panic from nipping at me.*

My students filtered into the dance studio of the campus dance studio slowly. Most took my injunction to wear loose-fitting, comfortable “workout” clothes seriously. Though, two male students came in jeans and t-shirts, perhaps to suggest their lack of enthusiasm. Everyone looked around nervously, spotting the huge stack of folded blankets on the side of the room, blankets my yoga teacher, Holly, and I and her two assistants lugged up in huge, black trash bags to the third floor of my campus’ gym. In the nervous energy that accumulated before my students showed up for class, I neatly folded those trash bags and placed them in a pile behind the blankets; the challenge of folding plastic was a welcome distraction to what would come next. As for the blankets themselves, Holly was adamant that we provide props for my students so as to better accommodate the restorative poses with which we’d start and end class. Indeed, if she’d had her way, we would have moved the bricks and straps from her studio across town to this room as well. The copious use of props is a feature of the kind of yoga we’d do today. Iyengar yoga can accommodate a range of students’ needs and flexibilities by modifying poses using props. Among other reasons, it is such adaptability that makes this Hatha approach a friendly one for the writing classroom.

Today was the day all our joint planning would hopefully pay off, and Holly and I were committed to giving my students a taste of “real” yoga even as we strived for a structure that wouldn’t be intimidating and that would fit organically into the overall goals of my writing class. My writing students were prepared for today’s “yoga for writers” practice from the day they stepped foot in my course. They knew that their body blogs and our exploration of the physical demands of the writing process would eventually bring us to this first day of practicing yoga together as a class. After exploring the importance of our writing bodies for the first quarter of the semester, we would finally be learning yoga so we could experiment with integrating *asanas*, or poses, in our composing processes from this point on. Today, we would be led by a certified instructor, my own yoga teacher, who generously offered to teach my writing class a series of yoga poses that we chose together, carefully sequenced and then dubbed a “yoga for writers” practice.

By my eyes and their own accounts (which I would read later in their blogs), my students seemed wary as they entered the room. They immediately took in the presence of Holly and her assistants—one male and one female. I hoped the male assistant served as an important reminder for my male students, especially the jean-clad ones, that yoga wasn’t “girly” or inherently emasculating. Since

young men at my university tended to approach yoga as a form of women's exercise, I'd previously mentioned that the yoga classes I take right outside of the university's bounds are populated with just as many male as female yogis and talked about how professional football players were using yoga as a way to develop body awareness, strength and flexibility. My students and I had eventually come together over the irony that a practice dominated by men in India is so differently characterized by American youth culture. Noting the assistants, students looked back to me for reassurance. Their eyes seemed to say, "I guess we really are doing yoga in our class today." I smiled hopefully at them.

*My students look apprehensive, but I believe myself to be the most nervous person in the room. I worry that despite my attempts to prepare them and funnel our class toward this very moment, they will not discover even a degree of embodied awareness today. If they can't make the connections between yoga and writing on their own and through their individual bodies, I can only pray they won't write me off along with our practice. What if they start to view me as some "crunchy," new-age hippie wasting their time? How can I finish the semester without incident if my students no longer respect me or my authority as their composition instructor? I realize in a moment of clarity that an anxious teacher isn't the most convincing, so I try to swallow my nerves and to smile confidently at them as they enter the room. One by one, they look to me for reassurance, and I find myself nodding and telling them to take off their shoes and grab a blanket, trying to draw strength from routine. This is, after all, how Holly has run all of her yoga classes, so it has been my routine as a student of hers. My roles as student and teacher merge as my worlds collide.*

I hoped that our mindful preparation and organization as well as Holly's evident and serious passion for yoga would help students leave behind prior judgment and would mediate their trepidations with a sense of adventure. I had great faith in Holly's no-nonsense approach. It was tempered by genuine friendliness and a desire to share her practice with others that was infectious to me as a yoga student. I hoped that her fire-and-ice combination would keep my students on task and prevent them from goofing off. Holly began by asking students how they were feeling, noting that many looked exhausted. I wouldn't normally ask students how tired they were feeling, so this question surprised me for a moment. And, even if my students acknowledged their exhaustion in those chatty moments before the day's lesson had begun, I wouldn't necessarily think to give them a moment to reconnect and revive themselves for the tasks that lie ahead during our class time together. But, this is how Holly started. As my students explained their hectic weeks of athletic practices, late nights studying for tests in the library and writing papers, I began to notice just how much weariness they wore on their faces and the exhaustion with which they seemed

to carry their bodies. I couldn't help but wonder how many times in previous classes I'd misread exhaustion for disengagement.

Holly promised students that our practice would help with their exhaustion. Already being listened to, they responded in turn and took Holly's instruction to fold up their blankets in thirds as she was. They copied her model of the first pose, *savasana*, which she showed them by lying on the floor in a supine position with arms and legs relaxed to the sides of the body.<sup>1</sup> To encourage students' energetic involvement and their full presence during our practice of the more active poses or *asanas*, we started students in this restorative pose, which is meant to calm the mind and quiet the body. If their responses to Holly's first question were an appropriate gauge, my students were in great need of momentary physical rest and a stilling of their minds.

Students relaxed into *savasana* with a blanket folded in thirds beneath and between their shoulder blades to help open up their chests. In yoga, chest openers are not only meant to be physically restorative, as a way to counter the rounded shoulders cultivated by too many hours in front of the computer or sitting in chairs with poor posture but are also thought to open up the heart and mind to new ideas. Because yoga sees the metaphoric and physical as interconnected, it is understood that as we open up physically, we are less likely to make snap judgments and are more likely to approach ourselves and others with balance, compassion and non-violence, called *ahimsa*. Of course, on a literal level balance and openness are important for my students, many of whom never practiced yoga before and would have to be patient with their tight bodies; they would have to let go of debilitating judgments if they found their peers to be more limber than themselves, for instance. Further, on an imaginative level, I hoped students would be influenced by this opening pose to give our practice a fair chance and not immediately judge it as a poor use for a class meeting. Happily, students' sighs as they settled into this pose were a testament to the relief they felt at being given a chance to relax before asked to exert themselves once more for a teacher's demands.

Moving them into an easy seated, cross-legged pose from *savasana*, we asked students to set an intention or *sankulpa* for their practice, noting that this intention was to guide and give meaning to their movements. We explained that this was like having a goal when writing a paper. Intentions remind students to listen to their bodies as they move them in new and different ways, promoting focus and giving them a feeling of purpose to carry into their practice of yoga—or writing. Setting an intention is a conscious way to bridge the mind and body's intelligence and can help students learn to connect feelings and thoughts, increasing awareness of both. Drawing inward for a moment consequently helps

develop self-reflection and increases flexibility. This practice of reconnecting with ourselves is understood to give measure to our actions, teaching us that we can control our response to stimuli by listening to our bodies and using our energy productively and not for unthinkingly reacting to everything that comes our way. The practice of choosing what we react to is a ritual we would later use to support curiosity and engagement when tackling how to integrate outside sources and differing perspectives in our writing.

*Before I can think much about what my intention should be today, one rises to the surface: I must let go and simply enjoy this experience. I want my being and doing to merge in this intention so that I can find strength and clarity, which I will need in order to know how to bring this practice “home” to our regular classroom meetings after today. As I set this intention, I imagine it arising from my heart and permeating my whole body. When I practice yoga, I like to think of my intentions as beams of light that start in my center and reach to the tips of my toes and fingers so that every cell of my being can find a unity of purpose in the movements to come. Today is no different. As I imagine these beams of light warming me and spreading from my inner body to my outer body, I remember that it is this cultivation of strength from awareness and patience that drew me to yoga in the first place.*

To move focus toward self-awareness, we coached students through a process of *pratyahara*, or a slow releasing of tension from the body and consequent withdrawal of the sense organs. We chose to include these practices in order to help students develop a relationship with their bodies that would continue throughout our practice, and later, into their writing. The goal of *pratyahara* is not to ignore everything or to tune it out but to develop calm awareness and concentration in the midst of a distracting world. And because yoga views the body as a mediation point between inner and outer, yoked as we are to other bodies and a material world, drawing inward simultaneously reminds us of the other bodies to which we are connected and creates a felt community between practitioners.

Students then worked on steadying their breath, engaging in *pranayama*, or breath awareness. To keep things simple, Holly asked them to match their outbreaths and in-breaths so as to even them out, bringing peace and promoting focus for the practice to follow. A basic tenant of yoga is that the breath impacts the mind so while Iyengar yoga approaches *pranayama* as a skill of its own right, a separate limb of the eight-fold path of yoga, basic applications of attentive breathing are incorporated from the beginning of *asana* practice. Awareness of the breath is the hinge on which *asanas* turn. When our breathing is even, our thoughts and our actions can be balanced and directed.

*With my eyes closed, I breathe slowly, feeling my in-breaths calm me. I hear my out-breaths mingle with my students’ who are sitting all around me. At this moment,*

*I remember why I told Holly I wanted to practice with my class instead of directing up front with her or watching from the sidelines. Not only do I want to help model poses for my students, I also want to testify through my own bodily actions that I am part of our felt community and not an outsider, directing and watching without participating. I hope that our movements together will establish a solidarity and commonality of purpose that will flourish during the remainder of the semester. I hope that we will grow into a contemplative writing community together. For now, I feel I am experiencing a genuine moment of connection; at this moment, I am with my students in ways traditional class structures often make impossible. Here, we are feeling bodies together, breathing and moving our way toward awareness.*