

One Yogi's Journey

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”
Lao-tzu, The Way of Lao-tzu

Reflecting back, I never set out on life's path to become a yoga teacher. The journey was organic: a turn here, a detour there, and now I find myself today engaged in a career that shapes every aspect of my life. Something that was not intentional at the outset is now something I practice with great intention. I began as a “weekend warrior”, dropping into yoga classes casually when I had free time, whereas now I rise at 6 a.m. every day to get on my mat. I can't imagine not teaching yoga.

My journey to teaching began in New York City nearly 20 years ago, sitting in my cramped studio apartment in Chelsea, searching the Yellow Pages for a yoga studio. It seems funny now, with yoga studios sprouting up everywhere. I found a studio in my neighborhood, just a few blocks away. Anything I could walk to in NYC was great.

I will say that I was compelled to seek yoga, though the thought of teaching didn't enter my mind. This was partially due to the influence of others, but also because what little I had seen of it looked interesting. I remember my father talking about it when I was young. As a young man, he had developed a home practice and referred to it as mental training – mind focusing. As a young woman finding her way in the world and forging an identity, I thought that sounded helpful.

Not knowing what to expect from my first yoga experience, I found it perfectly normal to be introduced not only to asana (the physical postures) but to the yogic lifestyle as well. My first teacher welcomed me into the studio with quiet dignity, smiling but saying very little. The studio was virtually silent: students waiting quietly on their mats for class to begin. Quite a remarkable change from what was happening just outside the door. The asana class moved slowly and wasn't too challenging but left me with a profound sense of calm and centeredness. The same teacher encouraged me to sign up for a vegetarian cooking class, which I did. This was the beginning of how I learned the yogic approach to healthy living, which includes wholesome eating, balanced sleep habits and forging healthy relationships – most importantly with oneself. With yoga, this is key: discovering oneself and making peace with what is found.

The benefits of yoga began to take hold in my life with each year that passed. My confidence grew, as did my ability to roll with the ups and downs of life – something that the practice of yoga facilitates. The process was, in a word: Magic.

In the spring of 1991 I moved from New York City to Los Angeles, starting over with new friends and new career choices. During this transition, I found myself filled with excitement. As my yoga practice continued and evolved in Los Angeles, I was often approached after class with questions about my technique. Not realizing where it would ultimately lead, I happily answered

as best I could without the formal training I would later thrive on. Again, reflecting back, I believe that being on the path is how I actually landed in a yoga teacher training course. A work colleague of mine was also quietly but passionately cultivating her own yoga practice. When our mutual interest was revealed, she encouraged me to join her and enroll in teacher training. Water cooler small talk turned into major career shifts for two plucky young ladies. For that, I'll be forever grateful.

The Yoga Works teacher training program I took was taught by its founders Maty Ezraty and Lisa Walford, senior instructors in the Ashtanga and Iyengar methods, respectively. Along with Chuck Miller, they became important mentors and role models for me as a student and teacher of yoga. The yoga training included detailed analysis of the alignment of yoga postures (asanas), yoga philosophy discussions, how to construct an intelligent class sequence as well as a basic understanding of the anatomical body. The training links itself to the Krishnamacharya lineage of teaching. Krishnamacharya is the man responsible for many of the most popular styles of yoga we experience today including Ashtanga, the Iyengar method and Viniyoga, as he taught Sri K. Patthabi Jois, BKS Iyengar and Desikachar – the gurus of those methods. Krishnamacharya taught vinyasa krama: a step-by-step approach or “carefully placed step”: *How* one places a foot for each step on the journey as a yogi.

As I completed my yoga teacher training in Santa Monica, I was more aware of what I didn't know and was hungry to learn more. I questioned whether I could uphold the standards of teaching I thought necessary. “My practice isn't advanced enough.” “I don't know enough.” “I haven't mastered the yogi lifestyle.” The constant phrases that plagued me I now hear coming from the future yoga instructors who I teach. But I soon learned that I knew more than I realized when teaching my first class without any major stumbles. It was a relatively seamless transition from student to teacher ... as if it had been a part of me all along. Over the years I would refine my skills, but all the pieces were there from the beginning.

Two decades after embarking on my journey, I now lead the Yoga Works Teacher Training course internationally. I trained my first group of students in 2003. The process of leading others through a part of their own journey is both humbling and awesome. I see many aspects of myself in others, and through this process become more compassionate for us both. Through teaching, I still learn. Once again: Magic.

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The Decision to Teach

What draws one to a yoga teacher training? Often something sparked in a class or classes makes a student wish to dig a little deeper. Perhaps a desire to advance a practice, refine a life choice or gain more knowledge. All reasons are valid.

It takes great effort to learn something new. Students learning a musical instrument put in years of dedicated practice to become proficient. If they are intent on becoming skilled, they likely will. In yoga it takes focused intention and great effort to create a true transformation. Only through continuous experience do the fruits of a yoga practice begin to ripen. The Yoga Sutras (a perennial source of yoga philosophy) define a practice as one attended to consistently, over a long period of time and with great zeal and passion. The dedication required of a yoga teacher is even greater. Joseph Campbell, a teacher of mythology, spoke of the hero's journey in his book *Oriental Mythology*. He said the hero has "the courage to face the trials and to bring a whole new body of possibilities into the field of interpreted experience for other people to experience—that is the hero's deed." As a yoga teacher that is part of the journey, offering up your own practice and life to experiment so that you can better articulate to students what pitfalls they might encounter along the way. Essentially, you are driving over potholes, feeling how bad they are so you know how to warn others: "Watch out for that one, it will put a hole in your tire." Flat tires don't lend themselves to long road trips.

At the heart of teaching yoga is holding the space for others to explore questions and draw their own conclusions. It is both a gift and a privilege. The rich and deep journey to become a yoga teacher is also incredibly simple. Just as with the practice, it requires only action. Putting one foot in front of the other as a child does learning to walk. The journey may be long, but it begins with a single, courageously placed step.

For more information on Catherine's teacher training schedule log onto www.theasanaroom.com, click on teacher training and scroll down for upcoming dates.