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Yoga Off the Mat

by Sarasvati Sally Dawson

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Yoga

off the mat

Freedom
in everyday life

SARASVATI SALLY DAWSON

'Sarasvati has presented a beautiful and heartfelt explanation of the purpose and practice of Yoga, in its full meaning as both a way of living and as a physical practice. She describes the Yoga of living with a passion for simplicity and straightforwardness that makes sense to anyone, because it comes from the heart of her own realisation. She offers guidelines for practice that will encourage even the sceptic.'

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'A clear understanding of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras has given my life more meaning and a way to navigate through my emotions and mental ruminations. I see Yoga as a way of living.'

Katie Macleish, Yoga teacher and mother

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CHAPTER 1



Introduction

If you've ever attended a Yoga class, you'll know you feel better after practicing. Your body is more easeful. You feel energized yet relaxed. Your mind feels serene.

It's possible to find the freedom that Yoga offers without having to spend hours and hours on the mat or meditation cushion. If you want to learn how to live from that peaceful place, how to bring that feeling of peace to your everyday life, this book for you.

I have written this book to make the inner work of Yoga – not just the postures – more accessible to everyone. It is the perfect companion to your Yoga practice on the mat – whether you attend classes or practice at home. Whether you're a student of Yoga, a Yoga teacher or completely new to Yoga, this book is for you.

In a Yoga class

In a Yoga class you are usually focused on movement in a way that is mindful and respects your body. The teacher instructs you through a mixture of centring, warming up, forward bending, back bending, twisting and inverting postures. Depending on the class style, there will be slower and more dynamic asana and restful and meditative practices as well. There is no limit to the way a class can be put together.

Yoga teachers are busy taking you through the physical motions and helping you to stay focused and present with your practice on the mat. We don't always take the time to explain that this is also a practice to help you understand yourself better. Of course, there is Yoga wisdom sprinkled throughout many Yoga classes, but my hope is that reading this book gives you more than that. My hope is that you can come 'home' to yourself and better understand what it is to have this human life. Because that is the essence of what Yoga is – we use the asana practice to make the body comfortable and to quieten the mind so that we can do the inner work of Yoga.

If you read and explore the practices here, you'll understand the practice of Yoga a lot better. You'll also become more skilful in living your life in a way that brings you peace, joy and freedom.

How do you feel after Yoga class?

Once you get a sense of what you're doing with your Yoga practice you begin to enjoy the feeling you get from moving

the body. You enjoy the deep sense of letting go such as in corpse pose (shavasana), relaxation and meditation. Maybe you gradually learn to take a little of that quietness out into your day. But usually before long - a few hours later or a day or two later - you are back into ordinary life experience again. A greater understanding can help you to apply the principles and practices of Yoga to your everyday life. Your Yoga on the mat enhances and supports that, but you also become a little bit more independent in your practice.

Dependency

You can bring the suggestions in this book to your practice on the mat and also to your everyday life, questioning and applying. Just see how you go with them. It's not prescriptive; it is an enquiry, as is the whole of your Yoga practice.

I don't want to encourage dependency. If a teacher teaches that 'this is the only way' that's a good hint to run a mile. Don't stay with that sort of teacher. It is your life and your practice, and you don't want to be dependent on someone else for the happiness in your life.

Many ways up the mountain

Many consider Patanjali's Yoga Sutras the source book of Yoga. The Yoga Sutras are an ancient collection of short 'sutras' or sutures, threads, phrases that fully elucidate the state of Yoga. They explore the mind and teach us how to be free. We'll go into this in more detail later.

If something is really true, there will be more than one book that is useful. There are other writings, ancient and contemporary, that explain Yoga.

So why write another one? Just as there are many ways up the mountain, there are different ways of saying things. Sometimes you hear something that makes sense in an experiential way, rather than just intellectually. I'm hoping that my words might strike a chord in a way that you are ready to hear now, or in a way that other writings or teachers have not.

I am fortunate to have had a teacher who has pointed the way for my own life-changing investigation, bringing about a simple but profound change of awareness. If my words can open that for anyone else, then they have served their purpose. Sometimes it is just about timing. Other times it is about hearing the messages in a certain way that resonates. It is my hope that there is something here for you. And that you will recognise the messages here as authentic and real and take out of this offering what is right for you.

I'm having a little chuckle here as that 'you' from the previous sentence will be challenged. We will begin to see it as no more than a product of the mind and not a 'real' entity at all. But that is for later ...

What is Yoga?

But before the sutras, what is Yoga? Yoga is a big subject and I'm keen to break it down and make it easier to understand. The word Yoga actually means union, or unitary consciousness. Normally we think of ourselves as separate,

and let's face it, we do have a separate body and mind from everyone else. Yet the practices and investigations we do in the name of Yoga help us to realize that, even though there is a separate body and a separate mind, we are actually the whole: we are manifest together in this big creative consciousness. That is not immediately obvious, is it? We'll break it down to make it more attainable and then you can investigate and take from it what is right for you. I can absolutely assure you that there is a way of living your life that feels connected, whole, purposeful, joyful and real. It is not airy-fairy mumbo jumbo stuff. This is not new-age hype. It was true in ancient times and it is still true now. It is real. Your life is your practice, and the life that you have is enough for you to explore the practices, it is the way of exploring that is right for you. Know that freedom, joy, ever-present love and bliss are available for you and just a heartbeat away.

What do the Yoga Sutras tell us?

The Yoga Sutras teach that Yoga – that state of union or that state of connection – becomes apparent when we let go of the thoughts. So, when we are in a state of still-mind, that's when we are in a state of Yoga. The rest of the time, the sutras tell us, we take our thoughts to be real. We take our thoughts to represent reality, but that's a mistake! Why? Because our thoughts are simply neurons firing off in our brain, reflections and interpretations, but not the reality of anything. This seems so very simple, but it is hard to get, hard to understand, because we are so attached to our thoughts. So let me say it again. A state of Yoga comes about when there is stillness of thought, or at the very least, when we are not attached to our thoughts. That state of Yoga is

always there, but the awareness and recognition of it, the feeling of union and connection, comes about when we are in a state of still-mind. How do we get to a state of still-mind? We practice meditation. Yes, that's the key, to meditate!

But hang on, does that mean we can only experience that state of Yoga, that profound state of love and bliss, when we are in deep states of meditation? No. That's the really cool thing. Once we practice meditation we strengthen our meditation muscle, so to speak. We learn to drop back into a quiet, aware state even when the mind is busy. Even when we are going about our normal daily life. We spend more and more time in the witness state, quietly observing, quietly being free from drama. We take our Yoga off the mat and our meditation off the cushion. It takes work, practice and persistence: it is an ongoing journey. But without a doubt it is worth it. Your whole experience of everyday life can and will change and expand for the better.

Yoga means union. Often this is interpreted as union of body, mind and spirit, or body, mind and soul. A way of looking at it that feels more complete for me, is to think of union of the 'small self' with the 'big Self' of consciousness. You could call it union with God, union with the infinite, or with wholeness, or with consciousness or whatever resonates for you. On the most simple and basic level, Yoga unites the body and mind through the breath. On a more spiritual and holistic level, Yoga unites the individual with the universe. This union already exists, there is nothing we have to do other than realise that getting caught up in our mind is what prevents us from experiencing it.

The Yoga Sutras state that *'Yoga is the stopping of the thought waves of the mind'*. To me, this means that to experience union, you stop the thinking that identifies yourself as your body, mind and personality in favour of a state of conscious awareness. Life goes on, stuff still happens, but your experience of it changes. You feel centred, fulfilled, joyous and happy. The state of Yoga is not contingent on external needs, wants and *'if only's'*.

The practice of meditation is central to experiencing this state of Yoga. The Yoga Sutras go on to give many helpful suggestions as to how to get to a meditative state. Suggestions to help our minds to become clear seeing vehicles for the perception of reality as it is, rather than our mind's interpretation of what it is.

You may have heard that the purpose of asana practice – the postures that we do in Yoga – was originally to prepare the body and mind for meditation. While asana has now developed from its early beginnings into a whole system of health and wellbeing for the body, practicing asana remains a sneaky and reliable way of easing into still-mind.

We can recognise that the state of Yoga is always there, always available, but it may not always be apparent. The more we learn to drop the busy mind, the more we are able to feel our way into that quietness and experience our natural ease, our natural state, our state of Yoga.

About Thoughts

That's not to say that it's not good to have thoughts. Thoughts are a great tool! Our mind is a wonderful tool for

living. When we begin to recognise stillness, we also begin to recognise that we don't have to be drawn into our thoughts and we don't have to believe them quite so thoroughly. As our meditation practice develops, perhaps we can see thoughts for what they are rather than be dragged into the drama we feel when the mind rules what we do. It should be the other way around; when we see our thoughts for what they are, they serve us.

So, we might say that a state of Yoga is that state that comes from letting go from being quite so attached to our thoughts. Seeing them for what they are. Practicing still-mind regularly, practicing meditation regularly, helps us to get good at that. It is very hard to be good at that without practicing meditation. Then we can use the incredible mind as a healthy tool for living, but also have great perspective from the quietness that is the state of Yoga. When we get that state of Yoga, when we have that perspective, we can see our purpose a lot more clearly. We can feel the flow of life a lot more clearly and not be so confused about living our lives.

Freedom

The title of this book mentions freedom. The 4th pada, or step, of the Yoga Sutras is also about freedom, kaivalya. When we can step back from the drama of the mind, we feel into the flow of connected life. We feel into the flow of all that is. We feel into spaciousness and Love. We feel Grace. We feel grounded in the Self. We come home to our Self. We don't have to figure things out. We are free. Life still has a doing-ness about it, the ups and downs of relationships and

work and so on. The house still needs cleaning. But the experience is one of freedom - you are free.

What can we do? Onwards!

Let's look at what spiritual practice is and what you can do to move towards this state of experiencing one-ness. Let's move towards the experience of big consciousness that doesn't feel so separate, where we cease to feel as though life is giving us a bad go and everything falls into place a bit better.

It's worth noting that this work is not about having to be positive all the time. A positive pep talk can be helpful but that's not what this is. Forcing yourself to be constantly positive may mean that you are not being completely honest with yourself. Instead, this practice encourages you to notice the feelings that are going on, while understanding the reality of who you are and little by little becoming more grounded and established in that reality.

Why do we practice Yoga? To help us realise our union with pure awareness, as in the state that we call samadhi, that leads to freedom, kaivalya, or nirvana. Yoga is much more than doing stretching and flexibility postures, practicing breath control, practicing observances, being mindful, contemplating and even meditating. All of these are very useful tools that have a lot of benefits, but there is more to Yoga. We use these tools to experience that state of union, or oneness with the universe - a state of pure, conscious, aware Being. And wherever we are along that path is just fine.

Sarasvati Sally Dawson

Thank you for picking up this book, I'm sure you won't regret it, and I invite you onwards on this journey!



Which way do you walk?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarasvati Sally Dawson has been practicing Yoga since 1996 and teaching Yoga and Meditation since she founded Waverley Yoga Studio in her lounge-room in suburban Melbourne in 2002. She has Bachelor of Applied Science and worked as a Medical Scientist for 20 years, has a Graduate Diploma in Business Administration and trained as a Yoga and meditation teacher with the Australian College of Classical Yoga (ACCY) in 2001. She is a Senior Member of Yoga Australia, and member of Meditation Australia. She is involved in many aspects of the Yoga teacher-training program at ACCY, including teaching anatomy, physiology, asana and Yoga wisdom.

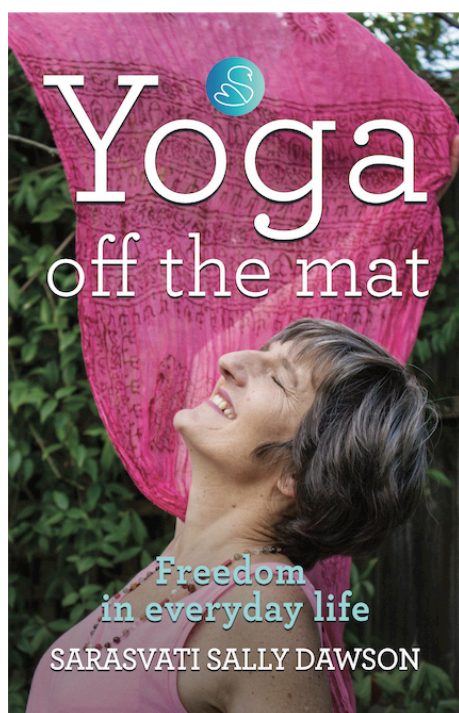
Sarasvati has developed several post-graduate workshops for Yoga teachers, and teaches a variety of Yoga and Meditation classes and workshops for ongoing students of Yoga. As well as her ongoing classes, she has taught Yoga and Meditation in various settings, including the corporate sector and on many Yoga retreats with her teacher Swami Shantananda.

Sarasvati's 'Shavasana, Deep Relaxation and Meditation' CD (now also available in mp3 format) has been popular since its release in 2007 and has been re-released with a bonus Meditation track in 2017.

Find out about her programs and offerings and purchase her book, CD/mp3 and other programs at **www.sarasvatisallydawson.com.au**

Sarasvati Sally Dawson

Enquire about Sarasvati's availability to speak and/or lead
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You don't have to spend all your time on the Yoga mat to find your natural state of freedom. Sarasvati shares her journey to uncovering peace and joy through Yoga. The perfect companion to your practice on the mat, ancient wisdom clearly delivered for modern times.

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