



# Yoga *beyond* the mat

It's great to feel light, calm and balanced after a yoga class or home practice – but how do you translate that feeling to the rest of your life? Fiona Marsden speaks with five yogis who are trying their best.

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Maybe I'm just a yoga nerd, but I think there are few things in life more uplifting than a session on the mat. Apart from the physical benefits of greater flexibility and strength, yoga practice often gives me a sense of calmness, perspective and light-heartedness; a feeling that all is well in the world – for an hour or two, anyway!

But wait, there's more. For me, and for many other yogis, the months and years of practice take on a deeper, longer-lasting value. Slowly and subtly, yoga seems to influence our lives beyond the mat. Over time, it begins to alter the way we see ourselves and others, how we respond to certain situations, and the choices we make about how to live our lives.

This transformation is a somewhat mysterious and highly personal process. It's not something that can be proved or disproved; merely experienced – so I

don't propose to spend this article picking it apart. Instead, I've spoken with five yoga practitioners (three teachers, two students) to find out how they believe the transformation process has unfolded in their own lives. What changes has yoga created for them, beyond the mat?

## **Relinquishing control**

Flo Fenton has been practising yoga since the early 1990s and teaching it since 1997. Based in Byron Bay, she runs a yoga business and has a busy family life as a wife, stepmother and grandmother. "My natural tendency is to be full-on, intense, and on top of everything," she says, "but sometimes my body has a way of slowing me down. I'm 45 now, with hyper-mobile joints and back problems. And I don't just practise yoga; I spend a lot of time demonstrating in class – so it doesn't take much to set off an injury."

Flo credits yoga with teaching her that, despite her best efforts, there are times when she cannot control what happens in life – and that this is okay. “My injuries are a gift, really,” she says. “They’re a reminder that I need to step back and work on aspects of myself other than a fit, flexible body.” As she points out, asana (postures) is just one of yoga’s eight limbs described in Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*. Asana practice is a pathway to the other limbs; not necessarily an end in itself.

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### Less reactivity; more perspective

For some yogis, alongside a growing willingness to relinquish the notion of control, comes an ability to be less reactive, frustrated or angry when things don’t go the way they ‘should’. Forty-year-old Angel Whitaker has been practising yoga for more than a decade, and completed teacher training after moving to Australia in 2001. Originally from Tennessee, she has an Australian partner (also a yogi), two stepsons and a one-year-old son. “I’m pretty busy, but even if I only have a half-hour in the morning to do some Sun salutes, I find that this percolates into the rest of my day on an energetic level,” she says.

This is particularly helpful in her family relationships. “My partner and I have the potential to be very reactive people, and because we met relatively late in life, we came to the relationship with a fair amount of baggage and set patterns of thinking,” says Whitaker. She believes yoga has helped them work around these issues and build a more constructive relationship. “Thanks to yoga, we’re more aware of who we are as people, and we have more perspective when we’re feeling upset towards each other. We’re more likely to say, ‘Wait a minute; let’s take a step back from things,’ than to fire up and lash out.”

As mother to a very young child, Whitaker finds her yogic sense of perspective useful when he is fretful and

won’t settle. “I can get really down on myself, because I feel like I should instinctively know how to meet his needs,” she says. “But yoga reminds me that this is unrealistic, and that most of the time I’m doing an okay job.”

Darwin-based freelance writer Michael Duffy also believes a yogic perspective has been instrumental in improving his primary relationships. “You can settle for less for a long time in relationships and feel resentful about it,” he says. His wife is also a yoga

practitioner, and after learning more about the philosophy behind their practice, they evaluated their relationship, to see what needed improving and what to do about it. “For us, yoga as a philosophy of life was a way to break through,” says Duffy. “Now, when arguments arise, we try to take a

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step back, then talk it through and don’t leave our anger to simmer overnight.”

Duffy has two young children with his current wife, as well as two adult children living interstate. He believes that learning to be less reactive has been positive for his relationship with his two younger children. “For a long time, I had no kids living with me, and I could pretty much follow my own priorities in life,” he recalls. “Now, I often have to give way to the needs of two people who are dependent on me. It would be easy to think, ‘My god, I’ve reached the age of 64, and I’m spending all this time doing things with the kids!’ But yoga has been instrumental in helping me detach from what I want, and in sharing my life with a family again. So I just accept it, and don’t beat myself up.”

### Making healthier lifestyle choices

For other yogis, their practice has not only changed the way they react to people and circumstances, but the kinds of people and circumstances they attract in the first place. Carole Baillargeon took up yoga in her native Canada in 1986, began teacher training in Sydney in 1990, and now runs Darwin Yoga Space. She believes her practice has had a cumulative effect on her day-to-day choices, ranging from what she eats, to what she does to relax and who she spends time with.

“Of course, getting older and becoming more mature probably has something to do with it,” she says, “but I noticed that the longer I practised yoga, the less I gravitated towards my old lifestyle. I used to spend time in bars, have a drink on Fridays after work and the occasional cigarette with a meal. I was still smoking when I started yoga. But over time, I became much more sensitive to the effects of alcohol and cigarettes, and at some point, my desire for them just fell away. I also became more sensitive to things like sugar and coffee. I found that my body wanted different things.”

Baillargeon believes yoga has also

sensitised her to external stimuli. “I’m more sensitive to violent movies, for example, so I don’t watch them. And instead of relaxing by spending hours in a shopping centre, I might go for a walk on the beach because it’s less taxing on my nervous system.” This heightened sensitivity extends to her dealings with others. “I tend to be attracted to more positive people and more harmonious surroundings. If I do come across someone who I feel is very negative, I will see less and less of them.”

Whilst Baillargeon gives yoga considerable credit for improving the quality of her daily life, she points out that it doesn’t always make for plain sailing. “You can’t expect to have a life without emotional suffering, just because you practice yoga.” Instead,



Image: Kellie Thabridge

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Baillargeon believes yoga has made it easier for her to accept suffering as a fact of life. “It teaches me that I can’t just cut myself off and say, ‘No! I want peace and harmony like I get on the yoga mat.’ If I do, I’ll become more isolated from others. Yoga is not about avoiding life; it’s about helping us to live life better.”

### Influencing the way we work

For other people, practising yoga seems to influence the way they think about their careers, and how they manage the day-to-day demands of work. Bhavini Patel is a senior pharmacist working in the Northern Territory. She has been practising yoga regularly since 2000, and finds it a useful antidote to what can be a very ‘left-brained’ career. “In the Western biomedical health system, you’re trained to see the body as a

machine, find a problem and implement a solution,” she says. “Over the last six or seven years of my pharmacy career, yoga practice has enabled me to make a shift in the way I work with patients. I now see them as fully rounded human beings, rather than as patients with particular medical conditions. I take the time to find out who they are as people and what’s important to them; while still using my pharmacy knowledge to support their health.”

Angel Whitaker models professionally in addition to her family and yoga teaching commitments. She believes practising yoga has improved the way she handles what can be a cut-throat industry. “I used to be very attached to how my portfolio looked, and whether or not I got a particular

modelling job,” she says. “But now, I just take a ‘Let’s see how things go’ attitude, and I’m grateful for opportunities when they come along. The funny thing is, although I don’t actively chase jobs, I still get them!”

As a freelance writer, Michael Duffy is familiar with the ups and downs of a precarious profession. “I never know where my next pot of money is coming from,” he says. “This can be quite stressful, but I feel that yoga has helped me detach from worrying about it; at least some of the time. As I become better at detaching, I also become more confident that when I have no work, it will emerge from somewhere – and it often does.”

### From difference to unity: finding our shared humanity

For Duffy and Patel, yoga practice has been instrumental in another aspect of their careers: working with indigenous Australians. Apart from his freelance writing work, Duffy travels extensively in remote areas, educating indigenous communities about the role of school councils and how to make them work well. “The more I work with them, the more it challenges my assumptions,” he says. “As white Australians, we tend to assume that the way we do things is ‘right’ and not negotiable. We often use the phrase ‘building bridges,’ but usually we build a bridge so indigenous people can come across to *us*. We don’t try to cross to their side!”

Duffy believes that practising yoga has helped refine his ability to listen to what indigenous communities are actually saying, even if it’s not what he wants to hear. “In Western culture, we’re used to questioning and challenging other people. But when you’re on the mat in a yoga classroom, you’re not questioning – you’re learning, listening and accepting the teacher’s direction. In a yoga class, the ear is the most important part of the body. Yoga has made me a better listener when I’m talking with indigenous communities.”

Bhavini Patel has a similar experience. “I do a lot of work orientating pharmacy services towards the beliefs that indigenous Australians have about health and illness, which are quite different from the Western biomedical model,” she says. “I think

our view of the world is influenced by those who surround us and the culture we were brought up in. We tend to set up boundaries between ourselves and those who appear different; a kind of 'us' and 'them' mentality." Patel credits yoga with helping her to move beyond these perceived differences and tap into a sense of shared humanity. "When you start yoga, you might say, 'I can't do a headstand,' but after several years of practice, something shifts in your approach, and you're able to get into the pose. You move from being someone who 'can't' to someone who 'can'.

"It's the same when you're dealing with indigenous people. Saying, 'I'm not the same as an indigenous person,' is the same as your ego saying, 'I can't do a headstand because my body is too weak, or because I'm scared to go upside-down.' Over time, if you keep trying, you will begin to see the similarities between cultures, rather than the differences – just as patience and persistence will help you achieve a headstand. I see it as moving from a sense of separation to a sense of non-duality."

### **The exceptions that prove the rule?**

In the interests of providing a balanced viewpoint, it's worth acknowledging that yoga practice doesn't always make us feel fantastic. By opening up our bodies (particularly the heart centre) yoga may bring up emotions that have been churning under the surface. We may be frustrated, angry or upset, and walk away from the practice feeling resentful that it hasn't delivered the peaceful frame of mind we were expecting.

And, just as yoga practice doesn't always make us feel great, so it follows that we often fall short of applying a sense of yogic calm and perspective to the rest of our lives. No human being is perfect – and no matter how long we've practised yoga, or how much it has influenced our lives, there are times when we still think and behave in a decidedly 'non-yogic' manner.

"I live a long way from my birth family," says Flo Fenton. "I only see them once a year or so – but it's amazing how I can go from being an adult to feeling like a five-year-old when I'm around them. They can really push my buttons!" These family encounters

sorely test Fenton's hard-won yogic sense of perspective. "During one visit, my father made an unkind remark. I completely 'lost it' and blew up at him. To the other people present, I was over-reacting to a minor comment, but to me, he was being intentionally hurtful. It's a shock when something like that happens because it reminds me that I can still be pretty volatile, and that even with the help of yoga, self-realisation is a very long process."

Fenton points out that there will be many times in life when we feel like we're going back to square one – but it's a matter of how we deal with it. Do we beat ourselves up about it by staying in our hurt state and rehashing the event, or do we try to put it in perspective, make amends and move on? That's where a yogic perspective can be so valuable. Carole Baillargeon puts it this way. "Sometimes yoga helps me resolve conflict more effectively, but other times I flare up and feel disappointed in myself afterwards. Yoga helps me not to dwell on that disappointment and accept that flaring up is part of being alive and being human."

Yoga might not transform us into completely different people – but if it can help us become more aware of our strengths and our flaws, and more compassionate towards ourselves and others, dedicating time to a regular mat-based practice is surely well worth the effort.

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