

4 – PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL PREPARATIONS FOR YOGA TRAINING

Before you actually start a yoga training session there are a few items that require attention. You don't just "do" yoga; you plan yoga sessions. You plan the place you will be doing them; you plan for your personal needs. If you are learning, you plan to find a competent teacher, and if you are teaching, you plan to be competent and prepared. Professionals do not fly by the seat of their pants, because failing to plan is planning to fail. This refers to your ability to deliver excellent instruction and to the ability of programs to efficiently deliver fitness.

A PLAN

A yoga training session has a purpose. It is not an assortment of randomly selected and randomly ordered exercise postures. A competent yoga trainer should match the session to the intent of a longer term training goal. Each session should be choreographed in advance, should include exercises that flow or link together in sequence fluidly, and should be adaptable for the varied levels of student capability present. For a healthy beginning trainee who intends to improve basic range of motion and fitness, the characteristics of a good yoga session are:

1. A proper and efficient warm up—this is accomplished through a progressive series of postures.
2. Attention to detail of where to place hands and feet on the mat and where the body should be upon the mat—you wouldn't start a forward lunging movement standing on the front of the mat or facing to the side.
3. The intent of the session should be clearly understood by the instructor, communicated to the trainees, and reflected in the choices and sequence of exercise postures included.

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4. Instruction and teaching points should be worded such that they are appropriate to the range of ability levels of students in the class—this means that the instructions and cues used by an instructor will be repeated in varied forms so beginners and advanced trainees alike can understand them.
5. Instruction on breath control—when to breathe as one moves through the postures—should be clearly communicated.
6. Demonstrations should be visible to all present.
7. Students should feel comfortable and not be overwhelmed by new expectations—yoga tends to be best conducted in a relaxed atmosphere.

A PLACE

While yoga training can be done virtually anywhere, there are a few considerations required before getting into a session. What makes a room acceptable? There are some things that apply more to teaching environments than to home based practice, but the basics are just that: basic needs for effective practice.

1. As a warm muscle is more extensible than a cold one, a moderately warm room is quite beneficial. A comfortable ambient temperature allows the student to focus less on thermal comfort and more on performing exercises. Hot environments are not necessary as the body in motion will create heat quickly (it has also been demonstrated that while hot rooms get students warmed-up more quickly, the long term results from yoga done in a hot room and yoga in a comfortable room are the same). On the opposite end of the spectrum, it is rather uncomfortable and progress comes more slowly when practicing yoga in cold, air conditioned spaces.
2. The exercise floor should ideally be wood. Smooth and level surfaces are needed so the yoga mat sits evenly on the surface for trainee comfort in sitting and lying

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poses. The smooth hard surface is best for providing contact and friction between the mat and floor which prevents mat sliding.

3. Basic good practice means that all exercise environments should be clean. Although trainees will exercise on their own personal mats, they will have their face near the floor and their personal effects on the floor. A dirty floor is off-putting and will not inspire confidence and return business. Keep the floor clean and swept.
4. There must be enough space to move through all planned exercise postures. While it is normal for trainees in yoga studio practices to practice in close proximity, personal space must be attended to, as cramped trainees will be limited in both their focus and their ability to achieve complete range of motion.
5. Home-based practice can be done in any adequately open space. For commercial practices an empty room is ideal. This means that the room should be devoid of furniture. Mirrors can be strategically placed such that trainees can see themselves and the instructor so they can model their movements based on what they see. Mirrors can be a help or a distraction. They may cause students to look at themselves or others in the mirror rather than focusing on their own kinesthetic awareness and execution of the postures being learned. As such they may or may not be present in a studio.



Figure 4-1. A typical yoga studio.

Yoga is an infinitely transportable exercise system. You will never be at a loss for a space to practice. Be it a smooth patch of ground outside, the floor of a bathroom, kitchen, or any room of the house with enough floor space, the deck of a boat (as long as it's bigger than a bass boat or dinghy), basketball court, dojo mat, office floor, you get the idea. Your ability to practice goes with you everywhere. This can be important, as regular participation in exercise is what all fitness professionals desire for their clients. It's what medical professionals recommend. It's what brings about the best fitness improvements.

A MAT

One of the most identifiable pieces of personal equipment associated with the practice of yoga is the yoga mat. Every gym will require you to have one (or in some instances you can rent one) in order to be allowed to practice. The mat has a few specific functions in the gym. First, it defines “your space” on the yoga studio floor. Second, the cushioning it provides (it’s just a small bit) makes working on the usual hard surfaces of the yoga studio or gym tolerable. And finally, the mat acts as a tool that helps the hands and feet stay in place on the mat and the mat stay in place on the floor, both combining to create a good foundation on which to move.

Choosing a “yoga” mat is important. When buying a mat, you need to make sure it is a good quality one. It is best if you have seen the mat and felt its surface and cushion. Ask other trainees and instructors for opinions and advice on the best products, especially if you plan on buying the mat from an online merchant. There are a wide selection of thicknesses, prices, and colors available but there are some basic things to look for:

1. The mat needs to have a sticky surface. Most yoga mats have this as a normal feature in the form of a rubbery outer coating (over an inner foam cushion). While they may look similar, camping mats do not have the same degree of cushion nor the non-slip outer coating. Similarly don't choose the thicker Pilates mat, while they are more padded, they too lack the non-slip coating on the underside. The lack of the non-slip characteristic in these two similar looking mats makes performing yoga exercises less effective and occasionally can make them more dangerous.
2. The non-slip rubber coating present on yoga mats can be different between manufacturers. Inspect the labels carefully and feel the tack of the coating. Cheaper PVC (poly-vinyl-chloride) derived coatings will generally not be durable

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enough for long term use and will lack the traction to keep the mat in place during use. It is a much better option to purchase latex rubber or composites to provide the best durability and traction. In terms of thickness, there again are numerous thicknesses. The best choices are 3/16" or 1/4" thick. Too thin of a mat limits cushioning. Thin mats can deform during use and too thick of a mat can interfere with posture stability and motor control.

3. Yoga mats need to be prepared for first use and maintained for continued use. When you buy a new mat and run your fingers across the surface, it will feel oily. As part of the manufacturing and shipping process they are treated with light oil. The oil prevents mats from fusing to each other during manufacture and to itself after it's rolled and packaged for sale. To ensure that the mat provides friction to the floor and to your feet, clean the mat prior to first use by using soapy warm water and a damp cloth. Then wipe all residual moisture off with a dry cloth. You will sweat during yoga training and the sweat will end up on the mat. It is good practice to wipe down your mat routinely to ensure you are exercising on a sanitary surface. The sweat-sanitize cycle can help cultivate the ideal sticky surface for your mat. This also points out a very good reason to own your own mat. If you rent or borrow, you are sharing sweat with others.

Instructors should have a few back-up mats on hand. Some trainee will invariably forget theirs and need a loaner. It is typical that new students will turn up with brand new mats (and the oil treatment has not been removed from the mat's surface) and sweaty palms (they are nervous in an environment new to them). They will slip around on the oily surface, have difficulty maintaining stability, and they will look around and notice that no one else appears to be having the same problem. An observant yoga teacher will have a seasoned mat they can quickly put on the top of the new mat to make the student better able to perform AND to make them feel a little less self-conscious. After

the session the instructor should then explain the perils of new mats and how to correct the slippage problem.

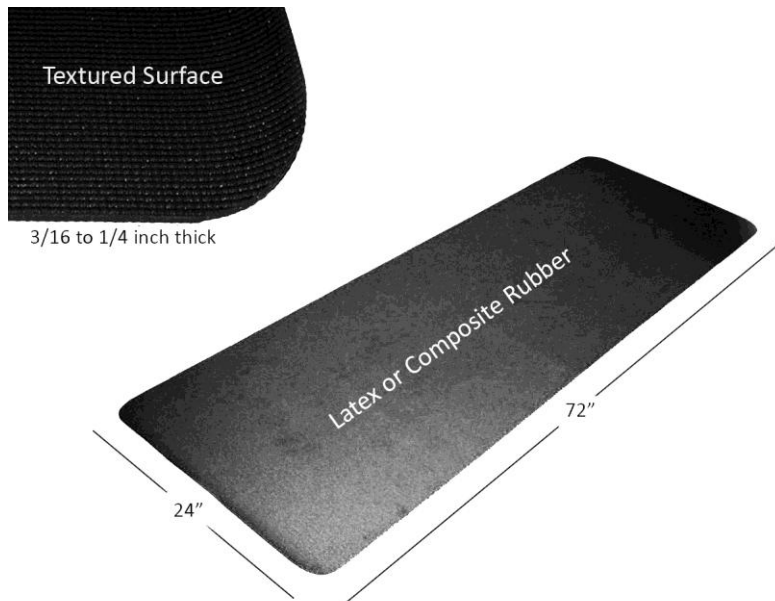


Figure 4-2. A yoga mat and its features.

A final, and quite personal, aspect of choosing a yoga mat is what it looks like. You can choose a color based on personal favorite or simple whim. However, the colors in an environment can affect individual mood state positively or negatively. In general people tend to choose brighter colors as motivational. Whatever color and/or decorative design you choose, get a “good” one and make it individual for easy recognition ... and then like Linus and his blanket, you will get quite attached to your yoga mat.

OTHER PERSONAL ITEMS

There are a number of other items that can make the yoga training session more effective and more comfortable. Some are dubbed as essential and some are simply useful.

A TOWEL

A towel is an essential tool of all exercise training, indoor and out.

"A towel ... is about the most massively useful thing an interstellar hitchhiker can have. Partly it has great practical value - you can wrap it around you for warmth ... you can wave your towel in emergencies as a distress signal, and of course dry yourself off with it if it still seems to be clean enough."

Douglas Adams
Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Every hard-core weightlifter and powerlifter has a towel in their gym bag. They can be found in martial arts dojos and boxing gyms. They are a ubiquitous element of personal exercise equipment. In a yoga session, a towel is extremely handy to have with you. Sweat on the yoga mat reduces the friction between the foot and mat, making stability and balance more difficult. Sweaty hands can create support issues between hand and mat and can create posture hold problems if the hand-grip slides due to wetness. A towel can be used to eliminate mat or body moisture problems in transition times between postures.

Everyone sweats. Some people more than others. If you tend to sweat a lot or don't like the sensation of sweat running down your skin, a towel is essential. The towel should be kept neatly at the side or front of the mat. While a huge bath towel is not needed, there are relatively large specific-to-yoga mat towels (they have sticky pads on one side so they don't slide away). For many trainees, a smaller hand towel will do nicely. The only real criteria for towel choice are that it be clean and absorbent.

BLOCKS

Not everyone in a yoga session has all of the required range of motion or anatomical body segment lengths that enable assuming an exercise posture unaided. A good yoga

teacher or studio should have blocks and other props that will aid trainees in assuming correct final postures, or that will aid them in moving towards acquiring the ability to do so over time. A yoga block is simply a piece of high density plastic/rubber that is used as an extension of the arm if the trainee cannot reach the floor. Its function is to allow the student to “touch” the floor as an aid to balance or to help provide something to push against the floor to help attain anatomical alignments in certain poses. The block looks a lot like a brick, with some being 50 mm (2 inches) thick or 25 mm (1 inch) thick. The thinner versions are sometimes preferable to the thicker as they are lighter, easier to move, and slightly more comfortable to sit on (during periods of verbal instruction).

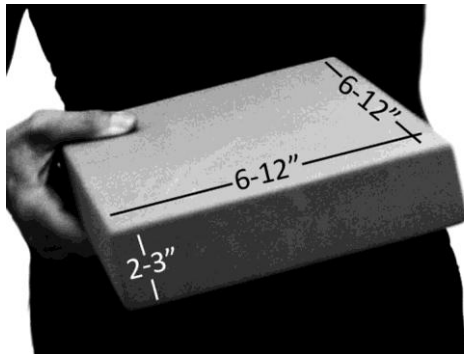


Figure 4-3. Yoga blocks.

A STRAP

There are instances where we need to be able to pull against the feet or to join the hands behind the back to assume a correct position. Range of motion insufficiency or particularly short anatomical body segments may prohibit some individuals from doing some postures or making progress towards performing them appropriately. A short (less than one yard or meter) canvas or other robust fabric strap (like the material from which luggage straps are made) allow the two body segments (hand-foot or hand-hand) to be indirectly connected. This enables appropriate force to be generated that pulls or twists the body or body part into appropriate anatomical alignment.



Figure 4-4. A strap can be used by those with limited mobility during postures such as the seated forward fold and a closed sage twist. A simple dress tie can be quite an economical strap.

CLOTHING

Any clothing worn to a yoga training session must allow unrestricted movement and it should conform to the shape or form of the body. This does not mean, as many people immediately assume, spandex or high price trendy workout clothes. Clothing must simply be comfortable, stretchable, and breathable. Even old school grey sweats will work. T-shirts and stretchy shorts work just fine too. Whatever is worn needs to allow full range of motion movement for the trainee and allow the instructor to see anatomical alignments. The former provides the best individual performance; the latter affords the best opportunity for teaching.



Figure 4-5. Clothing appropriate for yoga.

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The original Olympians trained and competed in the buff. The best cooling of the body is provided by direct exposure of the skin to the environment. Less clothing also provides the least restriction to movement, so there is somewhat of a basis for wearing limited clothing during training, as permitted by environmental conditions. Also, when people get fit, they like to wear less to show off their hard-won fitness gains. It's good to be confident and proud of your gains but certain activities require certain apparel considerations.

In any facility used by multiple people, especially where there is contact of skin to shared surfaces, clothing choice is important. For group health, a barrier between the skin and contact surfaces, whether machine or floor, are needed to diminish the risk of bacterial infection spread among users (reviewed in 1). Staphylococcus from one person's skin to shared surface contact can infect many other people who put their skin on the same surface. This can be easily solved by repetitive cleaning of contact surfaces throughout the day, but it's generally easier for all involved to just wear clothes that stop skin-to-surface contact. This is as easy as simply wearing shirts for men, rather than going shirtless, and wearing minimal tops for women to effectively attenuate the spread of disease.

Another aspect of bacteria and clothing is related to how the fabric of the clothes you choose to wear affects your own personal aromatic presence (aka, stink factor). A recent study demonstrated very nicely that cotton exercise clothing does a better job at preventing post exercise bacterial growth than clothing made of polyester materials (2). This has a direct impact on everyone around you if you should wear the same workout clothing in sequential sessions. You might be able to get away with it with cotton clothing, but why not just wash your gear between sessions? It lowers disease risk AND your training peers will thank you.

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Yoga training is conducted in bare feet. Shoes are, by custom—similar to martial arts facilities—left at the door, in the locker room, or, at worst, to the side of the exercise floor. Street shoes carry dirt and contamination onto the exercise floor and this is not acceptable in terms of customer satisfaction or health.

Other than the issues of clothes and shoes, everything else about yoga apparel is wide open. Slave to fashion or minimalist couture is unimportant; it's the training that is important. Cheryl Tiegs once proclaimed that "It's very important to have the right clothing to exercise in. If you throw on an old T-shirt or sweats, it's not inspiring for your workout." We'd like to think that the results of training are what is inspiring, but if cool gear gets you to the session on time, every time, that works too.

YOGA SESSION STUDENT ETIQUETTE

What is expected in terms of student behavior? Each yoga practice will have a specific set of guidelines for student conduct. A copy will generally be given to the student at the sign-up time for classes. Alternatively, most yoga practices with an internet presence will also have these guidelines available online.

All group exercise environments must be structured so that instructor-student interactions can occur effectively. This means that there is always a noise restriction in place, either formally or informally; the students have to be able to hear what the instructor is saying. In some instances, such as in dance based exercise systems like Zumba, the instructor has to use a microphone and PA to deliver instruction. This is not the case in yoga where the environment is usually a much more peaceful and sedate space. As yoga practice requires individual focus on personal learning, movement, and body position, individual and group behavior should reflect that need. This means that when it is time for the training session to begin, keep your voice down if you speak to

those around you and do not compete with the instructor's voice. Some yoga studios require more silence than others, so make sure you are familiar with the rules and practices of the studio in which you are training. When in doubt, quiet is always a good idea, especially if you are waiting for a preceding class to finish up.

Group exercise is a community building activity. As such, if a number of clients have been coming and training together for many years and have built a strong community spirit, it will be common for them to have a group personality and greet each other with boisterous tales of the weekend or current life-events. This sense of belonging and community is precisely what is desired as it promotes long term exercise habits and client satisfaction; however, a gentle reminder is sometimes needed to get the group focused on their exercises and mindful of the fact that they have gotten to where they are by focused practice in a quiet environment.

As a student, it is important to listen to instructions carefully and to look at the instructor for any physical cues provided through demonstration. If you are new, don't set up your mat in the back, the instructor is in front and they are there to help you. They can't do that if they can't see you way back in the back corner.

Try to stay with the sequence of teaching. Being in perfect synchrony with others around you (who may be more experienced than you) is not useful, or even desired. Yoga is individualized and as a beginner you are working towards getting into the correct position in the allocated time, not towards immediately moving into perfect posture and holding it for exactly so many seconds or so many breaths. If you have just gotten your body into a good semblance of the posture when it's time to move to the next, or even if you didn't, that's just fine. Move to the next posture of instruction. You're learning. Learning proper position is exquisitely important, so don't stress or get frustrated. Even if you do get a little frustrated, don't just do your own thing. If the

instructor sees you having difficulty they will give you cues or adapt the posture to aid you. It is a rare occasion that an instructor will give someone leave to freestyle as that creates a somewhat confusing environment for the group as a whole.

You can unilaterally choose to modify what you are doing if you are in pain or feel what is being asked of you is well beyond your ability. You are a client receiving a service and a good yoga instructor should be able to observe and teach modifications for every exercise posture they use. Individualization and adaptation for the client is part of the job and under no circumstances should the client be made to feel inferior or victimized by needing accommodation.

THE FIRST DAY

Going along to a yoga class for the first time can be quite a daunting experience, especially if the trainee is coming in alone and knows no one in the group. The student should ensure that they introduce themselves to the instructor and flag up that they are new with no idea of what to expect and how to proceed (be honest!). The instructor should take note and ensure that the student is well placed to hear and see instruction.

Before a yoga session starts, a beginner will see a bunch of what they perceive as competent trainees doing lots of different pre-session rituals. The beginner, based on this observation, will think they are not doing something they should be doing. Uncertainty and a feeling of inadequacy will start creeping in. If no one tells a beginner precisely what to do and when to do it, the door is open for dissatisfaction and dropping out. If a yoga instructor is trying to sell a service, having the first experience a student has be one of inattention is not good business practice. Every instructor and every advanced trainee was once a beginner and should make every effort to aid newbies in their initial sessions: the instructor because their business depends on satisfaction and

return clientele, the other trainees because the community needs to be positive to grow.

WHAT WOULD MAKE A TRAINEE A PERFECT TRAINEE?

There really is no “perfect” trainee but there are a number of characteristics of successful trainees:

1. Someone who listens to instructions and who is mindful of developing their own personal abilities. Yoga instructors constantly observe students and use a variety of techniques, verbal and physical, to teach modification of postures. Listen and watch for teaching instructions relative to adapting a posture. Sometimes you may not be sure if the comment is directed to you, so you should proactively try the adaptation. If your body feels any different or more at ease having carried out the instruction, it was meant for you.
2. Someone who displays proper self-focus, i.e., does not look around the room at how everyone else is doing and maintains their mat and physical presence within their own space.
3. Someone who lets the instructor do their job and does not offer correction to other students.
4. Someone who is at ease, comfortable, and focused on the task at hand, which in this case is the relatively tall task of bending, twisting, and holding your body in positions that develop your ability to move through a complete range of motion and develop you into a more fit individual. Unfortunately, this status generally comes only after years of progressive yoga practice.

WHAT NOT TO DO

The overall key is to not interfere with other trainees such that they are prevented from being in a position to learn and refine postures and skills during training. There are some specific issues that might be considered egregious errors:

1. Wearing shoes in class: A problem with sanitation and tradition.
2. Entering a session after it has started: Many studios won't allow late access as it is disruptive and limits your progress.
3. Leaving the session prior to completion: Disrupts others and limits your progress.
4. Taking a phone into the session: Disruptive to everyone.
5. Talking louder than the teacher: Neither you nor other students benefit from instruction if it can't be heard.
6. Chatting to the people near you during the class: Distracts you and those around you from proper focus.
7. Asking many questions during instruction: While asking for help is acceptable, asking too many questions during class disrupts the flow of the class and can prevent the training effect from being delivered to all students in the session. Save questions for after the session ends when student-instructor dialogue won't interfere with the conduct of the session.

Some yoga practices cultivate a sense of attention to the Indian roots of yoga through adoption of specific Sanskrit greetings, chants, and other eastern ritual elements. If the class contains some or all of these elements, you need not feel compelled to join in; if you prefer, just stay quiet, bow your head slightly, and wait for the others to finish and proceed to the actual training session.

WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR IN A GOOD YOGA INSTRUCTOR?

Not all teachers are the same, in any field. Some can be quite conversational, some a little dictatorial; some are encyclopedic, casual, inclusive; some are a little of everything.

A good yoga instructor will generally do the following as part of a class:

1. Greet students before class in a friendly manner. This should enable them to identify new trainees and welcome regulars.
2. Determine if anyone has any injury or other limitation that would affect one's health or ability to participate in the session. This should happen before the start of the session.
3. Help beginners find a space in the studio and manage others in spacing themselves. It is much easier as a beginner to be nearer the teacher so you can clearly see and hear instructions.
4. Move through the studio space when possible to make corrections or modify position. The instructor has a responsibility to ensure that everyone is responding to the exercises in an appropriate and safe manner. Moving to and helping those trainees who are a little behind or who are having difficulty is important as it facilitates the entire class in performing the same exercise, or adaptation thereof, at roughly the same time.
5. Ask students how they are feeling to ensure their bodies accommodated the stress placed upon them successfully, and will offer help with practical issues or any practice related questions.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD YOGA TEACHER

1. A good self-practice. Yoga is a large set of learned skills and the instructor needs to continually develop their own abilities in practice and teaching.

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2. A welcoming attitude. New students should feel part of the group from the first visit and veterans should feel at home. Students should not feel frustrated by the experience in any way ... other than that which normally accompanies learning and trying to master new skills.
3. A sense of humor in an instructor makes learning and the learning environment less intimidating.
4. A keen eye for detail. The instructor must be able to see what the trainee is doing right and wrong and make appropriate commentary or instruction for the students' benefit based on those observations. Such a teacher will actively observe students from various angles and use the observations as teaching points.
5. An ability to use their voice as a tool. Good instructors vary the pitch, tone and volume of their voice during instruction. Monotone is neither calming nor exciting to listen to for any period of time.
6. A sense of duty to students. Whether presented with a beginner or a veteran student, a good instructor will adapt their practice to accommodate them. They realize that one size does not fit all. They care about the progress of every client.

Finding the right yoga teacher is a very personal thing, when you find the right one for you, you know it. There is no sure-fire way to determine if a newly minted instructor will be a great one as they are just beginning and developing their teaching acumen. One thing that is certain is that they will be motivated to try. Similarly, there is no sure-fire way to know if an experienced instructor will be the one for you. They have developed their approach to teaching over time and their adopted methods may not be precisely right for you. In both instances, the only way to tell for sure is to audition them. Almost all yoga studios offer single session or very short term packages for new potential members. All new customers should take advantage of these in order to find the best fit.

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