

The Yoga Mat

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Abstract

After centuries of yoga practice without any specialized surface, the yoga mat now seems to have become a nearly indispensable part of the practice. This phenomenology explores the intimations, the intimacy, and the space of the yoga mat in its everyday usage. It seems that the mat convenes a sacred space not only for the practice of yoga but of the practice of yoga.

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I notice my rolled-up yoga mat standing in the corner, and take up its invitation. I roll it out in the middle of my study, and step onto it; my focus already on the series of yoga postures that lie ahead. Standing now within its roughly 24-inch-by-68-inch field, the yoga mat accentuates a place of solitude and quiet in my home. My attention turns inward, withdrawing to the area circumscribed by the mat, and to my body's routine of movements. I reach up, fold forward, lift my gaze, step back, lower down, press up, draw through, push back, lengthen out, reach forward and draw in. The mat itself is familiar and reassuring. Initially I feel the mat as cool, with a slight lack of friction beneath my feet. But as I proceed through the sequence of postures, the mat warms and soon responds to my sweaty hands with clement support, and to my stretched legs with firm but supple give. It seems that I am no longer on the mat or in the mat but of the mat. The mat gives purchase to the possibilities of my yoga-practicing body; it unfolds the limberness of my legs or the stiffness of my back.

Whether preparing for a home practice or running out the door to a yoga class, the thing I reach for is my mat. Is it all that I need? Usually I wear stretchy, comfortable clothes and use props such as a cushion, bolster or canvas strap - it seems I require a lot of things to practice. On the other hand, many evenings I am doing hip-opening seated postures on the living room rug while watching TV, and at times I can not seem to resist kicking up into a handstand against the wall. At moments like these, I do not need a mat or anything else other than things in my everyday surroundings to do some yoga. And yet, when it comes to a "serious" practice, the idea of the mat being necessary, even essential, persists. What is special about the yoga mat? Peeking into a yoga class underway, it is quickly apparent that everyone has a mat. This is not necessarily a studio requirement, nonetheless it is very rare to see a student without one. The mats likely appear as a rainbow of colours and in a variety of materials. There are lightweight travel mats and extra long mats, rubber mats, and fabric mats. The most common ones are long rectangles in

size and shape, mimicking roughly the outline of a resting, supine body. The beginner may choose their first yoga mat from a shelf at the drugstore. More experienced practitioners likely choose theirs with some care and at some cost. Even expensive yoga mats are often modest in appearance, but may also be elaborately decorated with text and design or highly technical with moisture-absorbing capabilities.

There are other mats in our world, mats upon which we step with different expectations and utility. The doormat welcomes us back to our home, providing a place to scuff the dust off our shoes or stamp the snow from our boots before entering. Bath mats lay beside the shower or bath, and as we step out, they absorb the warm water dripping from our freshly cleaned bodies. Such mats feel soft against our bare feet, and insulate us from the cool tile or linoleum flooring beneath. We seldom tarry long on door mats and bath mats; indeed, we are likely on our way to somewhere else when stepping onto these mats. As such, they mark a humble and hospitable transition from this world to that. The yoga mat also delineates a place of humble invitation for us to step in, but its transition is to be found through a longer stay on the mat, by convening its promised place of meditative retreat through movement. In this sense, perhaps the yoga mat is more akin to a cozy area rug in a living room, to hug our feet for awhile, where we may repose and quietly reflect at the end of a day. It seems that the area rug is primarily a place to rest our bodies or to entertain guests in the middle of an open room. The yoga mat is not for hosting convivial conversation, nor is it intended to welcome tired legs and feet to repose. Indeed, the yoga mat is seldom used for anything but the practice of yoga. An unrolled yoga mat designates a place for yoga.

The Familiar and Unfamiliar Yoga Mat

Practicing with our own mat, we automatically orient ourselves to the mat in a way that inheres in the poses themselves: we may tend to move and feel our tendency to symmetry, steadiness, and balance. When practicing on an unfamiliar mat, its significance as a space-maker becomes more apparent. A brand new yoga mat almost always needs to be broken in over time: the primary characteristic of grip requires the slick, slippery sheen of manufacturing be worn off. It might take several practices as well as some attention to cleansing to remove the layer of newness. During this breaking-in period, the practitioner may notice changes from one practice to the next while standing upon, pushing down on, stretching over the top of, and lining up with the edges of the mat. We get to know if it is sticky enough to use without a towel, if it is soft enough to cushion knees and elbows, or firm enough to press back with a steady support.

It is not only a new mat that might be unfamiliar. If we find ourselves in the situation of wanting to practice, but not having our own mat—due to travel or, simply, forgetfulness—the prospect of using a rented or borrowed mat can be quite unsettling. Some might give up and head home. Others may settle onto an unfamiliar mat, first testing it out, coming to stand at the “top” of the mat, turning sideways to line up the outside edges of the feet with the mat in a wide-legged forward fold, or centring their heads and arms in headstand. We perform the postures but from time to time our concentration might be taken away by the unfamiliarity of this mat.

Whether new, or new-to-us, the unfamiliar mat as such takes some getting used to; the features of my own mat, such as thickness or colour or firmness, are different from this one. Indeed one may put significant energy to find one’s own mat. A Goldilocks quality is sought: not too slippery, but not too sticky; not too soft, but not too hard; not too thin, but not too thick. A

yoga mat is best when it is just right for its own individual practitioner. Now the either new or borrowed mat makes itself unpleasantly known. During practice, we cannot help to notice the strangeness of the mat. Mats that are too slippery may be disconcerting, the too soft mats may be unstable, thin ones can be uncomfortable. Then our focus may shift from the movements and the breath to the discomfort and instability. The mat may be encountered as a nuisance as it is no more seamlessly integrated into one's practice. The unfamiliar mat provides not welcoming habitation: it is inhibiting the practice of yoga.

After the practice, the unfamiliar mat may be put back on the shelf, if we have a second or more chances to unfold and practice on it, the unfamiliarity may be broken in. For instance, a brand new mat may begin to smell of tea tree oil or lemon, together with a little of the perspiration from the last practice. The yogi comes to know how often the mat needs to be washed and how long it might take to dry. After months of downward facing dog postures, hands, feet and body impress themselves onto the mat, and its surface becomes worn. The once pristine surface begins to wear away, marked in those spots where the mat is touched or stressed most often, and sometimes leaving tiny flecks of material on the palm of the hand or sole of the foot. The practitioner comes to know their yoga mat, and the mat seems to become impressed, embossed and worn by the actions of the practitioner.

The Intimations of the Yoga Mat and the Intimacy of Practice

For students of yoga, the routines of practice become intimately intertwined with the mat itself. For those dedicated to a home practice, the mat may live perpetually rolled out flat on the floor in a room, marking a special niche reserved for yoga. Or the yoga mat may be kept always at the ready, rolled up and in a tube-shaped bag, leaning by the back entryway, or in a corner of our bedroom. It stands as sentinel: propped upright against the wall, waiting, and watching. For still others, the yoga mat may be stored in the trunk of the car or in a locker at the studio, always ready for yoga class. When the urge to practice strikes, the mat may come to one's mind like a good book waiting on the nightstand. For the reluctant practitioner, the mat may strike as does overgrown grass that badly needs to be mowed. Wherever it lives, one may hear its gentle call: it's time to practice. In such a moment, we may scoop it up along with our keys, wallet, and gym bag and head to the yoga studio. When rolled up and put away, the yoga mat may still silently nudge us to take it out and unroll it. Once unrolled, it is hard to ignore the mat's summon to practice.

As the door to the yoga room opens, students from the previous class flow out before the next group makes their way in. We walk in already looking, already moving in the most direct line to the best spot. Mat in hand, we choose our favourite location carefully, near the centre and front, or perhaps next to a friend. Some choose to be beside a window, others at the back of the room. One might align the edge of the mat with the wall, or at a precise distance from the next mat. I meticulously line up the edge of my mat with a long line of the hardwood flooring and then give it a little push to unroll it in a swoosh.

In carefully aligning and orientating to the space and to each other, sometimes we may find ourselves being too close with one another in a crowded class. It can be quite interesting to watch yoga practitioners set up in a crowded workshop class. Only if pushed, requested, even cajoled to make extra room, do we usually see a mat moved within some unspoken appropriate interval of space between. Discomfort may be visible on the faces of those who do not get their

favourite locale already claimed by the mat of another. Waiting for class to begin, we might practice some warm up postures, close our eyes and sit still, or gather around the mat of a friend to catch up before class, visiting them in their space. Once the class begins, we may each remain aware—distantly or otherwise—of the proximity of the others immediately around us. While the mat designates *our* space, the space beyond the mat's borders is shared by our neighbour. In a crowded class, we may remain stubbornly vigilant so as not to enter another's mat space, to not disturb another's practice. The shared space beyond the confines of our own mat must be silently attended to, negotiated, and ultimately integrated with one's practice. When practice is over, we attend to the custom of cleaning the mat with the studio-filled spray bottles, wiping and rolling the mat up again, tying it or placing it in its bag, prepared again to be ready for the next practice.

There are rituals of the practice itself, fluencies that develop over time between a yoga practitioner and the yoga mat. Mat and practitioner converse and are conversant with each other. The mat comes to feel like a home, a space to *be*. As the yogi practices more, the mat becomes a space that fosters a fine-tuning of attention. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012) writes “my body is the common texture of all objects and is, at least with regard to the perceived world, the general instrument of my ‘understanding’” (p. 244). The yoga mat may not be experienced just as a practical object on which we perform choreography of physical movements in comfort and with stability. Rather, we seem to *inhabit* the mat with our movements and the mat and my body become a whole. The yoga mat seems to provide a locus where, as we move through the practice we fully appreciate that “each moment of the movement embraces the entire expanse” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 141). We feel every discrete, subtle gesture as part of the whole of the practice, and we may come to fully appreciate and experience ourselves in close contact with the world.

Convening the Space of Yoga

For practitioners, the yoga mat declares a space for practice wherever it gets unrolled. Before practice begins, I move through some beginning movements, getting a taste of my practice to come and inhabiting the mat. My hands centre between the long edges in plank pose; my shin not yet but moving towards parallel to the top in pigeon pose, the outside of my foot lined up along the side in a deep lunge. The yoga mat is more than a secure or comfortable place to practice, it opens the possibility of *space* for yoga to happen.

As I move through postures, I necessarily press myself into and against the mat. Yet my experience is more one of pressing into and against the ground. Indeed, the mat seems to extend into but also soften my contact with the solid earth below. Don Ihde (1979) would describe my relation to the mat as one of embodiment: “I experience the [ground] *through* the [mat], the [mat is] taken into my ‘self-experiencing’” (p. 7). In this way it “is only secondarily an object, while more primarily it is absorbed into my experiencing as an extension of myself” (Ihde, 1979, p. 7). In experiencing the ground through the mat, I nonetheless encounter gentle pressure where I meet the mat, where my hands, feet, and body press securely against its pliant surface. At these body-mat junctures, I experience an “echo focus” (Ihde, 1979, p. 7), where the pressure experienced between me and the mat is not totally absorbed, never entirely forgotten. It is in the midst of this dynamic body-mat relational dyad, that my yoga practice unfolds.

The yoga mat reveals itself in the practice of yoga. As these gestures of the body and of the mind become practiced, one may proceed through the world differently, calling back to and fully informed by the moments spent on the mat. As practitioners, we may consecrate the mat with sweat, tears, and the aches and bliss of movement. We in turn are consecrated by the rituals

of practicing on the mat. We apprehend the nature of the mat as it gathers together the gestures of yoga: the physical movement of body, the deliberate rhythm of breath and conscious quieting of mind. Engaged in and lost to the pulse of practice, seemingly unaware of the substance of the mat, may be when we are most near to it; when the length and thickness and stickiness of the mat show themselves not as measurable physical characteristics, nor as mere place-holding, nor as a vessel containing, but rather a vibrant possibility of the world. When we respond over and over to the invitation of the mat, we may eventually move our bodies in a way so deliberately intentional that it is nothing less than devotion and in this way the mat seems to convene a sacred space.

“See You on the Mat”

The mat is not only a physical platform, it also refers to a commitment to the practice and to a particular attitude of the yoga tradition. The yoga teacher might beckon the students to “come to the mat” even though everyone is standing or seated on their mat already. The teacher is seeking to draw attention inward, and to urge the students to let go of thoughts from before and concerns for after. The mat provides both a physical boundary and a focal place for gathering one’s existence, and making tangible the supplication of the yoga practice. A yoga teacher once said that a student may come to yoga for its physical benefits alone, yet by drawing our attention to stepping onto the mat, moving the body, and fully participating in the yoga, we cannot help but experience the mental and spiritual aspects of the practice. We achieve this in the ordinary place of every pose as a gesture of *grounding* where we press down onto the earth, with our feet, our hands, or other parts of our bodies. Each gesture, each pose finds its orientation in relation to the mat.

For centuries, the practice of yoga had endured with very little in the way of equipment. Beyond its physical practicality, the significance of the mat inheres in the meaning it holds for the yogi. The mat offers and sanctions the space of yoga practice. A farewell of “see you on the mat” may reveal a sort of commitment and acknowledgement to the practice itself and to the community of practicing together. This salutation may not necessarily suggest that we will practice together at the same time. It probably does not mean “see you at the noon class on Tuesday,” even though this may happen. Rather, when we declare we will “see” each other on our mats, we are reaffirming our commitment to the practice, and to holding gentle account for each other. We surrender ourselves to the practice and the call of the mat with each movement “embracing the entire expanse” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 141) of our respective worlds.

References

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