

Tess Styler
WRIT 2000

Unrolling the stories: A Journey with My Yoga Mat

The first time I stepped onto a yoga mat, I didn't realize how much it would transform my life. Granted I was only six, and it was my mom who practiced daily at the time, the yoga mat continued to be a staple within my home and life. As I grew up, it felt as if the mat was inviting me to sink deeper not only into it but my practice, to let go of my worries and focus on the present moment.

The more I continued to practice yoga, I found that the mat had become an integral part of my own personal journey. Being a symbol of my commitment to my own health and happiness, and a reminder to stay present in the moment. Whether I was practicing in the studio, my University of Denver dorm, the Denver International Airport, my University of Glasgow dorm, or my parents' home, the mat provided a consistent and supportive foundation for my practice.

The yoga mat is not just a piece of equipment; it is a tool that helps one connect to their body and breath. A place where one lets go of their worries, where shanti (peace) is truly achievable, the Bhagavad Gita observes this as, "the resolute in yoga surrender results, and gain perfect peace; the irresolute, attached to results, are bound by everything they do". The yoga mat has been the sacred space for ages where one can focus solely on their practice and listen to what their body is telling them without distraction.

I gave my final presentation last week to complete my 300 hr certification for yoga teaching. It's been a year long journey, having to take a break last winter for mental health and personal reasons that made me have to move back home for a bit. In that transition time, I purposely left my yoga mat here in Denver, texting myself to see if I can find my own inner peace and self

without the flimsy piece of material. And I couldn't. I longed for the slight feeling of comfort that came from my worn, imprinted 6-year-old mat that had one too many mystery marks. I missed the little barrier it made in my mind, challenging me to stay balanced and strong within four little walls that held my practice in place.

Yoga mats are ubiquitous in the modern yoga world, but their history stretches back centuries to the origins of this ancient practice. While the physical practice and appearance of yoga has evolved over time, the fundamental desire for physical and spiritual well-being remains constant. The mat has become a symbol of this desire, providing the space for practitioners to connect with their bodies, minds, and spirits. Granting myself, and many a humble invitation to step on and a place to turn our attentions inward and experience solitude.

With no expectations or requirements, the interpretations of mats are vast and culturally different wherever one might be. My regular practice on my mat consists of a sequence of asanas to get my body moving and breath flowing, followed by pranayama (breath exercises) and then sadhana (meditation). I usually will do this flow every morning and then a few stretches or restorative asanas before bed to slow down my thoughts and connect back to my body/the energy I created earlier on my mat. Most days it feels as though I have two beds in my already crammed room.

They seem to find their way into most homes these days, either rolled out in its designated space, tied up in the corner, or shoved somewhere underneath the bed. Yoga mats have become the 'designated space' to not only practice yoga but to meditate too. But it wasn't always that way, yogis for hundreds of years would practice right on their floors, the grass, or the soil; becoming one with the Earth beneath them as they sunk their hands in her.

Eventually yogis moved on to honoring the fallen life around them, using the skin of tigers who died of natural causes; *Ahimsa (nonviolence)*. They provided enough length, insulation, and a non-slip surface; functions that still reign dominant over the market. Not the most common or affordable material, tiger skin, many yogis practiced on towels or cloths they had around them. There are no expectations when it comes to a student and their yoga practice, it is a gift for all, both on and off their (nonexistent)mat.

A fundamental truth and value of yoga is the idea of humility, and through that anyone is capable of anything and there are no advantages in one's practice. Every student can practice yoga correctly and safely, no matter the money put into it; yoga can be for anyone.

It was until the 1960s in Germany, where a yoga student, by the name of Angela Farmer, was worn out from practicing on her floor and crafted together her own mat using leftover carpet padding. It didn't take long for her creation to take off, many of her students became influenced by her; Angela and her father became the first retailer of the 'sticky' mat' in the early 1980s. Then in the 90s, US yogi Sara Chambers opted to make a 'more durable, study mat', that soon would become 'Hugger Mugger' one of the top yoga prop companies (Cler).

Yoga mats are much more than the flashy, overpriced, overmarketed ones that flood Amazon, Lululemon, Target, or most studios.

They are the representatives of a sacred space where yogis can connect to the divine within themselves. By stepping onto the mat, we are affirming our commitment to our own well-being and the well-being of those around us.

As I unroll my mat each day or wipe off the dust and hairs if I forgot to put it away the day prior, I am reminded of the deeper curiosity that drives us as humans to seek practices that help us connect to ourselves and the world around us. Whether that be from practicing yoga,

meditating, walking amongst nature, or simply being curious in the present moment; we are acknowledging our fundamental need for physical and spiritual well-being.

And in our world that is chaotic and uncertain, the simple act of stepping onto one's yoga mat serves as a powerful reminder of our own strength, resilience, and inner peace.

Citations

Andrew, Steven. "The World's First Yoga Mat." *Breathe Together Yoga*, 1 July 2020, <https://breathetogetheryoga.com/yoga/history-yoga-mat/>.

Cler, Cameron. "Before Mats Were Modern." *Wanderlust*, 29 Oct. 2015, <https://wanderlust.com/journal/before-mats-were-modern/>.

Lermeyer, Gillian. "The Yoga Mat." *Phenomenology & Practice*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2017, pp. 55–59, <https://doi.org/10.29173/pandpr29350>.

Mitchell, Stephen. *The Bhagavad Gita*. Crown Publications, 2002.