

# Time out on the mat



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THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS BEING "NOT GOOD AT" YOGA – AND THAT'S A USEFUL LESSON FOR OTHER AREAS OF LIFE.

Sitting on the worn carpet floor at a yoga retreat recently, I chatted with other students while we waited for the instructor.

"What do you do?" was eventually exchanged between four of us. Law. Lawyer. Lawyer. Law.

Chance? Unlikely.

Spiritual practices such as yoga and mindfulness meditation have been creeping into the mainstream, even into typically conservative corporate firms of late. Some have rejoiced in this seemingly perfect solution to increasing reports of anxiety and depression in lawyers: "Great, I'll just go to a power yoga class at lunch, take deep breaths, and I'll be right." For those who are trying yoga, I'd like to reflect on some deeper personal development opportunities it has to offer. Those of you who haven't yet taken to the mat might be surprised at its potential – yoga is said to be "practice for real life". Intrigued?

Most of you might already be aware that it can be impossible to separate the traits and quirks law demands of us from the thoughts about ourselves outside the office. In fact, as young lawyers we learn to normalise being critical of ourselves or increasingly sceptical and negative. As if that wasn't enough, throughout law school I found myself losing confidence and trust in myself: perhaps the fact that law requires us to justify our every opinion in the external wisdom of others

causes us to lose faith in our capacity to forge our own path.

So, what has this got to do with downward dog?

Well, a regimen of increasing demand combined with self-critical thoughts can be a challenge to sustain, let alone flourish under. Rather than suppressing feelings of inadequacy – or worse, trying to control them – yoga offered me the opportunity, in an environment completely removed from the lecture theatre or office, to practise building tolerance of the moment-to-moment status quo, without striving to change it or "make it better".

I first found yoga at the uni gym about six years ago, finding release in the stillness. Accepting myself as I was seemingly left me behind the rest over at law school, but on the mat, external success was irrelevant. Yoga gave me an opportunity to practise non-judgmental acceptance of myself, exactly as I am, at any given moment. Now, instead of being self-critical, and living with a focus on the perceived gap between where I am and where I am striving to be, I know it's better to withdraw from those types of thoughts.

Over the years I've practised various styles of yoga. Iyengar felt too slow for my busy mind, but was fantastic for getting the basics and practising non-judgment. Bikram was unbearably hot and seemed counter-intuitive to why I was drawn to yoga: it focused on pushing my body. Vinyasa flow,

where the poses are connected seamlessly and guided by a focus on the breath, has served me sweetest so far.

Yoga is life practice – when holding a difficult pose, I am practising letting my nagging mind be, while I wait it out. Rather than focus on why I cannot do something someone else can (which of course I still sometimes think) I am building my tolerance and acceptance of things as they are. Further, rather than believe every thought I have, I can choose to simply watch thoughts, and cultivate a sense of self-compassion and mild amusement at myself and my unending determination to embody success. The benefits are increased resilience off the mat, and an ability to direct my attention where I choose. Being flexible really has little to do with it.

Determination and commitment to self-improvement are of course not traits to be dismissed; however, they can cause us to focus on things that wear us down.

In my yoga practice now I deliberately go slow. There is no rush, many gurus from the yogic traditions reassure me: "All is coming". This is difficult to practise in the workplace, where things need to be done straight away. However, in class I need only breathe deep and allow my body-and-mind to be exactly as it is, at that time.

I encourage more lawyers to try some time on the mat. ●

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