

Positive Body Vibes From Big Gal Yoga's Valerie Sagun

By Samantha Durbin

Search #yoga on Instagram and you'll see an engrossing range of images. People are flexing in various poses, practicing inside and outside, in America and across the world, with different body types and skin colors. Yoga is an ancient mind-body practice that continues to evolve and mystify, much like the personal practice of its devotees.

Enter Valerie Sagun into the #yoga hashtag stream, a practitioner of yoga who advocates self-love and positivity. In the past five years, Valerie has been downward dogging and sharing her practice through the online yoga community. Most recently, she completed her Hatha yoga training and began teaching a Yoga for All Bodies class in her hometown of San Jose, CA. And like the rest of us yogis, she's both fallen on her face and enjoyed the sweet surrender of Savasana. Read on to learn about when @biggal yoga first discovered yoga, what keeps her positive, and how to nurture self-love through practice.

Tell us about your first yoga class and how it made you feel. Was it amazing and transformative? Was it a challenge that intrigued you?

Both. My first class was at my university five years ago, and I went to Hatha yoga class twice a week for two hours. As a beginner, that was a great way for me to get a consistent practice. It helped me set a routine for myself, and I would keep practicing after school to keep going. I found it hard, but was excited to do it finally—I'd been putting yoga off for a while. I was definitely sore after that first class, and the next couple weeks, but it was a good sore that motivated me. It was a healthy challenge where I'd learned new and different ways to move my body that I'd never felt before. I've since tried different yoga styles but found my personal practice in Hatha, which is slower and rooted in the breath. I enjoy a slower practice, and that's why I've learned to teach that style.

What is your approach to yoga? Is yoga equally mind, body, and spirit for you?

It varies with what's going on in my life. Now, it's more mind. When I first started, it was more physical which helped me mentally because I tend to get stressed out. It was a way to manage my freak outs by looking at things more clearly. There's definitely physical challenges, and your mind can say, "You can do this!" and then you fall flat on your face. When I first learned Wheel, I didn't think I could ever do it. Then I tried it one time when I wasn't in a class and I did it! I was amazed at myself. Many people want instant gratification, but with yoga you want to take your time and be patient. You're trying to push your body to do something it can't do yet, and it takes some time to warm and move

muscles you haven't used before. The art of yoga is in repetition. Yoga is always there to guide me toward being a better person, which also makes it a spiritual practice.

What are your favorite poses? What are your more challenging poses?

I always enjoy going through the empowering sun salutes. Sinking into Pigeon is a great release. Crow is a favorite and a challenge; I can do it for a couple of seconds, but I'm constantly trying to get better. I like the strong look and feeling of Triangle. I don't like Eagle because when you have larger curves it doesn't feel that great; I know I'm holding the pose, but it just doesn't feel good and in yoga, you shouldn't do anything that's uncomfortable.

And what are the overall challenges yoga gives you? What are the rewards?

The greatest challenge is working with my body. I can watch someone do a pose and think, "That seems simple enough," and when I try it, it doesn't work. There are certain parts of my body, like my stomach, that get in the way. I've learned to work around it, and it doesn't bug me. I just know I have physical limitations and if I try to do something I can feel my body resisting itself. I've adapted by doing poses differently and getting into poses differently because I have to find another way. The reward is having more awareness of myself. I better understand parts of myself, both physical and mental.

Besides yoga, what's in your toolbox to help you stay loving and positive?

Keeping busy with hobbies that help me express myself and make me happy. I also enjoy making ceramics and art. When I'm down on myself, a yoga challenge always makes me feel better and eases my mind. Also, community is important to me, surrounding myself with encouraging people who also believe in body positivity. When I first started posting yoga poses online, I discovered a community where doing yoga challenges brought people together. I related to people who also made me feel comfortable. You can create relationships inspiring each other. Through yoga, I've found a diverse community of people who also want to have fun and enjoy their lives.

Are there any mantras you tell yourself when you're having trouble motivating or continuing, either when you're practicing yoga or in everyday life?

One I learned in teacher training, and I use it when I get too serious. I tend to delay reactions or emotions sometimes and don't enjoy the moment until it's over. Enjoy the fun things in life and being appreciative of what I have are my daily reminders. But I've struggled with my ego, and when I'm enjoying something too much, I push myself down

and feel guilty for enjoying it too much. I've learned to let myself enjoy the little things and appreciate myself and my efforts.