

HOW TO NOT BE A MONSTER

**THE IMPACT OF YOGA ON
WORK, PLAY, AND FAMILY**

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To my calm husband Duane.

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LET'S BEGIN

Maybe you've bought this book because the title resonates with you. Maybe you've startled yourself with how poorly you interacted with a loved one or colleague and are trying to understand why. Maybe you have negative thoughts that will just not leave your head. Maybe you're struggling to make sense of the path of indulgent destruction that lies behind you, and you're worried about what lies ahead. Or maybe you're just interested in yoga. Or maybe all of the above, and you suspect you might be a monster who needs help. But that's hard to admit, so rest easy. I'll take the mantle: I'm a monster. I won't mention you again.

In stories, a monster is an imaginary creature that is typically large, ugly, and frightening, with a disregard for those in its midst, except for possibly an interest in eating them. A monster is a mess of impulses that leads to no good.

Every day, I feel competitive, jealous, angry, indulgent, and reactionary. I bear a festering grudge for a neighbor who caused problems while we built our house. I think through detailed plans for what I would say and do to a former employer who I feel mistreated me twenty years ago. I imagine a driver who has cut me off losing control of his car and driving into a telephone pole. Upon hearing that an acquaintance has achieved some form of success, I stun myself with an immediate reaction of hope for them to fail. When I was a kid, my temper was so bad that my parents would warn me of the realities of what I might turn into as an adult: a monster. I'd fly into a frenzy of fists and feet with older kids at the slightest taunt. I'd scream bloody murder if my brother wasn't cooperating with me. My mother once had to send a friend home from a playdate because he wasn't drawing the way I wanted him to, and I was enraged. I felt sick with regret after each outburst, but it took me a long time for that feeling to be enough to prevent me from lashing out again.

And guess what? I'm also often scared, anxious, nervous, and hurt, as monsters usually turn out to be. I worry friends might exclude me from events. I'll waste time on the couch, overwhelmed by thoughts of what I should or could be doing, including things I actually enjoy. I'm in almost constant fear that my and my husband's livelihoods will come to a crashing end and we'll be on the street within a month.

These are dramatic examples, but there are also more subtle thoughts and behaviors flitting through my activities that literally make me shake my head to stave them off. I feel addicted to these tendencies. They feel... pretty good. I've got

company: I've seen and heard examples of others—parents, teens, CEOs, yoga masters—behaving like monsters, and sometimes succeeding not just in spite of that, but because of that, only to eventually stumble.

But when I think of myself from ten years ago, I was worse; all of these thoughts and behaviors were just immutable parts of my personality, I figured, and maybe I could mask them, but certainly not fix them. I was unable to see myself as separate from my monster-like tendencies. Now, I can.

I've realized that in the brief moments when I manage to avoid these dark places, I feel better, lighter, unburdened... like I can actually get something constructive done. I've started to consider the times when I'm a caring, thoughtful and valuable member of society, and realize there are many—far more than the times I've been monstrous.

Yoga has helped me find this relief. It has taught me to create the circumstances I can operate within without being a monster. It takes work, but the payoff is worth it. You might be wondering how it is that by waving my arms and legs around while standing on a rubber mat for an hour a few times a week somehow helps me to achieve a state of well-being and helps me be good. This skepticism is reasonable. Why yoga? I'll try to explain.

WHY YOGA?

I encounter the question “Why yoga?” often. The easy answer: it keeps me fit and sane. In a nutshell, here’s how yoga was designed to work many, many years ago:

Yoga is a series of movements, the practice of which reduces distractions so that, with a clear head, I can identify, explore, and embrace my true self.

Easy, huh? More straightforwardly, a yoga practice involves a series of full-body movements that stretch and strengthen my muscles, smooth out my breathing, and ultimately clear my head so that I can get on with life happily and with purpose.

Yoga is a Sanskrit word that means “to yoke”. This can be interpreted many ways, but yoga as a “union” of body and mind resonates with me. It’s a simple definition that helps to remind me that both aspects of my existence are important and must be cultivated.

I want to live a long life, so I need to take care of my body, and I want to be happy for that time, so I need to take care of my mind.

There are many effective ways to address mental and physical fitness: therapy, medication, meditation, gym memberships, and personal trainers. But I’ve realized that yoga digs deeper and reaches further in the process; yoga is the only approach that is specifically and thoroughly designed to benefit me physically and mentally at the same time.

The physicality of a yoga practice is an obvious connection to a healthy body. I learned in high school biology that exercise is good for me. During a yoga session, I'm moving at a steady pace through a series of postures, or asanas, that are designed to restore or increase muscle strength and flexibility. Controlled breathing paired with movement strengthens my heart, thereby increasing nourishing blood flow to my cells and allowing them to regenerate. This prolongs my youthfulness. This is how there are 80-year-old yoga practitioners who can do handstands.

But the connection of yoga to the mind is less obvious. How does yoga strengthen my mind? Yoga works from the outside in, and from the inside out, as needed. My body is a physical manifestation of my mental state, and vice versa. If I'm depressed, I don't want to use my body, and I slouch and sleep. If I'm angry, my blood pressure increases, and my muscles engage. If I'm inspired, I feel energized and can run a mile without effort. So it stands to reason that altering the state of my body can affect my mind, forcing it to catch up, so to speak. If I sit quietly and focus on breathing slowly, I will relax. Cracking a smile will improve my mood.

The postures I practice in yoga are not arbitrary; they've been developed through years of trial and error. The result is a set of poses that I can rely on to make sure that I'm getting a well-rounded "rebalancing". Some postures are more complex and challenging than others, but that distinction is not for my body—I can stick to the simpler postures and still benefit physically. The more advanced postures are for my brain—overcoming ego, challenging my memory, building

focus. Everything I am subjected to (good or bad) has a cumulative effect on me. The yoga mat is a microcosm of the ups and downs of everyday life; by practicing a series of ever-more-challenging yoga postures, I'm working to develop greater resilience and agility.

Yoga is functional training for living.

There are extremes of how yoga is conveyed in western culture: it's either a spiritual practice or a gym workout. Unfortunately, if yoga is just treated as a workout, I'm missing out on the richness of its design and therefore its full benefit. Conversely, if it's treated entirely as a spiritual practice, restricted to esoteric and elusive theories, it can be exclusive and baffling. The reality is it's a spectrum, and with a little understanding of both ends, I've found what's right for me in yoga and put aside the rest. I have evolved in my practice, depending on my life situation. At times it's been more of a mental practice, and at times more physical. The balance is achieved not just within one practice session, but throughout the course of hours and hours of work on the mat: practice. My mind and body are learning, and without learning, the physical and mental fitness that I'm achieving from one day to the next are not sustainable.

A few years ago, I met a friend of a friend at a weekend getaway in San Francisco. During meals, he kept popping outside to smoke. This was not unusual, nor was listening to him hacking at two in the morning. But the next day during breakfast, he started talking about health. He said he smoked because he liked it, and he was "not afraid of dying." At the time I took

this as a heavy and rather thoughtful justification for letting his pleasurable habit affect his health.

But afterwards, I realized fear of death is not what encourages me to practice healthy living; an enjoyment of life and a will to live as long as possible does. My friend wasn't afraid to die, but maybe he was struggling to learn how to live.

**I don't practice yoga to get better at yoga.
I practice yoga to get better at living.**

As I've explored my practice, I've discovered deeper answers to "why yoga?", depending on circumstances. Yoga is a way to undo the days, weeks, months, years, or decades of damage my body and mind have accumulated. Yoga is a way to prepare for the future. Yoga is a balance of acceptance and ambition. Yoga is a process of discovery. Yoga is an opportunity to search for, explore, and then to be my true self.