



## **My Transcendent Yoga Mat**

**By Sara B.**

It's a magical rectangle measuring two-feet wide by about six-feet long, saturated in the red-violet shade of royal purple. It has a slightly sticky surface that today I plan to cover with my special tie-dyed towel. This towel boasts a confident color combination of purples and oranges and its velvety surface helps to keep me from losing my dignity. You see I sweat, quite profusely, in my hot yoga class and without this safety net I would slip, slide, and fall flat on my face. On my sojourn toward inner peace and tranquility I'll take all the help I can get.

I open the door of the heated studio on this damp day and the warmth embraces me immediately with the soothing comfort of a luxurious blanket. I begin to feel my body relax instantly as I take a deep breath of the warm silky air. I walk across the smooth floors in my bare feet and, glancing around the room, consider if I should take my favored spot near the back or instead, opt for something in the middle today. I'd rather not be up front near the mirrors unless there's no other option, since I find staring at my own full-body reflection entirely too distracting. I prefer to be a little more removed from myself so I can focus on, well, creating some distance from the day-to-day issues and my internal chatter. I settle on a spot in the back near the windows and quietly unroll my mat.

People who know me well would say that I like routine, and preparing for my yoga practice is no exception. I have a little ritual that helps me center my mind: I unroll my lovely royal purple mat with the little yoga symbol at the top and point it toward the front of the room.

Then I put my special towel with soothing shades of purple, energizing bursts of orange, and a tiny peace symbol right on top of my mat. It pleases me that this towel is *exactly* the size of my mat and brings my personal space so completely together within the shared space of this studio. For the next 60 minutes this will be *my* personal, sacred space. An island of serenity. I put my bottle of water and a small white absorbent towel to the right of my mat and I lay down very, very slowly onto my back. I take a deep satisfying breath and a long stretch from head to toe, then I relax my muscles and become still. My arms are at my sides, palms facing up, feet slightly apart, and my eyes are closed. The lights are dim and soft music is barely audible. There is no talking in the room. The only sounds are the soft whooshing of the studio door opening and closing, the padding of bare feet across the floors, and the unfurling of sticky mats.

I can feel the heat start to penetrate my body. Soon the temperature will rise to around 115 degrees. I take deep measured breaths and let my mind relax. I soften the area around my eyes and mouth and let my body melt into the mat as the day slides away. A few minutes of deep breathing encourages calmness and clarity of mind. Today I intentionally arrived about 15 minutes before class to relax and begin my metamorphosis. If I come straight from work, I don't have as much time beforehand to unwind and my practice on those days has a different feel to it. My body goes through the motions but my mind remains in a state of dissociation. It's during those sessions that yoga feels more like "exercise" and isn't as pleasurable.

The instructor comes in and welcomes us to class as the lighting becomes a bit brighter. This is our cue to sit up and look alive! I sense that the room has filled with about 15 to 18 others but I don't swivel my head to look around. No eye contact is an unwritten rule of practice. The idea is to focus inward and create a private space even with people all around us. Over time, this has become surprisingly easy for me to accomplish.

When I first started yoga about four years ago, maintaining my focus was difficult. I was self-conscious and constantly thinking about how my postures looked compared to everyone else. My focus was on external concerns while my inner self was verbally chipping away at my self-esteem. Upon reflection, I realize I had been too critical of myself, wanting perfection and control. I've since discovered that yoga is extremely personal and individual. I practice patient kindness with myself. I accept that my body does what it is able to do and what's perfectly right for me at that particular time.

We start with guided deep breathing together. One breath for all...inhale 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and all exhale, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. The idea of our individual energies coming together here this evening fills me with a sense of elation. We begin to flow through the *asanas* with our breath; one movement, inhale, another movement, exhale. This focus on repetitive breathing is essential to keep my mind present to what I'm doing right this minute. If I allow my mind to wander or engage in a mental chat about what happened at work or where I'm headed after class, the postures become more difficult, I lose my balance, and sometimes I find that I'm holding my breath. My inner dialog wants to start but I relax into my breath and let go. I'm always amazed to discover that if I'm willing to relinquish control and simply stay present to what is, the more control I have. The soft music, gentle prompts, and measured breathing in this hot yoga class allows me to flow through every movement and embrace the connection I have with others inside this room and in the world around me. I'm living and experiencing every little sensation *right now*.

I first started practicing karma yoga in a community class and became confused by some of the feelings certain postures stirred in me. During postures that opened the throat, but particularly those opening the chest-heart area I would feel an emotional wave wash over me and

often felt like crying. The postures weren't painful or terribly difficult so I was confused by the emotional surge. A few times I went home and sobbed without knowing why. After doing a little research and speaking with the instructor I discovered that when you're practicing yoga this emotional rush is common. You are opening yourself and your heart to the energy and love that surrounds you. At that time in my life it was difficult for me to imagine ever feeling loved again. I often felt sad when leaving class, but I always looked forward to returning the following week.

Four years ago my heart was full of pain and felt small, shriveled, and hard--like a dried fruit pit. The heaviness in my chest was almost unbearable. I had just been divorced after many years of marriage and I felt vulnerable, unloved, and painfully rejected. My body was rigid and weary from guarding my heart and soul against any more hurt and suffering. I found that I questioned my very existence. Somewhere in those years of marriage I had lost myself and felt uncertain about who I was and what the future held for me. By practicing and studying yoga, I began to rediscover and appreciate my abilities. I gained greater compassion for myself as well as for others. With every session on my mat I gradually learned to embrace change, accept impermanence, and achieved a new perspective on my life. Through the practice of yoga, my body has opened up and feels less rigid, and so does my heart. I had a choice and I wanted to feel whole again. I needed to rediscover the person that I had been years ago. The practice of yoga helped me feel connected to, and more in control over my body, emotions, thoughts, and even my actions. I'm the person that I almost forgot about. Yoga has allowed my heart to heal and come alive again. What we feel in our bodies is true. Sometimes during practice I visualize my heart blooming open like a lush garden rose as it continues to grow in warmth, compassion, and courage.

I don't feel like crying anymore during practice; instead I experience a tremendous sense

of peace and contentment. When I'm on my yoga mat I am *exactly* where I should be at that moment. My soul is lifted and I feel no stress or pressure, just lightness. I'm present to how my body moves and reacts to the poses. I listen to what my body is telling me and I treat it gently with respect and loving kindness. If I find myself struggling to attain a pose, I remind myself to just let it go. I'll try it again tomorrow. Every practice is new and I'm grateful for my capabilities. Some days are better than others but I don't dwell on the negative aspects. When I step on my mat I'm consciously positive in my thoughts. I don't allow the barrage of self-doubt or the stream of unspoken "what-ifs" onto my mat. The to-do list will wait; the work will be there tomorrow morning. Self-care takes precedence.

I hear the instructor start to cue us into our final postures and (as always) I'm surprised at how fast 60 minutes pass on my magical mat. I'm not ready for class to end. I want this feeling of complete connectedness to continue. We slow down with some spinal stretches before we move to our backs into one final twist. Ahhh, such a great finish. My breathing has started to slow as we are gently reminded to come back to our intention for practice this evening. I thank myself and my higher power for bringing me here, for my good health, and all the things I'm capable of accomplishing each day. I have many friends and family that care about me. I know I am loved. As the lights are once again dimmed, I close my eyes and ease into the final restorative pose of *savasana*. My body melts back into my mat and my breaths are deep and even. I have a heightened awareness of comfort as the towel-covered mat under me becomes barely perceptible. I relax and release any remaining muscle tension. Now slightly removed in mind and body, I experience a floating sensation. The feeling is sublime. After several minutes we're verbally guided to a seated position and my eyes remain closed. We take a few final breaths together and then seal our practice by saying "namaste" as one. The light and life in me

honors the light and life in you.

I slowly stand and fold my damp towels, carefully roll up my mat, and wordlessly gather my other belongings. In the dim room I hear only the sounds of mats being wiped off and rolled back up as feet softly walk toward the door. My steps, mood, and spirit are light, yet I feel solidly grounded and extremely refreshed. Even with my soggy yoga clothes clinging and giving me a bit of a chill, I am peaceful and content to be right where I am, right now. I'm suddenly aware that some of my best yoga experiences are yet to come, many will transcend my mat, and all will provide opportunities for growth and change. Centered and restored, I'm ready to re-enter the world.

*Sara B. loves words and has embraced writing as a way to reflect on the world and to learn about herself. When she's not writing, she spends her time working, studying, and practicing yoga as often as possible.*