

Four Simple Steps to Less Stress by Taking Yoga “Off the Mat”

By Megan McDonough

It's not hard to imagine Henry David Thoreau living in utter simplicity on his land at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. Spending only \$28.12 on a 10x15 square foot home and living a Spartan lifestyle, he went to the woods to live deliberately, learn life's lessons and feel a sense of “having lived” when he died.

Nobody wants to go to the grave feeling as if life was wasted. We all want to live completely, fully. But for most of us, living like Thoreau is more of a fantasy. We're busy earning a living, keeping family responsibilities and saving for retirement.

So here's the question for those of us fully immersed in a typical 21st century day: rather than retreating to the woods, can we live deliberately, here and now, in the circumstances we currently find ourselves?

The answer is a conditional yes. Yes because the essentials, by definition, are always present. The most essential is your indivisible essence, the core of who you are. It's impossible to be separated from it. The ‘yes’ is conditional, though, because we need more vigilance to stay focused on the essentials when our busy lives pull and push us off course.

Yoga cultivates that focused awareness to keep our minds here in the present moment. Rather than just a series of postures to open your hips, a yoga mindset can open your heart. By integrating principles of yoga into life on a daily basis, and not just in a weekly Hatha yoga class, a new world of opportunities can be found.

With the knowledge that this moment is inherently whole, relaxation appears. Just trust that where you are now has what you're looking for. This is yoga. And with this definition, everything is yoga.

Taking Yoga “Off the Mat”

There's a simple four-step process you can use to cultivate a yoga focus in everyday life. That process is called EASE, an acronym that stands for Experience, Awareness, Self-Reflection and Elect.

Step One: Experience

By watching your own experience closely, you can see the truth of the ever-changing nature of the world. During a in Hatha yoga class, the teacher instructs you to notice your feet connecting with the floor in Tadasana, or to see where your breath resides in Trikonasana. This same level of attention can be brought to everyday circumstances. Try this exercise. While you are feeling angry, sad, happy or excited about the anticipation of something, notice the answers to these questions:

- What emotion is present?
- How is my breathing?
- What am I saying to myself?
- How am I behaving?
- What am I feeling in my body?
- What is my energy level?

The simple step of noticing your experience while it's happening, or reflecting upon it later, can immediately illuminate where needless tension is being generated.

Step Two: Awareness

Awareness is the ability we have to broaden our perspective in a given moment. The interpretation of an event comes not from the experience itself, but from where attention is placed. Expanding awareness provides numerous choices for directing attention. Notice yourself reading these words. What are you aware of? Now turn your attention to your big toe. Notice where it is and how it feels. Is it hot or cold? How does your sock feel against your toe? Can you feel your shoe pushing against it? Can you feel the contact with the adjoining toe?

A moment ago, you were probably oblivious to your big toe. The simple act of bringing your attention to it, however, has expanded your current experience to include these new sensations.

Ask yourself the question, "what else is there in this moment?" Then, relax. Soften your edges, let go of your grip on the rope slightly. Slow down. Step away from the problem. Awareness holds infinite possibilities.

Step Three: Self-reflection

Self-reflection answers the question, "How do you want to *be* in this world?" We're misled when continually asked, "What do you want to *do* when you grow up?" Regardless of age, some of us still struggle with what we want to *do* for a living, which implicitly implies that some distant point in the future holds the key to our happiness. A much more present-oriented (and easier) question to answer is *how* we want to be, which of course could be lived in this very moment.

Answering the question of how we want to be focuses on the values we deem important. Do you want to be loving, courageous, compassionate, or adventurous? Pick one or two ways of being that resonate with you and then use your everyday life as the practice ground for bringing them to life.

Step Four: Elect

The last step of the EASE process is to elect or choose, in a given moment, to act consciously and in accordance with your values. Saying what we value is much easier than actually living it. Life is the testing ground for understanding at a very deep level what these values mean. What does it mean to be patient when your son comes home drunk? What does it mean to be loving when your boss is being demanding and arrogant? What does it mean to be courageous when the fear of rejection is paralyzing? The practice of life gives us unlimited opportunities to explore the implications of our chosen values.

Life is messy. At times we feel lost, as if we're wondering hopelessly through an impossible maze, stuck in a confining box. Life, though, is more like a labyrinth. We may feel disoriented, but there is only one path—the one we are on. And the path leads to the center every time, without exception.

Adapted from the book [Infinity in a Box: Using Yoga to Live with Ease](#) by Megan McDonough. Megan helps you get clear in body, mind and spirit so you can get the results you want. Along with [teaching yoga](#), she's an award-winning writer, [consultant](#) and [corporate trainer](#). She's taught at the famed Kripalu Center, the largest site for yoga and holistic health in the United States and is on the faculty of the Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy Advanced Training.

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