



# Yoga U

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*The College Student's  
Tools for Balanced Living*

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This book is dedicated to the amazing souls I met through Three Sisters Yoga, the teachers who teach me how to teach, and the people who inspire me to live life to the fullest (and to do so mindfully!). This is for all the students I have had at Wesleyan University who are my teachers as well. This is dedicated to yogis who I love deeply and the friends who keep me grounded in the journey.

# Foreword

I have been practicing and teaching yoga for over a decade now. When I started, I was a college student at the University of Denver pursuing a degree in Physics. Taking a yoga class was so far from my set of interests that it took a dare from a friend to finally get me to class.

When I went, it changed my life.

Suddenly, I'd found something that boosted my confidence, alleviated the pain in my back and shoulders and gave me a brighter outlook on life. Another interesting side effect was that it made managing my college experience far easier. My study time was more effective and my papers contained an air of positivity that had previously been lacking in my over-analytical science brain.

As soon as I graduated college, I took a hard left turn and became a yoga instructor. It has been my profession ever since and I have travelled the world, written a book, been featured in magazines, and taught conferences and teacher trainings. As a resident of New York City, my well-established practice continues to keep me sane, productive and optimistic about all of life's ups and downs.

Oh, how I had wished that someone had been thoughtful enough to write the book Ms. Engel is writing for you all now! My college yoga experience was a pivotal point in my life that obviously altered the direction of my future, but I came to it with such low expectations because at that time, no one had yet paved the way for young people to do yoga. Though I was taking class at my college gym, I was the youngest person in the room!

Nowadays, it seems the popularity of yoga has not only made it more widespread, but has also broadened the age range of the beginner yogi, and I'm thrilled to be seeing more college-age students in yoga classes. At one of my local yoga studios in Manhattan, the population is primarily NYU students and every time I have the chance to teach there, I can't help but think what a gift this is for the minds of these students.

They will have the optimism, openness and courage to go from their studies to life, the workplace and the families they build after their college career. They'll enter into their professions (which, in New York can mean 80 hour work weeks!) with the fortitude and gratitude that yoga teaches. It's exciting and I can't thank Shira enough for offering the tools of yoga so wisely to her community with this exciting book.

Trust me, she's done the work that she's offering you - I've seen her do it because she came to me as a yoga student several years ago while still in high school. As a bright light in my classes then, she continues to shine with her writings, and now she's taking them from blog to book to offer you the best of the tools she's cultivated over her many years of practice as both a yogi and a student.

What you're about to find in these pages are not just tools that will get you through the next four years, but tools that will create the foundational experiences to pave the way for all your endeavors. I don't say that lightly. Eventually this yoga stuff permeates your grey matter in such a way that it becomes not just a lifestyle, but your life. There is goodness and joy to be found within these pages, and I hope that these blessings stay with you for the rest of your term... in college and in life.

With great love,

Alanna Kaivalya

# Introduction



## WTF IS YOGA? AND WHAT DOES IT HAVE TO DO WITH U?

### WHAT I SAY

The word “Yoga” comes from the Sanskrit root “*yuj*,” which means to yoke or unite. This term is complex because it can mean something different for everyone. There are as many “Yogas” as there are people. That said, let’s go with this interpretation of Yoga as “union.”

College students tend to fall into states of disconnect; students view body and mind as separate, when they are inherently inseparable. Yoga is anything that brings these two entities into one. This means that Yoga can be a class you take at the gym, meditation, deep breathing, or a combination of all these practices.

A yoga practice has the potential to serve as a barometer, to assess how you are doing. A yoga practice asks, “How willing you are to take care of yourself in the midst of a stressful environment?” It is dependable and constantly malleable. In order to use yoga as an effective barometer, however, we have to be unafraid to make it mean something to us, as the unique individuals we are.

Yoga is revolutionary because we interpret it for ourselves. What I offer in this book is an interpretation of ancient yoga philosophy, poses and sequences that teach us how to embody that philosophy, and a wide variety of ways to have it all make sense in your bodies, minds, and hearts. It is crucial to note that I am offering an interpretation of an interpretation of an interpretation and so on. Yoga itself is interpretation because it is customizable.

Make this practice work for you, not the other way around. If you try to shift yourself to fit the practice, you are going to get bored or sick of it. Instead, make the practice fit who you are because who you are is AWESOME. This is radical. This is taking tradition, turning it on its head, and making it work for us so we do not lose it. Many people shirk away from modifying and reforming tradition because they think it is disrespectful. But honestly, if we do not do that, it will die out, which is terrifying because this is a tradition that makes people *happy* and happiness should never die out.

## WHAT TRADITION SAYS

The above is what I say Yoga is. This dude [Patanjali](#) has a whole lot more to say on the subject.

ATHA YOGANUSASANAM

ATHA = now

YOGA = yoga

NOW THE TEACHINGS OF YOGA CAN BEGIN

ANUSASANAM = teachings

Sounds simple, right? Yes and no. This makes so much sense and when we're on our mats, don't we already know that? Why do we need a whole commentary on it?

We don't live in a society of Now. We live in a society of if, when, could've, should've, and but. Now is weaning its way out of the vocabulary of day-to-day living. Now is actually the antithesis of the college student's crappiest friend: procrastination.

First, we will put off writing the paper until the library is absolutely silent. Then, we'll say that we can't do our asana practice until we write the paper. Not living in the now perpetuates a vicious cycle of neglecting the self. To say, "Now the yoga begins" is revolutionary when we create conditions for ourselves to be our best instead of trying to best ourselves. All yoga asks of us is to stay present. It is one of the highest commands and one of the most important. Yoga can be an amazing check-in point to see what else is going on in our lives. Have I neglected my practice because I thought the yoga should begin another day? What's happening that's making me do that? Can I do the practice anyway and see how I feel afterwards? These are all questions that, when asked, can help us use this practice of staying present, this practice of yoga, as a tool for life not once we graduate, but *now*.

YOGASH CHITTA VRITTI NIRODHAH

YOGASH = Yoga

CHITTA VRITTI = fluctuations of the mind

NIRODHAH = restraint

YOGA IS THE CESSATION

OF THE FLUCTUATIONS OF THE MIND

So what are chitta vrittis for the college yogi? Visualize yourself in yoga class or sitting in the library trying to crank out a paper. Your mind goes to: Is last night's hookup going to text me? Should I not have given out my number? What is wrong with me? Oh no, I made a mistake! Or, I have so much to do in so little time. I have this paper and that paper and that problem set and that write-up and how am I going to do it all at once? What did I get myself into? Or, What's for

dinner? I hate the new dining hall. Who am I going to go with? Is the vegan option going to be good enough?

Have a headache yet? Does any of this sound familiar? These are all aspects of chitta vrittis, otherwise known as the fluctuations of the mind. These various questions and analyses we pose to ourselves on a daily basis share some commonalities: they project into either the future or the past, and they are entirely unnecessary in the present. They are distractions. They modify what is going on in the moment so it makes it more difficult to focus. In many ways, they are jailers - they bind us to thoughts that are not facts. Now, we're human so we get them all the time. I know I do and a huge reason why I now do yoga is to quiet that chitta and to simply observe them. That last part of the sutra, nirodhah (restraint) allows me to be gentle when I see the chitta pass by and the way I interpret it is that I restrain myself from judging these modifications and acting on them inappropriately.

## **YOGA FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS: A REVOLUTION OF RADICAL PROPORTIONS**

If you are reading this book, chances are, you have experienced the daily stresses of college life and that hour-long release yoga can offer from that inner turmoil. Maybe you know what it is like to pull an all-nighter and stare in bathroom mirrors peering at gray skin. Maybe you know what it is like to be faced with the daunting social pressures of constantly being surrounded by new people, new situations, and a new lifestyle. Maybe you are searching for a lifestyle that does not solely consist of beer, tests, and random hookups.

And maybe, just maybe, you have found some time to explore yoga. Maybe your roommate swears by it. Maybe you're even a trained yoga teacher. Maybe you just stare at mat-toting happy-looking people and think, "If only I were flexible..." Perhaps you yourself have taken a yoga class during a particularly stressful day and, for ninety minutes, all your worries and that everything-is-a-big deal attitude you carry around melted away as you held weird poses and felt strength emerge from your spine.

Before you left for school, middle-aged relatives probably crowded around you at family functions to inform you that you were about to enter "the best four years of your life." Then, you get to school, experience the sheer awkwardness of freshman orientation, and are suddenly so busy and overwhelmed with classes, extracurriculars, and new friends that you begin to forget to breathe and take it all in. So let me ask you: how are you supposed to experience the best four years of your life if you can't even appreciate the present moment?


Yoga is revolutionary because Yoga IS the present moment. It teaches us and gives us the tools to tap into the now so that we can better appreciate our experiences, from the daily to the evolutionary to the revolutionary. Through practices that are both challenging and simple, we learn to face life's obstacles head-on.

College is intended to harness our tremendous potential to change the world. It encourages us to be selfish in the best of ways - to focus on what we want to learn, broaden our horizons, burst bubbles, and cultivate new understandings. The point of college as both an institution and time of life is to train us to engage with the world as people who know their purpose and have the power to fulfill it. In yoga, this purpose is called **dharma** and the point of yoga is actually the same as the point of college when it comes to fulfilling your dharma: the practice gives you the tools to engage with the world with impact.

But how on earth are we supposed to change the world if we are so worried, preoccupied, and lost? We are a generation in desperate need of a practice that gets us out of our heads so that when we return to them we can start using those noggins of ours more efficiently. We are a generation that forgets we have a body as we mindlessly munch, hunched over in the library. That body is constantly deprived of sleep, and forgets to breathe all too often. College, a stage of life that is intended for personal and collective growth, becomes akin to a pressure cooker... and we are water that is about to boil over unless we turn down the heat. Yoga turns down the heat.

So maybe you practice yoga already or have tried a class in town and experienced the pressure being turned down, like a lid being removed from a pot of overflowing oatmeal. Then, you emerge from **savasana**, head to dinner with your friends, get caught up in someone else's drama and proceed to freak out.

This is what happens when we access only one dimension (the physical) of a multidimensional practice. We deprive ourselves of letting that feeling last. It's not like we can just take savasana all the time. If we did, of what use would we be to the world? That would just be yoga, but what we need for a revolution to take place is Yoga. The capitalization is a subtle, but remarkable difference because it shows us that Yoga is not just the physical - it has the potency to address all areas of life and it can be accessed wherever, whenever so that we can approach each situation, from an exam to a frat party, with greater love, compassion, equanimity, and calm.

A black microphone on a stand is positioned in the center of a stage, illuminated by a bright purple spotlight. The background is dark, and the spotlight creates a soft, glowing effect around the microphone.

## YOGA, SLAM POETRY, & ACTIVISM

Where I go to school, slam poetry is the new football. At the start of every slam, the MC will remind the audience, "The point is not the point. The point is the poetry!" This is true for Yoga as well...but we'll use different terms to coin our metaphor. In Yoga, the point is not the pose; the point is what that pose can do for you, how it can allow you to carry yourself off the mat and into the world. If the pose exists exclusively on the mat, it does not matter. At all. "But it gets me a tight ass," I hear the whines. Okay, maybe those **surya namaskars** are working your toosh, but what exactly are you going to do with that tight ass? Where is it going to go? What meaning can you cultivate for yourself on the mat that you can take out into the world?

## THE COLLEGE YOGI BEHIND THE PAGE

Yoga teaches me that stability in life comes through stability with breath. I always thought that stability meant being static, unmoving, but when I started college, I discovered just how wrong I was.

When I got to my small liberal arts college in middle-of-nowhere Connecticut, I was filled with



fear mingled with excitement. I had spent the better part of my adolescence establishing a routine for wellness (I was lucky – I started early) and that was about to be shaken up...or so I thought. In my senior year of high school, I worked for a yoga studio and began practicing five days a week. I fell in love with [Jivamukti](#) and [Anusara](#) and hot power yoga and so, so much more. I was getting an education in a spiritual and physical discipline. I became attached to the very practice that teaches detachment.

I tried out one yoga class in a studio in that very small town and did not feel challenged. I grew disappointed and, for two weeks, complacent. I let my practice go for a little while and realized just how much it meant to me in the first place. I became overwhelmed by schoolwork and spent hours in the library, my body hunched over books, always leaning forwards or reclining backward.

At a campus Buddhist meditation event, I remembered a very wise yoga teacher telling me that when our spine leans forward, we are projecting into the future and when our spine leans back, we are dwelling in the past. When our spine is aligned and erect (as is the posture of yogis), we are content in the present.

With that memory, my yoga practice returned. I began a home practice. They say that necessity is the mother of invention and I say that college is the instigator of creativity. There wasn't much creativity involved when I lived in a city filled to the brim with yoga studios. I did not have to work for my practice when I could rely on external forces. In going to college, I learned that enlightenment takes work.

Here are some lessons I've learned:

1. **You can practice anywhere.** If any college practitioner has a right to this claim, it's me. I was assigned to a forced triple (three full sets of furniture squeezed into a room designed for two). There was literally no floor space. My mat had nowhere to go. In the beginning, this seemed ironic because double the roommates, double the stress, double the need for yoga to chill me out, but it turns out that this could be relabeled as an opportunity for me to explore the nooks and crannies of campus. I have practiced yoga in underground graffitied tunnels (where I struck my most badass Warrior Two yet), student lounges with people running through during my practice (see lesson 2), friends' rooms (see lesson 3), and in the beautiful grass when the weather has been especially nice. When there is willingness, there is a way.
2. **Breathe through the distractions.** Face it: there will be distractions. It's about creating a practice strong enough to withstand distractions. Breath is key. During my third week at school, I was in Bird of Paradise in the lounge. Already a tough balancing pose, I began to wobble as I heard a flock (pun intended) of students rushing through in between classes. I did not respond. I did not have to explain myself; the lounge is a communal space – I had just as much a right there practicing yoga as they had using it as a shortcut. Instead, I breathed deeply and guess what? I held the pose! I learned how to maintain my practice in the face of



distractions. That will serve me wherever this practice takes me.

3. **Bond with like-minded people.** Yoga has a way of sneaking its way into dining hall conversations. I began to share that I practiced and you know what I found out? I am not alone. Others were working just as hard as I was to maintain their regular practice at school so why not lighten the load by working together? I began to set up “yoga play dates” with these new friends. We would reserve dance rooms and take turns teaching each other. This became an excellent way to practice teaching and learning simultaneously.
4. **You are your own best teacher.** Before college, I relied heavily on my teachers’ guidance. I allowed them to tell me where my body should go instead of trusting myself. It was too easy not to. Necessity allowed me to establish a home practice. Spontaneously, I began getting on my mat and seeing where my body would take me. I didn’t *have* to do anything. My breath guides me through transitions and creates more space in my body. I know my body best and I needed to practice on my own in order to learn that.
5. **Take it off the mat.** College is *stressful*. Life is *stressful*. But it does not have to be all the time. The Buddha says, “Suffering is optional.” A regular yoga practice reinforces this. When I can get present with the breath and create space in my life through creating space in my body, day-to-day tasks lose their intimidation.

During midterm week, I walked into the student-run café after practicing and the barista asked me how I was doing. “I’m doing *really well*,” I emphasized. He looked at me, shocked, and asked, “Shira, have you forgotten about midterms?” “Oh, no,” I responded. “I’m just following my post-yoga bliss right now and I’m ready to get some work done.”

“You do that,” he laughed.

Seeing as I am writing this book and dedicating a large part of my young life to the practice, I clearly love yoga. I can give you a gazillion and one reasons for why a yoga practice can change your life, and another zillion reasons for why a yoga practice can transform the whole “college is the best four years of your life” adage from myth into reality. But none of those reasons matter. What matters is why you, as the unique, vibrant, awesome individual you are, want to practice yoga. And guess what? This is not a multiple-choice test. There are no bubbles you have to fill in. Every answer is completely valid. That’s right – there are no wrong answers so dive in.

## STRUCTURE: EXPLORING THE ARCHITECTURE OF THIS BOOK

Let’s begin with the title: This title has two meanings. One is Yoga University; emblazoned on the cover that this is a book on practicing yoga for college students anywhere, really, but specifically on campus. The second meaning is a bit more text-speak if you will. Yoga + U = yoga for *you*, as an individual, allowing you to create an authentic, meaningful practice that is deeply personal, as well as physical and spiritual, addressing what yoga does and can mean to you.

We begin our journey together virtually. This book began online in the form of my blog on Tumblr, *Story of a College Yogi* and it was only fitting to have it continue using a similar medium (it makes it all the easier to give you resources!). If I had to give my blog a shorter title, it would be called, “Yoga Me.” It is a virtual expression of my experiences practicing, teaching, and learning about Yoga. Through consistent self-exploration, I learned that it is impossible to focus solely on myself when engaging in spiritual pursuits. To focus solely on the self goes

against the philosophy of yoga. I wanted to know about other people. I wanted to know the stories of other college yogis and pluralize the title of my blog.

You might be coming to this book with a story as a college yogi. You might also be approaching this with a desire to write one, meaning that you want a consistent yoga practice, but do not already have one. Both are phenomenal reasons for reading! Like the stages of practicing headstand, there is something here for everyone!

We start off with a college tour. Through words and illustrations created by my studio art major of a friend, we go through each part of campus and see how we can be “yogic” (practice the principles of Yoga) in each physical space. What we learn on the mat enters the realm of daily life as we approach campus with fresh post-savasana eyes!

You will also find adorable Hindu deities on your Karmic Campus college tour. The deities provide the myths behind the poses we do (that’s right: we put our legs behind our head for a good reason). College yogi Hannah studied abroad in India and did a homestay with a Hindu family. After many conversations with her host father on the subject of the deities, she feels qualified to say:

We don’t need to learn all about the Hindu gods. The reason why there are so many and they’re all so different and misbehaved is so we can recognize qualities of ourselves in a few of them and really identify with them to realize that we are gods too. Their purpose is to show us that we’re all holy. It’s all an effort to make us realize that each one of us is important.

After our college tour, we delve straight into the heart of the Yoga practice: Patanjali’s Eight-Limbed Path. If you haven’t guessed already, this is not a book strictly about the physical practice. If you want to learn how to practice yoga poses, you will get that information here, but your time would be better spent getting on a mat with other practitioners at a class. If you are downloading this book, I am assuming that you already know there is something to *read* about Yoga, that you know there are philosophical words associated with a practice that is only one part physical. This is where the Eight Limbs come in: they break down all the parts of Yoga (and don’t worry – the physical practice gets *plenty* of attention) so that you can create a personal practice that benefits mind, body, and spirit. Following is the Student Planner, which gives you full yoga practices in a wide variety of styles that put all the yogic philosophy into practice.

We close the guide with a section on cOMMunity because do not forget – this is a book on Yoga for college students. I want to leave you with the biggest takeaway of all: this practice is no good unless you are using it to benefit your relationships with others! To say that you *practice* yoga means that you are doing something *practical*. The practicality of anything lies in how we apply it to our day-to-day lives. Creating (or joining) a community rooted in Yoga practices enables us, as college students, to gain group support for a lifestyle that is both individual and communal.

We move from theory into practice in our final section: Yoga Valedictorians. The idea for this book began with *Story of a College Yogi*. It seems only fitting that it ends with the stories of college yogis from a wide variety of universities.

Having a life-changing practice at such a young age means that you are being given the tools for living – poses for doing and breathing for being. Discovering yoga in college can mean only one thing: we have been given the Fast Pass at the Six Flags of Life. It means that we are des-

tined for greatness.

## YOGI'S CHOICE: HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Now that you know the architecture, you get to figure out which stairwell to take! There are numerous ways to approach the content to come and, just like taking a variation of tree pose in yoga class, *you* get to choose how you take this journey. Here are some ideas:

- **START TO FINISH:** You can read this book from start to finish and let the text wash over you like a blissful ocean wave. If you are doing this, don't annotate – just absorb. Then, go back through individual sections that strike a chord and search for more meaning.
- **5 BOOKS:** Break down this e-book into five separate ones: Karmic Campus, Patanjali's Eight Limbs, Student Planner, cOMmunity, and Yoga Valedictorians. Read them each separately as books in and of themselves. Maybe you are about to enter college so you begin with Karmic Campus to get a feel for what campus has the potential to do for your yoga practice. Then, a year later, you pick up the Patanjali's Eight Limbs. Maybe it only takes a week for you to move from book to book. Like an open-level *vinyasa* class, feel free to move at your own pace!
- **GET PHYSICAL:** Even though this book is about more than just the physical practice, feel free to use this book as a manual for what to do with the body by scanning it for the pose illustrations and using those as a two-dimensional yoga class on the go.
- **WORKBOOK:** Do every single exercise in this book. Annotate the shit out of it using cool annotating tools for e-books. Practice the poses. Write out your reflections. Be explicit about how each and every part applies to your life.

