

Let it breathe

Creating space for courage with Yogi Nora

YogaLife's Tej Rae catches up with Yogi Nora on her recent visit to Dubai



The struggle between giving into pleasure and exercising self-discipline is constant and relentless for most of us. We resolve to practice every morning, and we'll do it for a few weeks, and then press the snooze button at 6 am instead of getting on the mat. We have cravings for things as non-Ayurvedic as doughnuts. On the other side of the pendulum is Yogi Nora, who seems to inhabit another sphere altogether. Every morning, she practises for three to four hours, starting with Yin, moving into pranayama meditation, and then into a more physical practice that includes handstands and drop-backs to the floor. She hasn't eaten a piece of bread in decades. When she has cravings, it's for raw chocolate with no sugar.

For Yogi Nora, discipline and pleasure are

not separate. "The way you do yoga is the way you live your life," she says, with the definitive assurance that comes from decades of meditation and practice.

Her ascetic path harkens back to a piano, a flute and a 4-foot 11-inch mother who didn't believe in excuses. When Nora tells her students, "Get up like a mother", it's her own mother she is referring to – a tiny, strong woman that you would never cross, by Nora's description. Also gentle and kind. (Not that different from her daughter, in fact.) Nora's mother gave her daughter private lessons in voice, piano and flute, and in the Tiger Mom tradition – although she was Polish, not Asian – expected Nora to give 100 percent. "She was everything," Nora reminisces in a flood of emotion.

In Dubai for a series of workshops at Urban Yoga, Nora led classes in Yin, painless backbends, fearless inversions and a session for teachers on how to keep their classes fresh and exciting. I sat down with Nora over a vegan meal of baba ghanoush, rocket salad and hummus, to find out more about how her practice and philosophies have developed over time.

You mentioned that you had a highly structured childhood, which seems to have set the stage for your life as a yogi.

I think I was born to be on this path. I was either a full musician practising four hours a day or a full yogi practising four hours a day. It's hard for me to do something halfway.

Yoga is the same thing. I'm just doing yoga instead of my flute. I like to tell my students to pick one thing and do it thoroughly. Then your life takes shape. If you're dabbling into this and that, your life is dabbling into this and that. You have to have some commitment level, some determination inside you, that you have more to give than you're giving. Because we all have more to give than we're giving.

And this kind of intense focus has a way of spilling into other pursuits?

When you put yoga first in your life, then you have a beautiful relationship because of it. And then you have opportunities at work. If you're hectic in your practice, you're hectic in your life. Many people jam too much into an hour. If you're dabbling here and there, you're running in a circle. And you wonder why you never get this pose? Why you never get that job? You need to let it breathe. You need to make space for all these things that come into your life. If you make space, you have courage.

What if your students don't 'get it' right away?

Give them five or ten years, they'll get there. The first ten years, you're practising how to do yoga. After that, you start to do a little yoga. This is a process, this is your life. You go back to class, over and over, but you still don't get it. But you'll get something. And that something brings you back to class. We're very curious, and we want to do well. Deep down, we all want to do our best. The first few years, you don't even know what that is.

During the back bending workshop I went to, you talked about being calm and having no fear, but at the same time, we were challenging a lot of our boundaries.

It took me many years to figure out that through the intense poses, the best thing to do is stay calm. If I can stay calm, I can think. If I can think, the pose is doing itself. I'm not pushing. I'm relaxing and doing my technique. Which comes back to being hectic in your life. This yoga is teaching us how to live. It's way deeper than the pose. There's nothing bigger than this, except for birth and death.

In the same workshop, you mentioned the importance of eating a plant-based diet, and not having any 'gook' in your stomach.

Everything is about making space. Don't be so full. Less is best. You don't need to eat so much. When I turned vegan in my 30s, I felt so much stronger than when I was a vegetarian. One hundred percent stronger. When you get more and more advanced in yoga, you adhere to a plant-based diet. You have to be clear. You can't be clear if you're having dairy or meat. Clear mentally, and in your joints and muscles. If you eat mostly raw, you're getting all the vitamins, all the minerals. That's what you need when you're putting out energy in yoga. For me, it's the only way to go.

And you do a lot of juicing?

I juice once or twice a day, and I find that incredibly energising and nutritious. I have a base of carrot, apple, spinach or any kind of green, and ginger. Ginger is important because the heat warms up my muscles. If I have anything

else in the fridge, I'll throw it in there, like kale or pineapple.

Your physical practice is very athletic, but you do a lot of Yin.

Yoga busts you open. It's about being vulnerable, being innocent, being fragile. And from that, you're super super strong. You're so open that you can completely let go. The Yin yoga makes me strong. Just stretching and holding poses for a long time. I don't mean strong in my biceps; I mean strong in my internal. The physical comes.

People write to me and ask, "How do you get those abs?" I try to strengthen my inner self. It's a process to keep shedding your ego, to be open and trusting. It's an amazing feeling to go through life that way. Be as open as you can and as strong as you can. But not by pushing. By being open and letting it happen and making space for courage.

You are already so far along on the yogic path. What are you working towards?

I don't know. It's a drive in me that's bigger than me. When I practise every day, there's a moment of awe. It's so intense inside – if I died right now, I'd be OK. I'd feel like something really prominent happened in my life. I've reached some pretty intense places. Practising yoga is the deepest form of love I have ever found.

To learn more from Yogi Nora, check out her yearly retreat at Kamalaya Holistic Resort in Koh Samui, Thailand on May 14th. For more information, go to <http://events.r2o.constantcontact.com/register/event>. ❀



*The way you
do yoga is the
way you live
your life*



Yogi Nora's

heart opening sequence



Thanks to Yogi Nora, a certified yoga instructor that has been doing yoga for 19 years. Teaching beginner to advanced vinyasa flow and Yin yoga, check her out on www.yoginora.com or on her YouTube channel Yogi Nora, where she inspires people to practise yoga.

This heart-opening sequence was put together to challenge upper back flexibility and leg strength. These poses are options for beginner and more advanced practitioners. The beauty of this sequence is the flow from one pose to the next. Breathing with full, long inhales helps to relax and open the heart centre for courage.



1 *Lunging on or off the knee:*

On the knee, dig your back big toe in the mat, to ensure your back leg is fully engaged; relaxing low back. Off the knee make sure your front foot is pressing into the ground to stretch your belly and feel the upper body tilt. Invite your psoas to open!

ART DIRECTION: KISH
CLOTHES: CARROT, BANANA, PEACH MAKEUP: HANNAH LISA
MODEL: YOGI NORA PHOTOGRAPHER: ALI FROM PHOTO SOLUTIONS
LOCATION: ANANDA YOGA CENTRE COORDINATION: SAMANTHA STACEY

2 *Twisting in lunge:*

Twisting with elbows stacked, feels super great after the last pose. Keep elongating in the twist with long, slow inhales: go for length more than twist. Really try to stack your elbows to broaden the collarbones.



{ Challenge your balance and strength }



3 *Twisting half moon pose:*

Challenge your balance and strength and shift your weight forward. Again, go for length; drive through your long back leg and stand firm on your standing leg. By stacking the shoulders you are making space in your heart centre and fully extending in the pose.



4 *Warrior 2:*

Land calm and gentle into Warrior 2. Coming right back to long, slow inhales. Firm, strong legs, bending deep in the front leg and relaxing the upper body. With your strong stance and calm heart, relax your shoulders away from your ears.

5 *Reverse Warrior:*

Take your back hand down your back leg while keeping the full bend in your front knee. Lengthen your side body through your grounding legs. Look down at your back foot to be kind to your neck.



6 Triangle:

Straighten the front knee and ground through your front big toe. Reach forward with your front arm; place your front hand to the outside of your front foot: if you can't put your hand flat on the floor, get a block! Press down on your front hand and front big toe for an upper body twist.



Pyramid pose is an intense stretch for the entire body. Our legs secure us firmly to the ground as our spine falls forward calling upon balance and concentration while promoting inner calm.

7 Pyramid pose:

From standing, square your hips to the front and take your hands to the earth: as far as you can. Drape your front body over your front leg. Moving towards forehead to shin or dangle your head to the inside of your front leg. Slightly pick up on your front kneecap and ground through the outer edge of your back foot.





8 *Splits:*

Slide out to splits, keeping your body as neutral as you can. IF you are completely in splits raise your arms, cross your wrists with biceps behind the ears, to maximise your upper body tilt. Keep your legs active and soften your heart centre.



9 *Forward fold:*

Keeping legs and toes active, come to a forward fold with legs together or slightly apart. Depending on your hamstring flexibility, moving towards forehead to shin or forehead on the ground, between your separated legs. Keep the legs as neutral as possible with the least amount of turn out.





10 *Camel pose:*

On your knees, press your big toes into the mat to highlight the leg work. With palms to heart, lean your thighs forward and lift the heart. Keep big toe and thigh work consistent and reach arms over head to touch your heels. Big lift in the heart with slow, long inhales. Thighs forward and heart up to come back up.





11 *Mini drop backs:*

For advanced practitioners, same direction as Camel pose. Hips and thighs forward, big toes digging in the mat, heart lifting, dangle your arms above the earth for a few calm breaths instead of touching your heels. Legs totally engaged! Gently drop your hands to the earth for a mini drop back. Thighs forward, heart lifts and big toes dig in, to come back up.

Child's pose gently stretches your lower back, hips, thighs, knees and ankles; it relaxes your spine, neck and shoulders; it calms the mind, helping relieve stress and tension

12 *Child's pose:*

Relax your back in child's pose. Let your hands relax towards your feet and your shoulders droop towards the mat. Big toes are together with knees together or knees apart.



13 *Seated meditation:*

Sitting in easy cross-legged, half lotus or full lotus, take some calming breaths to your vulnerable heart, and remind yourself how amazing and lucky you are. From my great soul to your great soul.

Namaste.

