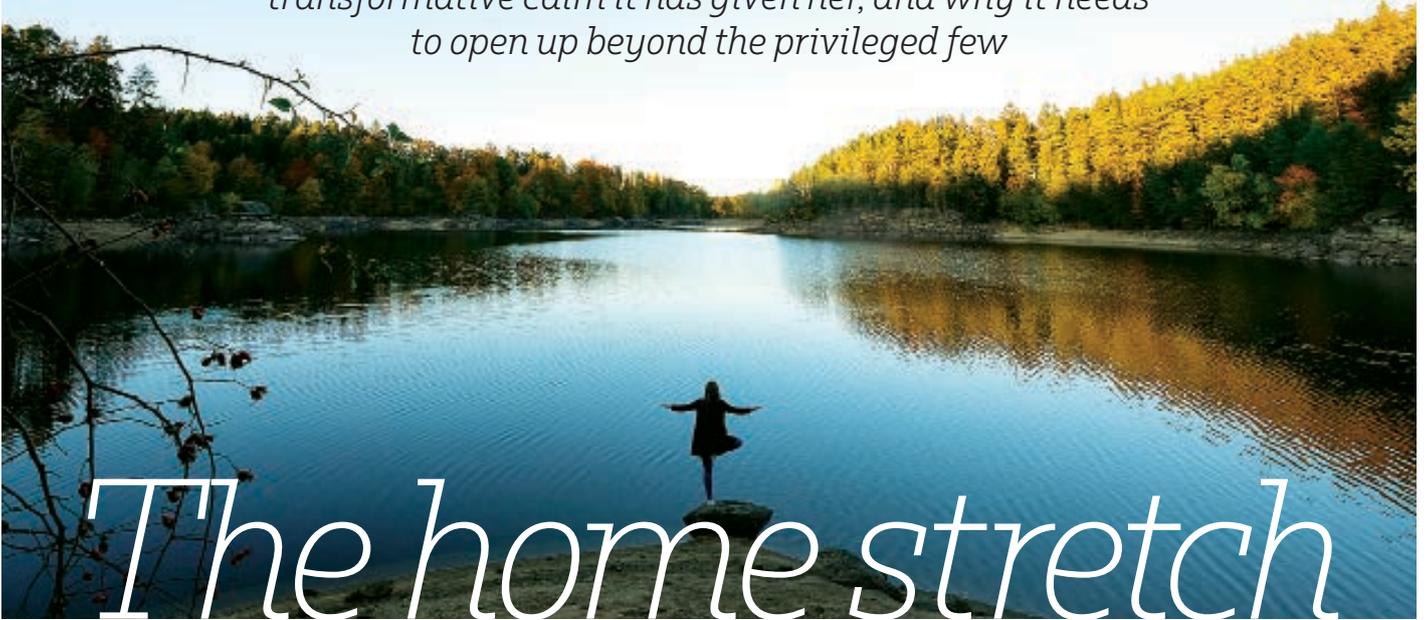


*Yoga in 2020 may conjure images of Instagrammable backbends, green goddess smoothies and expensive leggings – but for the author **Diana Evans**, who has been practising for more than 20 years, its power goes far beyond a hashtag. She writes exclusively on the transformative calm it has given her, and why it needs to open up beyond the privileged few*



The home stretch

THERE'S A SCENE IN THE RECENT hit drama *I May Destroy You* where Michaela Coel, in underwear, is captured in an acrobatic-looking yogic backbend on a wooden floor, apparently performing her morning practice, while checking her phone. In another recent television moment, Issa Rae's character in *Insecure* has a girlfriend round for a daytime yoga date in her living room, both of them side by side on their mats performing somewhat less ostentatious back stretches while chatting. It's a pleasure to see these random demonstrations of the presence of yoga in the lives of Black women, especially as it is an activity most commonly associated with bendy, skinny white women in leggings and crop tops, happily and easily paying as much as £20 for an hour of ultra-sweaty, calorie-shedding Bikram or muscle-carving vinyasa flow.

I've been practising yoga for about a fifth of a century, starting with going to ashtanga classes in London with my sister, who is now a longtime yoga teacher and practitioner. We would meet at eight or nine in the morning on some street corner in Euston or London Bridge — mist rising from the freezing pavement, our mats tucked under our arms — and undergo an hour and a half of Mysore self-practice (the ashtanga postures carried out at one's own pace) in a steamy hall full of deep-throated breathing, an instructor walking around performing adjustments. Once my sister joined

the world of the instructors, I would sometimes go to her classes and relish the feeling of being guided by her gentle, wise and familiar voice. She would hoist her hair up on the crown of her head and, cross-legged, straight-backed, manoeuvre us towards the alignment of our bodies and spirits. Yoga, she maintains, is an invaluable form of mind training and emotional regulation, a lesson in self-acceptance and the art of transformation — it's about much more than just toning and strengthening.

These days most of my yoga takes place in the living room, on a rug, a couple of mornings a week, accompanied by music (suitable soundscapes: Tracy Chapman, Morcheeba, Lucky Dube, Passenger, KT Tunstall, John Legend's first album). I don't check my phone while doing it and am usually alone and fully clothed, facing the windows. I go through the entirety of the ashtanga primary series — the first and easiest of six, the sixth being virtually superhuman — learnt over many sessions of following David Swenson's DVD *Ashtanga Yoga: The Complete First Series*. There are those acrobatic-type contortionist postures that I have accepted I will never be able to do, and that's fine. I breathe deeply. I count the breaths. I follow the logical journey of the movements as they work through the whole body system, and afterwards I sit cross-legged and straight-backed, connecting within, and take in the morning light.

I believe that the persistent regularity of this practice over two decades has deemed me calmer than I would otherwise have been; it has helped me withstand deaths and other losses, heartbreaks, anxiety, low self-esteem, the world state and deep stress. It's so much a part of my living in and facing the world that if I neglect to do it for longer than a week I feel a sense of mild terror brewing. It roots my feet fully on solid ground through a simultaneous magical elevation.

Generally speaking, yoga originated more than 5,000 years ago in northern India, as a spiritual ritual designed to develop inner harmony, awareness, acceptance and higher consciousness. It has gone on to become a multibillion-pound industry consisting of classes and retreats, equipment, clothing, dietary advice and a multitude of discursive and instructive media. The “yoga body” is now something akin to the “bikini body”, but originally there were no such things as a yogic shape or an aesthetic objective. This is an idea unleashed by the commodification — and typically undiverse — branding of the practice. Actually the mind is the focus; the yoga enables the body to exist alongside the mind, and vice versa, the health aspect is the most important thing. “Do not try this at home!” was my sister’s visceral response to the Michaela Coel backbend, expressing her worry over all those people who might be tempted to try it unaided and risk injuring themselves. As well as teaching in the UK, she has also taught and led workshops internationally, including three months in Rwanda

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THE ACTIVIST TEACHERS USING YOGA AS A FORCE FOR GOOD

■ Mindwalk Yoga is a free social enterprise launched by Zakiya Bishton, aimed at those looking for help through anxiety and trauma. mindwalkyoga.org

■ Oya Retreats is the UK's first yoga retreat for women of colour, founded by Stacie CC Graham. oyaretreats.com

■ Josetta Malcolm is a nonbinary yoga teacher based in Brighton who runs free/donation-based classes for queer and trans people. yogaeastlondon.com

■ Sanchia Legister is the founder of Yogahood and Gyal Flex, a yoga movement aimed at increasing diversity in the wellness world. sanchialegister.com

working with female survivors of genocide rape. Such are the proven benefits of yoga to mental — as well as physical — health that it is now recommended by GPs and the NHS as a relaxant and strengthening treatment for many ailments and forms of rehabilitation.

After completing my first novel, as well as buying a new chair, I rewarded myself with a yoga retreat in Thailand. I travelled alone to Koh Samui to a group of thatch-roofed cabins and chalets set off a paradisaical beach, and spent the next week lying on that beach listening to the waves or reading in between tri-daily sessions of yoga and pranayama (meditative breathing), and eating the stern, holistic delicacies of the yoga diet: vegetables, tofu, raw foods, fruit, lentils, light grains and seeded breads. It was a peaceful and unforgettable experience, though tinged with a strange loneliness, that of being at the end of a novel, where there is, for a time, an abyss with which you don't yet know what to fill — you are not yet ready to start something new, but you need the gap to be inhabited by something. The yoga was like a large clearing of the mind, the loosening of flecks and remnants of the last book, and I returned home to London ready to start on another, ideas for which were beginning to emerge in the beautiful stretching, the waits and the breathing and the counts. That strange loneliness, though, was also the familiar loneliness and alienation of being in the minority in the yoga space, which is partly a result of white supremacy at work in its popular representation. This still persists and needs to change.

My favourite ashtanga posture is the “fish pose” (*matsyasana* in Sanskrit), which comes towards the end of the primary series after the shoulder stand. You are lying on your back with the torso fully arched backwards, bringing the crown of your head likewise to the floor, chin in the air, the hands spread out underneath you with the palms down. Your heart is skyward. You are momentarily a mermaid. Every tension is falling away like water, and with your heart so high you are open to all the goodness and positive energy of the universe. It sounds flower-child and boho-mystic, but it is a genuine celestial feeling that is completely within our reach. It whispers that you are capable of anything, as long as you remain rooted, present, wide open and true. What better awareness with which to navigate our time. ■ **@DianaEvansOP**

Diana Evans is the author of Ordinary People, The Wonder and 26a



Diana Evans