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## Race and Yoga

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## **Sacred Crossroads: A Yoga Journey**

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### **The Journey**

From the very first moment I stepped onto my yoga mat, I began a journey that would propel me to become a yoga instructor and move my life in powerfully unforeseen ways. As I stood there awaiting the magic yoga promised, I hoped yoga would deepen the pride I experienced in the African dashiki that competed with my conservative pearl earrings and corporate suits. In reality, the magic of my yoga began with the impulse to embrace a life based on African principles many years before. And in true yogic fashion, I believe that I, a Black magic woman from the south side of Chicago, was born with the yoga that I practice and lovingly share with my students.

My yoga is me. It is a soulful Ayurvedic-inspired *Vinyasa* practice that evolved from my life experiences. And just as the yoga flows through me, it has a cadence. But, like djembe and conga rhythms, cadence can be difficult to follow. So, when yoga and crisis fused, my life became a blend of belly wails and scattin' ad libs. No one ever willingly invites crisis. It just appears, yet it's timing is intentional. My life as a divorced single mother and busy chemical engineer were looped into a soul-shaking experience to which I will be forever grateful. I've learned that times of crisis invite the ultimate yoga, the yoga of self-healing. Only the divine self, inspired by ancient roots, can serve as the teacher during these times. Surrender is critical. Non-judgment is required.

### **Heeding the Calls**

Unbeknownst to me, my daily journey in the elevator to the office high in the Chicago skyline was a metaphor. My inner alchemist came alive and cast the spell that would weave yoga into my life so strongly that it would fuel my life's successes and keep me connected to the ancestral cultural traditions I loved.

The teachings of Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa, Dr. Malidoma Some, Dr. Yosef ben-Jochannan, Michael Ademola Adesoji, Luisah Teish, and even Octavia Butler moved me and brought me closer to my ancient African roots. Their insights opened my mind to non-Western perspectives of life. It wasn't long before art morphed into reality and I was led to Indigenous Elders through whom I experienced the Orisha spirits of Bahia, Native American sweat lodges, and mantras to the sacred Mother. Through these experiences, I was introduced to the concept of yoga, specifically the process of becoming the highest expression of myself through my daily life.

My first yoga class was taught by the world renowned Yirser Ra Hotep in Chicago in 1992. Only now do I realize the significance of being exposed to yoga by a Black teacher. It is

even more significant that my first yoga class was a Kemeti yoga class rooted in the philosophy of ancient Egypt. And because yoga was offered by a Black teacher and in the spirit of my ancient ancestors, I dared to explore and embrace it. These classes were revolutionary because it was unique to see Africa reflected in yoga. My yoga classes were filled with Black people, mostly women. I don't remember their faces, but they are my sisters. I was born into yoga with them. I recall the class challenged my body and my mind. I left classes feeling light, victorious, and more connected to myself and my culture. After a month of yoga classes, I felt constant flutters of energy deep in my belly. The feeling came from within and without prior notice. I couldn't ignore it. My intuition told me that the feeling was connected to my yoga practice, but I couldn't make sense of it. It was during this time that life took over and I stopped attending classes. My work schedule overcame me and although I still thought about yoga and classes, I consciously let it go. Subconsciously however, the yoga imprinted in ways that would later push me into realms that I could not have imagined.



**Figure 1 – Saluting the Sun in Surya Namaskar (Photo Credit: Abolaji Monk).**

Life is a curious thing. When it takes over, it can be consuming. At times, working in corporate America was challenging for my soul. My heart yearned for deeper meaning in my work. I felt most connected to myself when I was in the community that reflected who I was as a person. With work demands, I was lucky if I could fit in any cultural experiences at all. I cherished conversations with my native Nigerian artist friends who eloquently embraced me as their own. They also assured me I was doing an important work. After all, I was one of the first African American female chemical engineers to graduate from my university. I felt a pull to come back to yoga during that time, but life wouldn't allow it. I was way too busy. And when I married, moved away and started a family, yoga was in my heart, but the pull wasn't strong enough to bring me back to my practice.

## Complicated Rhythms – The Birth of Crisis

The heaviness of being a divorced, single mother of two sons created an uneasy stability. I told myself it was a blessing and a chance for a fresh start. While some parts of me actually believed it possible, I walked the edges around the fountain of true inner peace. Yoga helped to fill the gap.

Before I knew it, memories of my first yoga class were stirred and I began practicing yoga in my basement with the help of a DVD created by a prominent yoga teacher. Within a month, my practice grew stronger. I loved how my practice evolved, allowing me to move into advanced expressions of the poses. My mind became sharp. I was filled with creative ideas. Work was more fulfilling. My yoga practice became a refuge from parenting challenges and my frustrations. The stresses of life were there, of course. But, I felt strong and courageous as my mind and body aligned.

For a long time, yoga was my daily offering to myself. I cherished the time. I felt more present in my body. I loved yoga. And I was sure that it loved me. The way each posture allowed me to embrace it was like heaven. I desired to practice yoga in community again. But my schedule didn't allow me to practice with Black teachers. When I sought out other classes, I was blatantly ignored by teachers in yoga spaces where I was the only Black face in the room. So, I embraced my yoga practice at my home. Little did I know, I was not practicing alone.

After a particularly powerful yoga practice, I laid in Savasana feeling the importance of my body in the universe. But then, pulsating pulls from deep inside my belly made my stomach drop as if I were on a rollercoaster. I spent the rest of Savasana wrestling with thoughts in my head. What was that feeling? What was happening?

Over the next few days the feeling grew stronger, even when I wasn't practicing. Yoga had triggered the feeling that I would sink so quickly and deeply into the Earth that all I wanted to do was scream. What happened to my yoga? The one thing that I had for myself was now torturing me. I was heartbroken and engulfed with fear.

Over the next week, I descended into a labyrinth cluttered with worried thoughts, labored breathing, and restless sleep. I had exhausting dreams of attending school in some far-away place with teachers without faces. After talking with my doctor, I was encouraged to rest. I rested as much as a working mother of two energetic and curious sons could, but my physical sensations grew stronger. One day, I felt uneasy and unsteady on my feet. I felt a strong buzzing snaking its way from my head down toward my feet. When the buzzing stopped, I was left with trembling hands and a feeling of floating in my feet. My doctor delivered an anxiety diagnosis and an antidepressant prescription. I struggled with accepting them. Over the next few days, I noticed pulsating energy in my hands and an uncanny ability to sense the emotions of those around me; I realized there was more going on under the surface. Yoga, in true magical fashion, had delivered me to the crossroads.

In *Ayurveda*, yoga's sister science, imbalance in the body is believed to be an imbalance in the body's primary energies or *doshas*. On a parallel path, African Indigenous cultures believe crisis is an opportunity and physical ailments are rooted in spiritual imbalances. In Ifa and Dagara spiritual cultures, mental health issues are linked to spiritual emergence (Somé 1998).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, trained Elders are consulted to usher the spiritual process with prescribed prayer, ritual and training, thereby bringing the mind and body back into balance. In his writings, Dr. Malidoma Some recounts the stories of those who found complete healing by embracing the traditional ways of African culture by addressing the physical-spiritual roots of issues.



Figure 2 – Honoring the Earth in Child's Pose (Photo Credit: Abolaji Monk).

My faith in the power of mind-body-spirit modalities beckoned me to look beyond the Western view of my symptoms for true balance. It was at the intersection of my ancestral teachings and yoga that I found true healing for my spirit and thus my mind and body. With the help of my Elders, I found wholeness in the wisdom of the Orishas, my spirit guides. Further assisted by Ayurveda, which prescribed a diet to balance my doshas, Tui Na abdominal massage, nature walks and rest, I regained balance. I bear witness to their power. Within a month, I was off my anxiety medication and feeling much stronger.

Although yoga was the catalyst for my spiritual emergence, I did not resume the practice of yoga that had brought me so much joy. I'd come to fear its power to change the energies of my body. Once my love, yoga and I had developed a complicated relationship.

### **Call and Response – The Healing**

In true synchronistic fashion, my work life took over again. My sons and I relocated to a different state. Well aware that the intensity of work could send my doshas into an imbalance, I maintained my connection with Ayurveda. Life was good.

While exploring my new neighborhood, I came across a storefront with a colorful lotus flower on the front window. Before I knew it, yoga clothes, mats, and books surrounded me. As I purchased a book about Ayurveda, the clerk asked if I'd done yoga before. My heart sank, but I managed to smile. After I left the shop, his question pulled at my heartstrings. It had been ten years since I'd practiced yoga. Not only had I done yoga, I'd loved yoga once. Tears came to my eyes. I missed the beautiful feeling of yoga in my body. I also recalled the painful times when my yoga practice triggered such discomfort in my body that it caused me to give it up. Once again, I pushed the thoughts of yoga away.

I woke up early one Sunday morning in the spring of 2015. The sun was shining and the wind blew ever so slightly. I decided to meditate before starting my day. Only a few minutes of

deep, slow breathing passed before my soul was completely stirred. I had to go to a yoga class. Before I knew it, I was in the car, dressed in black yoga pants and an old t-shirt. The ride to class was scary. I hoped the gentle restorative yoga class would be comforting. I breathed tentatively during the class. I was afraid to let go. More than once, tears filled my eyes, but I wouldn't let them fall. Even in its stillness, restorative yoga was powerful. Lying on my bolster, I felt a safety within myself that I hadn't had in years. Over the next five months, Sunday restorative classes became my weekly ritual. It became yoga for me. Once again, I had such a deep connection with myself. Just as in the early 1990s, I felt stronger, my mind was clearer and I began to have greater success at work. Life became more colorful and I could recognize its beauty.

Then, during a class, I felt a stirring in my soul. This wasn't the frightening experience I'd had before when my insides felt like they were dropping thousands of feet. It was soothing. Then, there was a whisper, "You are a teacher." Before I knew it, I was inquiring about teaching restorative yoga. In true synchronicity, it just so happened that the yoga studio was having their inaugural yoga teacher training class in just a few months.

My mind tried to talk me out of participating in yoga teacher training. I asked every question during the information session in hopes of being discouraged from taking the training. But, my spirit and the yoga were stronger. I knew there were other people who needed guidance as they were called into their own spiritual journeys. I was compelled to share my experience and insight with them. I was called to teach yoga in a way that acknowledged the ancestors and was conscious of the ways in which yoga affected the energies of our bodies.



Figure 3 – Peaceful Balance in Rotated Lunge (Photo Credit: Abolaji Monk).

As I introduced myself to the teacher training class, the fact that I was one of two African American women in the room wasn't lost on me. I was conscious that my ancestral connection and my yoga journey were converging. From this space, I let my heart-filled authenticity shine. I told the story of my love-fear relationship with yoga. I spoke of how I loved yoga so much and how it helped me to overcome a divorce and become more successful at work. I had to pause then as tears filled my eyes. I revealed that I didn't practice for many years and became afraid of the one thing that I held so dear. I told of how my ancestors brought me to the yoga they created in ancient Kemet, ushered me through my crisis, and delivered me back into yoga with melodic grace. I'm not sure what they were all thinking as I spoke. In my heart, I knew this yoga journey offered deep inner healing for me.

All the fears I had regarding my yoga practice surfaced during training. I was in class, but I felt like I was going through a rite of passage. I learned the power of breath, potency of meditation, and how to tune into my body and honor its limits. During a strenuous and energetic *Vinyasa* sequence, my overheated body began to show signs of *vata dosha* imbalance. This was the moment I'd feared. Before worry set in, my instincts and my training merged. I integrated my breathing with grounding seated yoga postures, child's pose and the *viparita karani* posture to calm my *vata* and bring me back into balance. I yielded to the tears that I'd held back for so many years while I was missing my yoga practice. I honored myself. I gave thanks to my Orishas. That was the day I became a yoga teacher. I was two months shy of receiving my yoga teacher certification, but the teacher inside of me was alive that day.

### **Dancing at the Crossroads**

Becoming a yoga instructor was not something I'd envisioned for myself. I wasn't seeking enlightenment when I began taking yoga classes. I was seeking a safe and empowering place to go within. I stepped onto the yoga path not knowing where it would take me. Like the honored tradition of initiation, my yoga journey became a blessing; it obligated me to serve my community and honor my lineage by stepping into the roles of teacher and healer.

Yoga took me to the depths of fear within myself. And although I could not name each one of them, I could feel their power so strongly that it kept me away from yoga for several years. The symptoms I experienced as anxiety served as a portal for a powerful awakening. I gained tremendous insights as a result of walking through my own crisis because I didn't walk alone. Instead, I walked cloaked in the sacred prayers and songs of my ancestors. Only after accepting their calling could I step back onto my mat to face my fear of yoga.

Yoga isn't always pretty. It transforms. It heals, as does revolution. The ultimate revolutionary act of healing for me showed up as yoga. Yoga became a channel through which to communicate with, and through, every aspect of my being. Once my heart and soul embraced African culture, my mind shifted to the roots of truth embedded within it. My reality was powered by the sacredness of my experiences. My relationship with yoga asked me to invest in who I was, be comfortable with being vulnerable, and live authentically. Ultimately, surrendering to my heartbreak of losing yoga made it new for me again.

Wearing an African headwrap, I begin each of my yoga classes with a short, silent prayer to my Orishas and the spirit of my ancestors that made it possible for me to teach. As I teach, I honor the legacy of Black teachers, African griots, and the original yoga teachers. I hold space for each of my students as I guide them through their yoga practice. I infuse the lessons yoga taught me with ancient lessons from African spiritual philosophy. In these moments, I am



conscious of the connection I have with lineages from long ago. I learned that my yoga is yoga. It is powerfully transformative no matter when and how it shows up. I don't have to name it for it to be yoga. Its existence as it flows through me, a magical Black woman, is power enough. And that's the healing that's needed in the world. Black boys and girls need to know that their existence is power in and of itself. If they know the resilience of our people, then that's a plus. If I can inspire one person to heal their heart in a way that fearlessly evokes their greatest talents to be shared with the world, then my yoga journey has been well worth it.



Figure 4 – Grounded Bliss in Modified Malasana, Garland Pose (Photo Credit: Abolaji Monk).

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