

Take Your Yoga Practice To The Next Level

by Erin Honeycutt

You've been coming to yoga consistently for a few years. You're getting stronger... more flexible... and your balance is improving. You can do headstand in the center of the room. Your practice is really moving forward.

And then... *you plateau.*

Suddenly every class seems the same. You open your hamstrings in the morning, only to feel them tighten up again during the afternoon. You feel like you're no longer swimming – you're treading water.

So what do you do now?

Simple. **Just look beyond your mat.**

Does your *life* support your yoga practice?

Your Lifestyle Makes The Difference

Ask any professional athlete: your lifestyle impacts your body's ability to improve and grow in a big, big way. What you eat, what you think, what you say. It all serves to either move you forward or hold you back.

Imagine if Tom Brady started each game thinking, "Those guys play much better football than we do. We're in big trouble." Do you think he could have led the New England Patriots to even one Super Bowl win? Not a chance!

An old saying goes: *The only thing that can come out of a box is what's already inside it.*

Imagine your body is the box. Your yoga practice comes out of you – it expresses You. The food you eat... the supplements you take... how much sleep you get... the movies you watch and music you listen to... the conversations you engage in...

... you put these things into the box *each and every day.*

The lifestyle you choose determines the quality of your yoga practice. Your body will reveal to you the harmony – or discord – of your life.

It's Not Conscious

Sometimes we don't want to believe that all these factors affect our strength and flexibility. After all, don't athletes get their results from hard work and sweat?

In the beginning, yes.

But just like us "non-professionals", even the great ones will plateau or backslide if their lifestyle conflicts with their physical discipline. Why is that?

Here's the answer: **the subconscious mind controls the vast majority of your athletic skill and ability.**

Most people don't really understand how much of life the subconscious controls. We think that because we **can** make rational, conscious choices, that **all** our choices must be conscious and rational.

Not so.

Has this ever happened to you? You have a lousy day at work... traffic crawls even slower than usual on the way home... and the first thing you do when you get home is snap at your spouse or your kids. It's happened to all of us, or you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Why did you take your anger and frustration out on your family? You didn't make a rational decision. You simply expressed an overwhelming, powerful emotion you felt. It was *irrational*.

Say hello to **your subconscious mind at work**.

Experts tell us that the subconscious controls as much as 95% of our behavior. Unless we make an effort to change, our conscious mind only controls the remaining 5%.

The subconscious mind produces every emotion we feel.

It triggers memories and feelings that seem to pop in from nowhere.

Every activity we do involves countless patterns of muscles firing in sequence or together. Patterns you don't even consciously know, but your subconscious calls them up with such precise timing that you easily achieve your goal of walking or writing or doing yoga.

Therein lies the problem.

The Inner Conflict

Since your subconscious controls the body, **it must agree with your conscious goals**, or you won't convince it to help you achieve them.

For example, suppose you believe you have tight hamstrings, and that opening the hamstrings in yoga class is difficult and uncomfortable. Your subconscious mind will tell your hamstrings to tighten up and prepare for the worst. Even your conscious decision to stretch them won't override that subconscious command.

Then you work to open your hamstrings... class after class... for weeks or months.

But each time after class, your body dutifully obeys the subconscious belief that your hamstrings are tight. They feel stiff and sore again by dinnertime.

We plateau when we hit a wall of our subconscious beliefs.

When you recognize the conflict between the conscious and subconscious minds, you have taken the first baby step of the **inner** work in yoga.

Resolving the conflict involves a lot more focus and determination.

The Inner Solution

The absolute best tool I know is meditation.

As you look within, concentrate deep, deep within your heart and **contact the innermost You**. Let this inner You reprogram your subconscious so it agrees with your conscious goals.

Find a style of meditation that you can do in short, bite-sized “snacks” throughout your day. Just one or two minutes. This makes it easy to work into your schedule. It also makes consistency easier (I’ll talk about the huge importance of consistency in just a moment).

If your meditation style requires you to sit in a darkened room for at least an hour, it’s harder to work into the flow of your busy day.

One other crucial component: meditation *must* connect you with the feeling you want to experience. The **feeling creates change**.

Not the thought. Not the images.

The ***feeling***.

The subconscious mind feels– it doesn’t think. It stores information and expresses itself through feeling and emotion.

The feeling is absolutely essential to make this process work.

Your subconscious won’t accept any desire or objective unless you feel strongly about it. And the feelings of the heart... love... joy... gratitude... create the strongest positive change in your lifestyle and your yoga practice.

Your Habits Hold You Back

While you cultivate that feeling connection with your heart, you can do a few additional things to make the process smoother.

Look at the parts of your lifestyle that support your subconscious negative beliefs. The subconscious learns by repetition. Do you repeat thoughts or actions that, for example, reinforce the belief in tight hamstrings?

Do you tell yourself – or others – that your hamstrings are your biggest challenge in yoga?

Do you sit at a desk all day at work? Do you have a long commute? Do you watch TV or a movie every evening before bed? Does your day simply lead you from sitting to sitting to sitting some more?

Sitting shortens the hamstrings. Sitting for hours every day for weeks, months or years forms the *habit* of short hamstrings.

And **habits are owned by the subconscious**.

You Can Make It Conscious

You can change these habits with just two tools: a decision, and consistent action.

First decide with conviction that **you want the change more than you want the habit**. This sounds obvious, but many people skip or gloss over this important step.

Decide *with conviction*.

Remember: the subconscious mind will only accept goals backed up by strong emotion. You have to believe – powerfully! – in your decision to change, or your decision won't have any force.

You can't *wish* to change. You must decide – with conviction.

Once you make a decision, backed up by a strong belief, you unlock the energy and motivation to take action. Your timeliness and consistency of action to change will reveal the strength of your conviction.

For example, if you sit all day and you have tight hamstrings, you can change that habit by taking a stretch break every hour. Stand up, stretch, take a short walk. Anything that breaks the old habit **and supports the change you want** – in this case, more open hamstrings.

This method works for any change, whether it is physical, mental, dietary or environmental.

- If a certain food weakens your immune system and lowers your overall health, consistently and consciously replace that food with a healthier alternative. This will systematically unravel your subconscious attachment to the unhealthy food.
- If certain people always leave you feeling drained or stressed, consistently change when and how you relate to them.
- If tense, emotion-filled movies or music leave you agitated and unable to sleep, consistently choose entertainment that helps you relax.

The point is: **you have the power to change** the habits and beliefs that hold you back.

[Wait, I Have To Change?](#)

At this point, many people turn away because this method sounds like too much work. Nobody really *wants* to change their diet, entertainment and lifestyle, right?

That depends. Are you happy there on your plateau?

How much do you want to grow?

Growth requires change. Pure and simple. You'll never progress on your path of Yoga unless you make *some* change.

After all, starting yoga in the first place was a change. Maybe a big one. You made a change when you moved from a beginner level class to an intermediate class. Each of these required a decision ("I'm going to go to yoga class") plus consistent action (e.g. not skipping class because you feel tired).

You've already used this method, which created your current practice and state of health.

But your practice only represents a small portion of your day. One hour of healthy yoga and twenty-three hours of an unhealthy lifestyle does not create progress.

Create A Feeling

Think of the feeling of a really great yoga class. Your body feels open and relaxed. Your mind feels calm. You feel connected to a deeper You. You think, speak and move at a calmer pace and with more purpose.

Does your life create these same feelings in you?

If not, look around for something to change. Maybe you eat while watching TV, reducing your digestion and leaving you feeling drained and sleepy. Change that. Eat in a quiet place with no distractions. Chew more slowly. Actually *taste* your food for a change.

Maybe you love dramatic or action-filled movies. Problem is, you can't fall asleep and you feel exhausted in the morning. Try cutting movies back to once or twice a week. Instead, end your day with meditation or some quiet reading.

Remember: **the feeling is essential** to the process.

If you really look, you'll discover quite a few ways you can change to create that calm and connected feeling throughout your day. A calm mind leads to an open body. Balanced emotions create an internal environment where your muscles *can* relax.

But pace yourself. **You don't need to change everything all at once.**

Bells, Treats and Yoga

Pavlov proved that it takes 21 repetitions to start to form a new habit. Which explains why **you must act consistently** to make this method work.

You can't make a lasting change in a day or a week.

It takes time. And patience.

Realize that you are *retraining* your subconscious mind. Just like any skill, you need to practice your new lifestyle until it becomes a part of you. That's when you'll start seeing lasting results.

Select one element of your life that you want to change. Focus on that one change for a month, with consistency. Once that change takes root and feels more natural for you, *then* choose a second thing to change.

The New Psycho-cybernetics by Maxwell Maltz gives an excellent, in-depth discussion and several techniques for consciously changing the subconscious beliefs that hold you back.

I **highly recommend** you read it. You'll find it immensely helpful in liberating your yoga practice from your current plateau.

But **you must act consistently**. Just like anything else in life, you'll get no results if you make a change one time on a whim and then never do it again.

Live Consciously

You can live a lifestyle of habit and stagnation. You already know what that gives you. Sameness. No growth or progress.

Plateau.

Or you can choose to live and act in a way that encourages your growth.

It takes effort to live consciously. But the inner feeling you cultivate makes the effort 100% worthwhile.

I love Purna Yoga because it emphasizes bringing yoga into my daily life. To help me **live life better**. It's not a 90-minute escape from my life. It gives me tools for creating habits, relationships and situations that both support my yoga practice and bring me more happiness in life. That's pure gold.

When your yoga practice hits a plateau, it almost always reflects a conflict between your practice and your lifestyle habits. The answer? Bring your yoga off your mat... bring it into your life... make it a part of you instead of "something you do".

Once you do, you'll begin to learn and grow in ways you never imagined.

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