

On the Road Again

By Michael A. Stusser

At the beginning of my regular yoga class, Dawn—my teacher for the past five years—made an announcement: at the end of the month, her studio would close its doors for good; the landlord had refused to renew the lease, and Dawn was moving on with her life. “Now please find a comfortable seat and close your eyes for relaxation.” Yeah, right...



Double Whammy

Not only is my long-term place of practice and repose vanishing into thin air, but the tutor who has guided my weekly meditation is also moving on, forcing me to find a new mentor. And have a nice day.

In these times of economic uncertainty, businesses are closing all around the world, and people are having to find original ways to make a living. This I understand. But we're not talking about the gal at my espresso stand taking a hike (which would also be traumatic), or my favorite car mechanic moving into sales; this is a person who knows my strengths and weaknesses, the spaces where I'm misaligned and—most important—how to correct them with simple commands and fine-tuned adjustments.

Trading Spaces

The studio itself has been key to my positive yogic experience. I've grown comfortable with the routine: when to arrive, the familiarity of the vanilla incense, the small talk (but not too much) with other students, a punch card on file. The place grew to be our own, with occasional parties to celebrate an anniversary or holiday, and additional programs when a big-time yogi or a rock-star chant master swung through town.

Over the years I even added my own touch to the ambiance: buying candles and flowers for the funky altar, suggesting dimmer switches for the overhead lighting, as well as groovy tuneage. Like a well-worn quilt at grandma's house, or a comfy bar stool at a favorite dive, my mat and towel have been stored in a special nook there for years. I wasn't just losing a place to sweat to the oldies, but a refuge and temple.

Change is good?

As depression and static energy sets in, my mind wanders with thoughts of stiffening inactivity or, worse, Bikram, Spinning, or racquetball. Knowing myself and how long it took me to establish a regular practice to begin with (it's a long way from the Barcalounger to the mat, my friends...), I understand that I'd best hurry and find somewhere for my yoga to thrive or it will slowly fade into oblivion (bringing back the days of shooting sciatic pain and clenched teeth).

Down-trodden dog

I can't afford private lessons, and this leaves me with two main options: I can move my practice home—either following cues on videocassettes (judging from the dozens of self-help and motivational tapes stacked on the VCR, I can tell ya this is not gonna happen), or assembling a series of my own creation. This latter suggestion would be a great idea if I had the skill, memory, motivation, self-awareness, or training. So...the last option is to search out a new Mecca, trying out teachers and spaces one at a time—the new guy on the block, schlepping to classes far and wide in search of a friendly studio.

The comfort zone

There's actually a yoga studio right around the corner from my house; I sat in on a class right when it opened. On first impression the owner had an eye for ambiance, with a waterfall in the entry, beautifully painted Ganeshas on the walls, and a Buddhist shrine at the front of the room. She also had a voice like Olive Oyl. Her instructions were piercing and shrill, making it even more difficult to tame my

monkey mind. These things matter. The YMCA also offers classes near my pad, but they take place in the warehouse-sized aerobics studio, and the mirrored walls and fluorescent lighting are a distracting and painful turnoff. (Obviously, I'm a high-maintenance yogi.)

Express Yoga was a no-go, as was the Sweat Box, and Yoga-Size. (You just can't DO yoga—with the all-important shavasana—in 55 minutes.) Though the sweet-sounding Temple Yoga seemed perfect for the part, the other 32 participants made me long for my living room. Thankfully, my city is large enough to accommodate dozens of spaces—and with patience and more drop-in fees than a fleet of paratroopers, I'm making progress, sorting them out, and narrowing my list (after checking it twice).

I'm on the road now, mat and towel in hand, tromping to studios and answering endless questions: Have I done yoga before? Do I have any particular health problems? What happened to my old teacher? And am I willing to stand in back to watch some regular students until I'm comfortable with the routine? OY! And what of the instructor's own experience? Are they versed in all eight limbs, the Upanishads, or CPR? Being able to stand on your head or memorize lengthy Sanskrit terminology does not mean you can help my spine align, my spirit soar, or my mind rest when the time is right. Perhaps it is I who should be asking to see their papers, please.

Value your routine and teachers, praise your practice, and thank those who make it a comfortable space to chill; nothing lasts forever. This I now know. Luckily, there are some things I'm taking with me from my previous experience with Dawn: my posture's first-rate and my outlook is bright; my heart center is open, and my head sits high atop my spine; my gaze is soft but focused. Prana surges through my veins as I get out of the car and walk toward another class—a tryout of sorts, where an opportunity awaits: a new practice, a new goal, a fresh future. Spine straight, I open the door and breathe deeply, taking it all in. •

Michael A. Stusser is a contributing writer for the Seattle Weekly and mental_floss magazine. His new board game Hear Me Out is in Starbucks stores worldwide. One day he hopes to receive yoga instruction on his cell phone.