

KARA-LEAH GRANT

The NO-MORE-EXCUSES Guide to YOGA



Because Yoga is for every body

“Let Kara-Leah lead you in this adventure that will transform you and transfigure you to the light and the love that is our natural state.”

Mark Whitwell, author of *Yoga of Heart* and *The Promise*

Kara-Leah Grant's commitment to you and Yoga is astounding. She is holding your hand and leading you to the healing power of intimate connection. Kara-Leah is persisting and insisting that you can be completely intimate with the pure intelligence and beauty of your life. Your Yoga practice will be actual, natural, non obsessive and daily! It is your direct embrace of the wonder that is your own reality. Let Kara-Leah lead you in this adventure that will transform you and transfigure you to the light and love that is our natural state.

~ Mark Whitwell, author of *Yoga of Heart* and *The Promise*

A wonderful primer for the hesitant beginning yogi, offering a wealth of information in Kara-Leah's inimitable, accessible style.

~ Kelly Fisher, Director of Urban Yoga, Wellington

I often say to my students that the hardest part of yoga is actually getting on your mat. In this book Kara-Leah helps you to break through some of that resistance that may be holding you back, plus it's a great go-to book to understand more about the practice of yoga, history, myths and styles. In Kara-Leah's trademark no-nonsense approach, she manages to keep things clear and interesting, communicating from her first hand experience – she has literally been there as the student and experienced the full spectrum of the yoga journey. This book is a perfect companion for the modern yogi. As Kara-Leah says 'This shift of consciousness is available to every one of us – it is the natural evolution of a human being.'

~ Nikki Ralston, *The Ralston Method*

This book is easy to read as a glass of water is easy to drink on a hot day. And just as valuable. Kara-Leah's words flow from a deep wisdom that is the result of a life lived authentically. She shares that wisdom, the essence of Yoga, generously, and I am privileged to have been one of the first to read it.

~ Ben Ralston, Healer, Yoga Teacher, Writer

This will be a great tool for people who just can't seem to get started with yoga. Written from experience Kara-Leah gives you numerous ways to get past the road blocks that seem to prevent many people from walking into their first yoga class. It gives insights into many misconceptions about yoga, and answers numerous questions about terminology that may baffle. The 200 pages are set out in a methodical and insightful manner, and will keep you on track to enjoy the many benefits that regular yoga will bring to your life.

~ Colin Clements, Australia Yoga Life

A Yoga teacher needs to be humble enough to continue their own journey of learning and healing, and brave enough to share it with those they teach. Kara-Leah shares her learning in a lighthearted, clear and accessible way. There is reassurance and advice for the novice yogi, further detail for the experienced Yogi and reminders for teachers too.

~ Gemma Carroll, Akasha Yoga Studio, Dunedin NZ

I have been steeped in spiritual practice since early childhood and have witnessed the exponential growth of yoga as an industry in the US, and also abroad, as I've been living and teaching overseas since 1999. We in the Western world are now blessed with a wide variety of choice. This enables each individual to align with the most suitable practice, at any given time, for him or her. However, this blessing of choice also becomes the challenge to know where to go, before you go. How do you know what to look for when this world of yoga is new to you? And as yoga becomes more of a marketplace, how can you separate the gold from the dross? I've had the pleasure of coming to know Kara-Leah over the past six years and I've seen close-up how she lives the process that is Yoga. In her latest book, she supports you in stepping safely and confidently into the ever-changing stream of Yoga. This is a valuable go-to manual for anyone confounded by not only the glittering new yoga, but also the complexities of the ancient yoga. Dive in, and welcome to the journey!

~ Melissa Billington, creatrix of MYOGA—freedom to unfold,
melissabillington.com

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the wisest part of all of us, that part which has lead you here today. The yogis call it the Atman; you might call it your intuition, your soul, or your heart. All names aside, it is the spark of divinity that we all share, that which connects us heart to heart around the globe.

Also by Kara-Leah Grant

Forty Days of Yoga



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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS YOGA?

Welcome to the world of Yoga – a place where we use our bodies to explore our psyches and gain mastery over our minds.

Whether you've already done a few classes and want to know more about yoga, or you've never taken a class in your life, you're in the right place.

Heck, maybe you're not ready at all and have been talking about trying yoga for years, but something always got in the way. Instead of trying yoga, you thought you might read a book about it instead. Even if that's you... you're still in the right place. It's my aim to blast through all those excuses you have about why you haven't started practicing and get you into class and onto a yoga mat.

After reading this book, you'll have no more excuses to keep you out of the yoga room.

On a much sneakier level, this book also attempts to give you a taste of yoga so in the *act* of reading it you are actually practicing yoga. Sometimes I'll ask you to stop and breathe in a certain way, sometimes I'll ask you what's going on in your head right now and if you can watch those thoughts without identifying with them. Sometimes I might even ask you to meditate for a moment or two. This is all yoga, because as it's about to become abundantly clear, yoga is far more than just the practice of physical postures.

You may still be unsure about trying this yoga thing – maybe you think you're too inflexible or too old or too big or too male. These are common misconceptions people can have about yoga and I plan to demolish them one by one. Along the way I'll also

answer some of the most common questions I hear from people who want to start yoga.

After that, we'll take a look at the history and the philosophy of yoga as well as the concepts you may come across in class. I'll tell you all about the practice of yoga and what that might include because yoga is not just about bending and stretching into funny looking postures.

We'll investigate teachers, classes and studios so you know how to find a great teacher and what warning signs to look out for – not all teachers are good teachers and some are downright bad. I'll lead you by the hand into your first yoga class so you can feel comfortable, keep yourself safe, and understand the many strange things that are a part of yoga.

There is a lot of material to cover, but you don't have to read it all in one go. There may be some chapters that don't apply to you. For this reason, this book is more like a reference book – each chapter is designed to stand alone.

Most of you will have come to this book with an idea that yoga equals yoga postures. This is like living next to a harbour your entire life and thinking that the water contained inside the harbour is the ocean. One day, you board a ship and sail out of the harbour and discover to your amazement that *this* is the ocean. For most of us asana – or postures – are our first port of call when it comes to yoga. That's where we start and it's a fantastic place to start. Why? Because most of us are so disconnected from our bodies that we desperately need to practice asana so we can learn to live inside our bodies again.

But this is not where yoga ends, and while this book devotes plenty of its pages talking about asana, asana classes, asana teachers it is written from the perspective of Yoga as the ocean – not the harbour.

When I'm talking about Yoga with a capital Y, I'm talking about Yoga as a process where one learns to be fully present with the moment.

'Yoga is the journey of the Self, through the Self, to the Self.'

That's all. And the *practice* of yoga (small y) is what we *do*, ourselves, as we journey through ourselves, to ourselves. That practice is asana – but it's also pranayama, meditation, chanting and practices included on paths like Karma Yoga.

Practicing asana teaches us about yoga until finally we live our lives from a total state of Yoga – a state of presence.

But don't worry too much about whether you get this or not at this point. You don't have to get it... it's just an introduction so that you can start asking questions. Because that is a big part of yoga – inquiring into your experience.

Many of us are looking for answers to life's big questions – Who am I? What do I want? What's my purpose? What's the point of life? Where am I going?

Yoga is one way to explore these questions... that's the beginning of the journey of the Self. It's a journey that ultimately starts with our bodies – not our minds. Because while our minds can spin all sorts of thoughts and beliefs about the way we are and the way the world is, our body is grounded in the here and now. Our body is as it is. It will tell us the truth, from moment to moment.

In essence our body doesn't just *house* our mind or psyche – it *is* our mind or psyche. The practice of yoga as we mostly know it in the West – physical postures – affects our body, which in turn affects our psyche. In simple terms, this is why breathing mindfully

* It's likely this is a translation of 13:24 of *The Bhagavad Gita* – the text it is attributed to.

*By meditation, some men
can see the Self in the self;
others, by the yoga of knowledge;
others, by selfless action.* (translation Stephen Mitchell)

while moving our body can have such a profound effect. It's why Yoga can lead to an awakening of Self and a shift in consciousness as we realise we are not the small separate limited ego-self we've always believed, but actually an infinite, connected part of a larger whole.

This shift of consciousness is not reserved for the most dedicated of yoga practitioners or those with the most perfect of postures, or the most committed pranayama or lengthiest meditations. This shift of consciousness is available to every one of us – it is the natural evolution of a human being. We will all wake up to our inherent inter-connectedness, one day or another.

Self-realisation is ultimately what yoga is all about – realising the Self. For today though, your yoga could be all about lengthening your hamstrings, opening your shoulders, building strength, or losing weight.

That is enough. The rest, it doesn't matter. It's always there, waiting for you when you're ready. But just knowing before you go to your first class that yoga is about more than forward bends, twists and backbends gives you some context for what might happen in class, or inside of you.

So step forth into the world of yoga, knowing that it will meet you where you are, and you can take as much or as little as you like from the practice. Know that nothing is asked of you except that you show up, that you are curious, and that you stay open to your experience. Forget everything you think you may know and be like a child again – curious, open and enthusiastic about exploring. That is where Yoga will meet you, and that is where this book will take you.

First though, we're going to blast through some of those misconceptions that might be keeping you off the yoga mat and out of the yoga class.

1. COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT YOGA

I'm not flexible enough to do yoga

Of all the reasons why people don't practice yoga, this is the most strange. It's laugh-out loud weird.

Why don't you practice yoga? Oh – I'm not flexible enough. Not flexible enough? That's like saying... why don't you go grocery shopping? Because my cupboards are too empty. Or why don't you have a shower? Because I'm too dirty.

Flexibility is not a pre-requisite for yoga, it's a *by-product* of yoga practice.

I'm going to say that again because it's key to this entire yoga experience.

Flexibility is not a pre-requisite for yoga, it's a *by-product* of yoga practice.

There's a huge difference there. Although I totally relate to the 'I'm Not Flexible Enough for Yoga Camp'. Once upon a time, that was me. I was completely and totally inflexible. In fact, I'd be willing to bet I was far less flexible then, than you are right now – if this were a competition, which it's not. How do I know? Because in all my years of teaching yoga, I have never seen one person come into class who was as inflexible as I was when I started yoga – and I've taught all kinds of beginners.

1. Common Misconceptions about Yoga

In high school Physical Education (P.E.) we were given standardised testing every year to see how fit we were. Two decades later, I can't remember how we were tested for strength or fitness, but I sure can remember how we were tested for flexibility.

We had to sit down on our bottoms, legs out straight in front of us, and a special ruler was placed at our feet with the numbers one through seven marked out. If you could only reach your fingertips to the one, you had the worst flexibility ever; reach the seven and you had the best flexibility. I remember doing this test when I was 13 and again at 14 (after that, P.E. wasn't compulsory). Both times, I couldn't even get on the scale. I was off-the-scale inflexible.

So I get it. I get how it feels to be inflexibility and that is how I know that the best thing you can do for your inflexibility is to take yourself to a yoga class – the right class with the right teacher, as melting that tension will take time. But it will happen. With patience, and persistence, in time you will become more flexible. I'm living proof of that.

Now, when I hear people say 'I'm not flexible enough to do yoga', what I hear is:

'I'm afraid of looking stiff and uncomfortable in class.'

'I'm afraid of being stiff and uncomfortable – as long as I stick to my usual range of movement I don't have to be reminded of how stiff and uncomfortable I really am.'

I hear people saying:

'I don't want to look like an idiot or a fool, the stiff one amongst all these bendy folk.'

'I don't want to stick out or look like I can't do it.'

'I don't want people to laugh at me, or pity me, or wonder what on earth I'm doing in a yoga class.'

That's what I hear you saying, and those are all valid thoughts and feelings. Now we're getting to the crux of the matter.

1. Common Misconceptions about Yoga

Why don't you do yoga? It's not that you're not flexible enough, it's that you're *afraid* of how doing yoga might make you feel – in the short-term.

It can be difficult to imagine how yoga might make you feel in the long-term. How about bendy? Soft? Surrendered? At ease? Relaxed? Open? How about that? Is that how you would like to feel when you reach over to tie up your shoelaces or get down on the floor to play with your kids or grandkids?

Ironically, while yoga is about self-acceptance and meeting you where you are – whether you are tight and inflexible or open and bendy – yoga class is still a place where we can feel easily ashamed of our bodies. It can become just one more place where we beat ourselves up because we don't fit the ideal we have got in our heads.

Who wants to go and do something that makes them feel ashamed of their body?

Nobody.

So the inflexible avoid yoga class and stay inflexible. In many ways, the yoga actually starts *before* you go to class. It starts with inquiring into yourself around this idea of flexibility and inflexibility. Now that you know you don't have to be flexible to go to class, are you chomping at the bit to get yourself to the very next available yoga class... or are you still reluctant and holding back? If you're still reluctant, what are you afraid of?

Ask yourself these questions and see what answers float up. Dig down deep and get to the bottom of this reluctance. Understand that behind that reluctance lies fear, and that fear is always a huge flashing neon sign that says: "Something to See Here." Fear is a pointer that shows us where we need to go in life – what we need to turn toward and face.

Now I'm not talking about the kind of fear you feel when you're down a dark alley and a menacing guy drops into step behind you. The kind of fear that comes up then is telling you to run like hell to save your bacon.

1. *Common Misconceptions about Yoga*

Problem is, we usually confuse the different kinds of fear we experience. Fear of an immediate situation is necessary for survival. Whereas psychological fear reveals what we need to do become a more healthy person.

Psychological fear starts with acknowledging how you feel. It starts with acknowledging all of your feelings. It's okay to feel afraid; to feel worried about being embarrassed or worried about what other people will think. It's okay to be worried about not being able to keep up with the class, or to be concerned about hurting yourself, or anxious about pushing yourself too far.

These are legitimate feelings that serve a purpose – the purpose of those feelings and worries is to tell you what you *need* to get out of a yoga class.

First, you need to go a beginners' yoga class that's taught by someone who understands what it's like to be inflexible and has the right props on hand to help you out. That teacher needs to understand what it's like to be inflexible both physically and psychologically. Working with the right teacher will make all the difference – because you'll feel seen, supported, held and listened to. Plus the teacher will be able to give you the right modifications for your body.

For example, a key element of flexibility is our ability to move our pelvis – to tilt it forward or to hinge from the hips at a 90 degree angle. Most inflexible people can't do this, so when they go into a standing forward bend, downward dog or any seated posture the pelvis tilts backwards instead of forwards and the spine rounds. Without correct instruction, this doesn't help the body to open in any meaningful way and it can put pressure on the spine.

A skilled teacher will notice that your pelvis is tilting the wrong way and will help you modify the posture for your flexibility level – although different yoga styles approach working with inflexible students in different ways. In Ashtanga Yoga a patient and skilled teacher will ask you to keep your knees bent when you are doing

1. Common Misconceptions about Yoga

Downward Dog and forward bends, only taking you through small numbers of the standing poses until the pelvis begins to get that movement. There's just no point in moving on to the seated postures before then.

Bikram Yoga is designed for beginners and teaches the first forward bend with bent knees for everyone – beginners and experienced people alike. Plus the heat helps soften the body and the mind so it feels easier to bend.

Iyengar Yoga is tightly focused on alignment and uses copious props to ensure everybody is maintaining the alignment of the posture within their range of flexibility and strength. This can be very useful for beginners – it was the first kind of yoga I ever did, when I attended a ten week course.

Other alignment-based styles and teachers can also be very helpful in those early days of discovering your body and releasing years of tension.

The one style that may not be suitable for inflexible beginners is Vinyasa Flow. Of course, it depends entirely on the teacher and the pace of the class but in general Vinyasa Flow classes move faster, have less alignment-based instruction and don't use props. This means that people who are inflexible will move in ways that re-enforce their tightness rather than open it.

I teach Vinyasa Flow classes with usually around 15 people. I do give more alignment instructions and take time to initially break down poses before moving toward a faster flow. However, when I have a new person in class who can't bend in certain ways, I'll often structure the entire class around where their body is so they can have the right experience for their level. It's not detrimental to other people in the class who might be more bendy, but if I taught a fast-flow with certain postures it might be detrimental to the inflexible person.

This is why finding the right teacher is paramount. Ideally, sign up for a beginners' course where everyone else on the course is

also brand new and the teacher takes more time to explain what's going on with the postures, working with each individual student so they know what's going on with their body and how they might need to modify postures along the way.

No matter what your fears and worries, there is no person that yoga is better for than the inflexible person. Releasing your body is an extraordinary experience. We get so used to living within a prison of tightness, it can feel liberating the first time we touch our toes with ease or place our bellies on our thighs. Our everyday movements become easier too – small things like being able to do up our shoelaces with ease or turn our head to reverse out of the driveway. Who doesn't want to be able to do that?

If inflexibility has been holding you back – ask yourself, what's the real reason that I don't want to go to class? Being inflexible is no excuse for not practicing yoga – yoga is *designed* for the inflexible.

I haven't got enough time to practice yoga

Of all the excuses that get bandied around for not practicing yoga, this one can be the easiest to counteract and, paradoxically, also the hardest to counteract.

When someone says 'I haven't got enough time to practice yoga', what they're really saying is 'Yoga is not a priority in my life'.

That's the honest statement, because there is *always* time for those things we value. We make time, even if we have to wring it out of our day.

If I counter their excuse with, 'There's always time in our day for the things we value' – the person I'm speaking to will often become defensive and start listing all the reasons why they really don't have time to practice yoga.

They work 60 hours per week on-call and travel often.

They work, as well as having young children and a partner.

They're training for a marathon already plus working a full-time job.

When those defensive patterns kick in, I know I'm talking to the person's ego. There's some part of the person's ego invested in holding up the status quo; that *believes* there's no time for yoga.

So I ask:

'Do you want to practice yoga? Do you want to go to class?'

Well yes, but...

'No, no buts,' I say, before asking again:

'Do you want to practice yoga? Do you want to go to class?'

I ask until the person can soften and open up to the question, responding with a whole-hearted yes. Now they've let go of ego (that which defends and holds against the moment) and I can speak to the deeper part of them.

If this is true, if you do want to go to yoga classes – given all the restraints of your life – *how* can you make it happen? What creative response could you come up with that would find a solution to all the busyness?

Now, instead of starting with not enough time and defending it, we've started with opening up to possibility and looking for solutions. It's a completely different mindset and it's coming from a different place. There's a different feeling to it.

Solution-finding feels different. It's about juggling, prioritising and figuring things out.

If you're a busy executive working crazy hours, where can you claim some free time of your own? What about doing a 45 minute lunchtime class twice a week and eating at your desk on those days? What about starting work earlier, finishing later, or just generally working more efficiently?

If you're a busy parent, can you claim one hour a week of your own? Can the other parent, a family member or a friend look after the children while you go and take a class? Could you find a Parent

& Bubs' class? Could you buy a great DVD and practice while the children sleep or when they're at playgroup or school?

If you're working on an oil rig six weeks on/six weeks off, can you practice at class three times a week while off the rig and then commit to three times a week for 15 minutes of home practice when you're back on the rig?

Often, as we start to explore our lives with a willingness to find a solution, unexpected ideas pop into our heads. We start to see the gaps rather than the obstacles.

Again, this very practice *is* Yoga. Just as we learn in class to shift from identifying with our thoughts and instead focus on the gaps between our thoughts, so too in solution-based living we shift from identifying with the obstacles to living in the gaps.

It often helps to do this exercise with a friend – preferably one who already goes to yoga class or has a home yoga practice. You need someone who is compassionate and can listen well – someone who can ask you, 'Okay, what else could you do? What else?' They're not there to give you solutions, but to prompt you to uncover your own answers. Just like a great yoga teacher...

Once you've established that 'having no time' is just another limitation in the mind, you may uncover a different reason why you're reluctant to try yoga. The time might be available to go to class, but you're still resisting going to yoga. This is common. Often the surface reason for not making it to class is not the real reason.

'I'd love to go to yoga.' 'Why don't you?'

'I don't have enough time.' 'Could you rearrange your life in some way?'

'Oh – yeah I could.' 'So you *can* go to yoga.'

'Yes but...'

That's what you want to look out for – that sense of 'yes, *but*'. Any time a 'yes, *but*' comes up, you know there's another layer of resistance to explore.

'BUT I'm afraid of not knowing what to do.'

1. *Common Misconceptions about Yoga*

'BUT I'm afraid that people will laugh at me.'

'BUT I'm afraid of looking silly.'

All of these reasons are perfectly okay. It's okay to feel like this. It's human to feel like this. That you feel like this is not the issue. The only issue is *how* you respond to these feelings.

Do you let them stop you from doing something you want to do on a deeper level? Or do you compassionately acknowledge these feelings and take action anyway?

That's training yourself to shift from being constrained by your mind, to acting from a place of courage and willingness. Yes, you know it, that's Yoga.

So if you're one of those people who have been meaning to try yoga for the longest time, but just doesn't have the time to do so... start with opening to a solution-oriented mindset. Figure out how you could make time, and then see if the reluctance is still there. If it is, then there is clearly a block getting in the way.

How do you figure out what that block might be? You don't need to. Oh you can figure it out if you like – root it out, let it go – or, you could just go to class. No matter what, even if you don't feel like it. Because you know a part of you wants to – otherwise you wouldn't be reading this book.

Feel the reluctance and go anyway. See what happens when you do that. Just... see...

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for *The No-More-Excuses Guide to Yoga*

Really want to try yoga but afraid that you're not flexible enough, thin enough, young enough, or physically-abled enough to go to class?

Been meaning to try yoga for years now but never seem to make it to class?

Been to a few classes and perplexed by the elements of yoga – the language, the philosophy, the history, the styles?

This is the book for you.



Kara-Leah has a rare ability to write about yoga in a way that is accessible, relevant and entertaining, without oversimplifying or sensationalising her subject. Her passion for yoga, and for setting straight the many myths that surround and obscure the practice, gives vitality to her writing and her ability to cut through our excuses to the real reasons we avoid yoga is enlightening. Her 'no excuses' approach to yoga may not work for everyone, but anyone who has toyed – or toiled – with beginning and sustaining a yoga practice will relate to, and find something useful in, this book. I highly recommend it.

~ Marianne Elliott, author of *Zen Under Fire*



Curious about yoga, but afraid to try? In the No-More-Excuses Guide to Yoga, Kara-Leah Grant introduces you to the fundamentals, talks you through your doubts, and pushes you to take the most important step of all: unrolling a mat and starting a practice.

~ Benjamin Lorr, author of *HellBent: Obsession, Pain, and the search for something like transcendence in Bikram Yoga*



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