

5 Questions: Yoga instructor Sara Ivanhoe



Yoga instructor Sara Ivanhoe relaxes with her dog, Agatha, at her apartment in Santa Monica. (Katie Falkenberg, For the Los Angeles Times)

By Dana Sullivan Kilroy
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Sara Ivanhoe has always been a bit ahead of her time. The 41-year-old yoga instructor has been practicing yoga since she was in high school. At first, she had no choice: In the small Marin County town of Mill Valley where she grew up, yoga was part of her school's curriculum. Like a typical teenager, she rebelled against most things that were associated with school, but yoga was different. More than 25 years and 4.3 million yoga-videos-sold later, Ivanhoe is still at it. When she isn't teaching at YogaWorks in Santa Monica, she's at Loyola Marymount University, working toward a master's degree in yoga philosophy. Here, Ivanhoe shares some of her yoga wisdom:

You started practicing yoga when you were 14. What brought you to yoga when most girls are distracted by makeup and ... boys?

Well I was distracted by makeup and boys — actually, sometimes I still am! And like anything else at school, I thought yoga was a drag, but I continued to practice because I had to. Years later, when life started to catch up with me, as it does for many people post-college, I needed to find some peace and balance. I realized that yoga had been with me all along.

Yoga has evolved in this country during the last two decades. Which changes do you think are positive and which concern you?

First, the bad: I am very concerned about the trend of what I see as aggressive and acrobatic styles of yoga. I see people who are new to yoga trying to do things with their bodies that they simply should not. Some of them are dangerous. Too many teachers are telling students to "conquer their fears" and to try things like handstands in the middle of a room without wall support. For many people this is totally unreasonable. The result is that people are falling, hurting themselves, spraining joints and causing injuries that will last a lifetime. Not all fears should be conquered! Some fears are intelligent and they keep us from harm. Now the good: I am so gratified by the popularization of yoga. Even if people start the practice for purely physical purposes, there is something about yoga that will sink in and lead to further study. I have faith that, underneath, we all have the same intention: to be loved and accepted for who we truly are.

What is your favorite place to practice if you can't be in a studio — and what do you like about this particular space?

I mostly practice in my living room. I know that's not very glamorous, but I find that I feel most comfortable to fail, to be imperfect, when I am alone. Many people love practicing outside, and while I am a huge fan of nature, I find that often nature stimulates my senses and can cause my attention to waver. If I had to choose a place outside of my home, I would

choose Bhakti Fest. It is a yoga and kirtan festival out in Joshua Tree that is focused on the practice of Bhakti. At Bhakti Fest, I get the biggest high out of anywhere I've ever been (and there is no alcohol served!).

What is your go-to asana or breathing exercise? The *one* thing we would all be better off for if we did it every day?

That's easy: *ujjayi* breath. Even people who don't do yoga naturally take deep breaths as a way to relax. Studies have shown that a huge percentage of the perceived relaxation of smoking is that the smoker is taking deep breaths. *Ujjayi* comes from the Sanskrit root "*jai*" which means "victory." It is a breath that makes you feel victorious! It's not difficult to do. Just close your mouth and breath both in and out through the nose creating a soft hollow sound. This is the sound your body makes when it is sleeping so it already knows how to do it (<http://vimeo.com/52474755>). Just a few moments of this breath, even just doing three long smooth *ujjayi* breaths will make you feel better instantly and put a smile on your face.

Who is your favorite Los Angeles-based teacher?

Easy: Erich Schiffmann. Actually, I think he's the best teacher in the world. What makes Erich different from everyone else is the way he teaches, not what he teaches. What I mean by that is this that [most] teachers, no matter their style of yoga, no matter the subject of the class, use a "one-way" directive method of teaching. The teacher "says" and the student "does." Erich's way is to ask a question and then the students, through investigation of their own, learn what they don't already know. Let me give an example. Say you are in warrior 2. I might say something like, "Lift your chest. Drop your shoulders." I'm telling you what to do, and you are following me, as best you can. Erich would say something like "Be aware of the pose, and investigate. What parts of the body can you relax without collapsing?" At this point, the student tries to answer the question and in doing so, he/she will relax different parts of the body. Can the chest relax? No, the chest needs to stay lifted. Can the legs relax? No, they need to stay active. Can the shoulders relax? Yes! I don't need to waste tension there. And so on. Asking brings us into the present moment because we don't know the answer.