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How Prince Taught Me Yoga

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Independent Artist

I was six when my Bharatnatyam guru taught me how to feel rhythm as a call to dance, an inside pulse that needed no counting. Music entered me and stayed there through decades of practice and performance. Each beat became an invitation for movement, until even silence, and my heartbeat in it, was reason enough to dance. With my body as my instrument, I did not miss music when I left the stage to devote myself to yoga. And when music found me again, it unveiled a world I never knew I had missed.

I was 28 and heartbroken when I first saw *Purple Rain*. I was so spellbound by the love Prince made to his guitar that I watched it again the next day. And the next. And the next, for days on end. I had forgotten how it was possible to be so alive so spirited. Had Prince not passed six months earlier, I would have bought a one-way ticket to Paisley Park. I bought, instead, my first instrument: a sleek black Fender Stratocaster, the sexiest of guitars. I was sure that if I could embody my heartbreak as music, I would feel fully alive again as I always had on stage when I was whole instead of an abandoned half.

I sought a guitar teacher who could show me how to play out loud what I only knew to express in the artful moments of my hands, feet, eyes, and smiles. Years earlier, while on the yoga mat, I met a guitarist; we reconnected serendipitously at a music school nearby. With first-day-of-school enthusiasm, I attended two guitar lessons where I was, to my amusement, the only student who had already graduated middle school. Sitting in a chair that was slightly too small for me, I told my teacher that I was there to learn how to express my emotions with the guitar, just like Prince. He told me to buy an adult-beginner guitar book, complete every exercise in it, then return for my second lesson.

In the next two weeks, I finished the lesson book, taught myself the notes of the guitar, and how to sight read music. When I returned for my next lesson, I was as triumphant as my teacher was unimpressed. Without taking the time to hear me play or demonstrate techniques, I was assigned to work my way through a second lesson book. This was not the kind of wisdom and guidance that I relied on when I was learning dance from my guru. I did not return for a third lesson.

For the first time in my life, I was a student without a teacher, reeling with freedom, passion being my only discipline. Every morning at 10am, I would amp up my state-of-the-art guitar to play the C major scale, happily, and haltingly. A new library of guitar books arrived in the mail day by day to feed my thirst for the knowledge of music. Rock riffs, funk rhythms, blues chops – I wanted to learn it all. As both teacher and student, I methodically worked my way through scales and exercises, I assigned, completed, and congratulated myself on.



Figure 1 – Sitting in Virasana and Playing Prince at Home in New York City (Photo Credit: Megna Paula).

It was an innocent confidence. Weeks passed before I realized that my ears were more awkward than my hands. I was using an electric tuner, relying on my eyes to read the screen, because my ears had no idea if my tunings were a little high or a little low or what the difference between high and low even sounded like. My dance training instilled rhythm into my very core, but melody and tonality had been lost on me.

As my ears began to awaken, my body felt how the effortless perfection of *asana* was nowhere to be found on my guitar. Even in the most difficult yoga flows and postures, my years of dance granted me a fluidity that felt unearned. I had long forgotten what it meant to struggle every time I stepped into a practice. But with my guitar, the moment my mind drifted away from the music, I either fumbled so badly that even I could hear it, or I stopped playing entirely, gazing vacantly off into the distance. I had to be present to play.

I had to wonder: how much of my yoga practice had been absent of presence? My body was so amenable to the postures; I had been so well trained physically that I could just go through the motions and still be impressive while my mind did whatever it wanted, dwelling in the past or deluding itself with future fancies, generally entertaining itself while the body worked alone.

I knew that there was another option. There had been moments in my life, on stage, and on the mat, when I had experienced glimpses of true grace, shots of clarity so pure that I assured myself I had simply hallucinated. Colors would suddenly vibrate; my movements seemed to hang in time, and my breath became a wave to ride into nirvana. Those were the moments that I was truly alive, present with the world in all its sensual wonder. And yet, it never occurred to me that to practice yoga is to practice that state of being.

Yoga is to be connected, in union, mind and body, self and surroundings, action and intention. Years of classical dance training, and my innate appreciation of perfection, had honed my proprioception to a fine art. I knew exactly where I was in space. But that knowing was visual, separate from the invisible, the audible. When I watched my fingers on the guitar, they quickly and visibly learned their new skills. But my ears told me that I had much more work to do.

The work was to listen. To one thing, at first: single notes, single breaths, the aspect of Patanjali's eight fold yoga path called *dharana*, concentration. Working that focus off the mat and on my guitar, I heard melody for the first time. It woke me up, brought me out of heartbreak, and back into vibrant life as an answer to the longing I felt while watching *Purple Rain*. What came next was a symphony, an unveiling of a world of orchestrated sound.

Then I would listen to Prince for hours at a stretch, enmeshed in the act of hearing, an ecstatic rapture equal to tripping on mushrooms, but soberly. The songs I "heard" a million times were awash with newness. I could suddenly untangle the interplay of instruments: bass from rhythm guitar, patterns in the drumlines, the way the lyrics came through the intricate melody, the occasional lilt of first guitar that was so iconically Prince, inspired and irreverent, skilled on a level that I was beginning to realize in my body-mind, on my mat.



Figure 2 – Practicing Backbends on my Uncle's Rooftop in Kolkata, India (Photo Credit: Megna Paula).

There, too, my work was to listen. What I learned to hear was my breath. It unfolded into its own symphony as I realized, anew, that there is no instrument as exquisite as the human body. I began to "hear" and feel, really, the bones themselves: the vertebra of my spine at first, and

from there, the lines of energy radiating along the long bones of my arms and legs into the delicate structures of my hands and feet. I stopped moving automatically, perfectly, and started flowing naturally, intuitively. Postures were no longer positions to hold but entrances into a state of being.

That was four years ago. My listening has expanded from the single notes of my breath to the sounds of the world, and as I teach, I can hear the room, the music playing and the often-erratic breath of my students. Sometimes I stop them and I ask: what can you hear? And I say:

Listen.
Listen to your breath.
Let it move you.

Our breath is the rhythm of our inner life, the body is our finest instrument, our every action is an observable melody. I feel this in my daily yoga practice.



Figure 3 – Feeling Inner Balance at Dawn in Puerto Rico (Photo Credit: Megna Paula).

And the guitar, well, it comes and goes from my life. It goes when a new lover takes its place and comes again when the man leaves me to play my healing out loud.

When I am single, alone but not-alone because I have my guitar, I practice with the same dedication and passion I felt for my first scales. The songs I've learned will tell you the story of the past few years: "Sunshine of your Love," "Sweet Child of Mine," "Revolution." I'm finally learning to play the song that inspired me from the very first moments of *Purple Rain*: the electric anthem of life, "Let's Go Crazy." I play with Prince in mind, and I wonder if I will ever

return to the stage, not as a solo dancer but as a guitarist with her band. I did give one performance: in a summertime farmer's market. I was singing along with a three piece band when the guitarist took a break. He asked me if I would hold his guitar and slung his acoustic around me while he went for a coffee. The audience spontaneously started clapping as I played "Twist and Shout," while the small group of us sang together.

Most frequently, it is me playing alone early in the morning or late at night. My neighbors have not yet complained about me plugging in my sexy Stratocaster to play Prince's music at dawn. At night I quietly play in bed with my acoustic. I often find myself composing lyrics and chords almost absentmindedly, in a deep presence where silence is melody is rhythm, that state of oneness I know when I'm in yoga where I find body-mind harmony. Those are the times where I realize that I am not the musician playing the guitar, but an instrument in union with the guitar, expressing the invisible breath that guides me always.

Megna Paula is an independent artist living and loving the East Village of NYC. She graduated from Duke University with a Bachelor's degree in Neuroscience, worked with Georgetown Neurology, and will begin a Master's program in Psychology with NYU in 2021. She has been teaching since 2004 and teaching yoga full time since 2013. Find her on Instagram at @megnapaula for yoga, and @lit.spirited for fun. Private lessons, art shop, and blog are online at <http://www.megnapaula.com>.