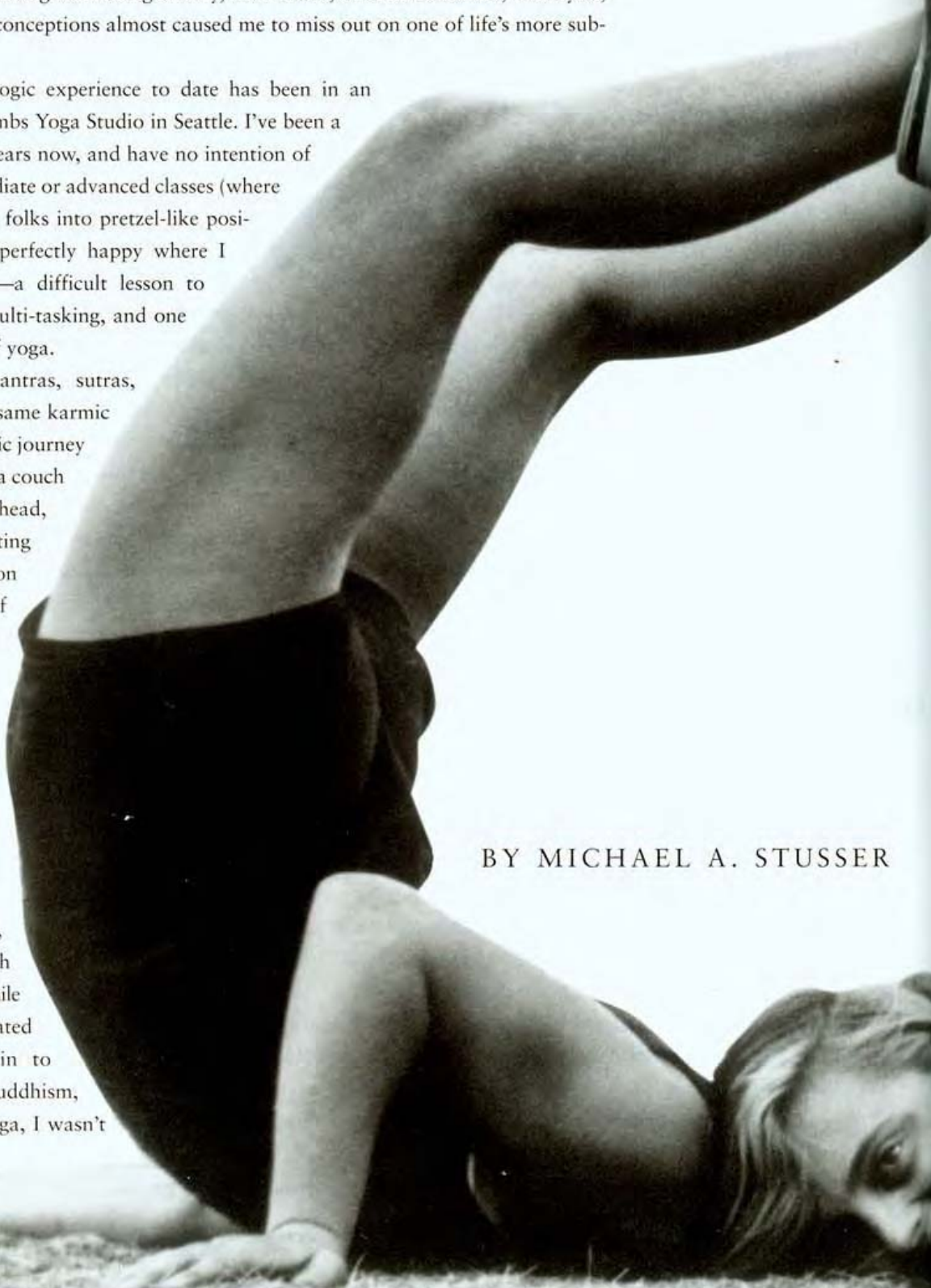


there was a time—and not so long ago—when I thought yoga was a bizarre circus routine where sinewy, limber Indian contortionists in need of a shower bent themselves into pretzels to the beat of sitar music. Not that there's anything wrong with being sinewy, from India, or a contortionist, mind you, it's just that these misconceptions almost caused me to miss out on one of life's more sublime experiences.

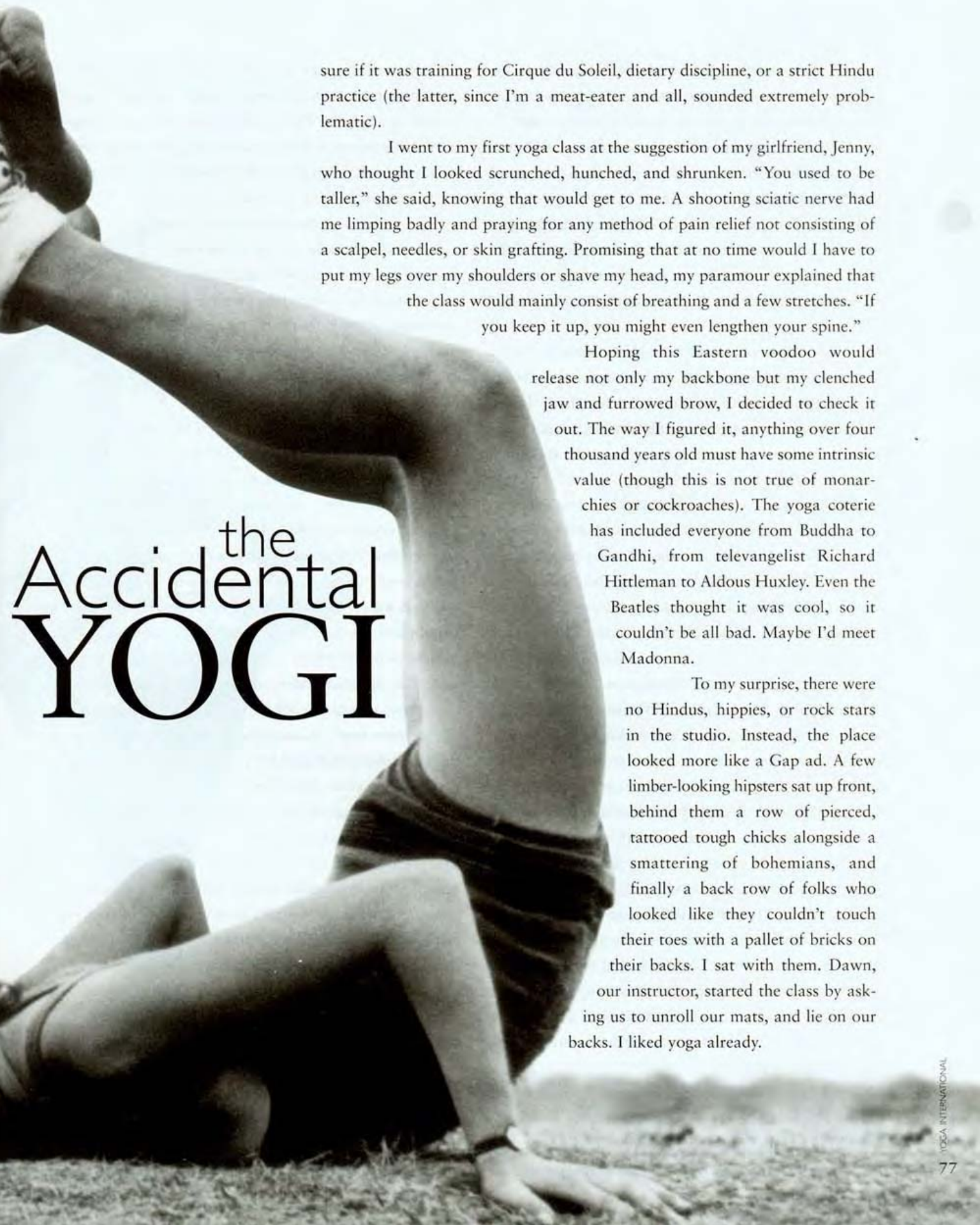
My entire yogic experience to date has been in an Intro class at the 8 Limbs Yoga Studio in Seattle. I've been a beginner for several years now, and have no intention of moving on to intermediate or advanced classes (where they actually do twist folks into pretzel-like positions). You see, I'm perfectly happy where I am—in the moment—a difficult lesson to learn in this age of multi-tasking, and one of the basic tenets of yoga.

Lumping mantras, sutras, and chakras into the same karmic blend, I began my yogic journey a New Age version of a couch potato; I'd nod my head, but had difficulty getting off my tail. In fact, upon hearing mantras of any kind, my typical response was to say something banal like "I'm all set, thanks," and balk at further exploration. Clearly some of what is going on in the world are complex scams (the Celestine Prophecy, WTO, and the health insurance industry), while others are too complicated for my narrow brain to fathom ( $E = mc^2$ , Buddhism, mimes, etc.). With yoga, I wasn't

BY MICHAEL A. STUSSER







sure if it was training for Cirque du Soleil, dietary discipline, or a strict Hindu practice (the latter, since I'm a meat-eater and all, sounded extremely problematic).

I went to my first yoga class at the suggestion of my girlfriend, Jenny, who thought I looked scrunched, hunched, and shrunken. "You used to be taller," she said, knowing that would get to me. A shooting sciatic nerve had me limping badly and praying for any method of pain relief not consisting of a scalpel, needles, or skin grafting. Promising that at no time would I have to put my legs over my shoulders or shave my head, my paramour explained that the class would mainly consist of breathing and a few stretches. "If you keep it up, you might even lengthen your spine."

Hoping this Eastern voodoo would release not only my backbone but my clenched jaw and furrowed brow, I decided to check it out. The way I figured it, anything over four thousand years old must have some intrinsic value (though this is not true of monarchies or cockroaches). The yoga coterie has included everyone from Buddha to Gandhi, from televangelist Richard Hittleman to Aldous Huxley. Even the Beatles thought it was cool, so it couldn't be all bad. Maybe I'd meet Madonna.

To my surprise, there were no Hindus, hippies, or rock stars in the studio. Instead, the place looked more like a Gap ad. A few limber-looking hipsters sat up front, behind them a row of pierced, tattooed tough chicks alongside a smattering of bohemians, and finally a back row of folks who looked like they couldn't touch their toes with a pallet of bricks on their backs. I sat with them. Dawn, our instructor, started the class by asking us to unroll our mats, and lie on our backs. I liked yoga already.

# the Accidental YOGI



The color of caramel, Dawn adorns herself in exotic jewelry, has a strong, commanding presence, a sultry, calming voice, and moves like a sheet in the wind. She fit my preconceived notions about yoga in two ways: First, she wore a diamond stud in her nose, something I think I've seen Indian women wear in *National Geographic*. Second, with picture-perfect posture and her hair tied up in a Dr. Seussian fountain do, she looked as though she could sit in the lotus pose for days on end. Dawn was a reason to do yoga all by herself.

"Yoga's not about being able to touch your toes or stand on your head," Dawn began. "It's about being comfortable and aware of your own body. If you find yourself in a posture that doesn't feel good, you're not doing yoga." Apparently I wasn't, as the shooting pain in my right leg felt anything but "good." Moving my legs further apart, I became acutely aware there were several vertebrae out of place. If it's true you're only as old as your spine is flexible, I was prehistoric.

The first session was mainly spent lying on the floor and breathing deeply (pranayama), two things I think I'm fairly good at. (In reality, I learned I was using less than 30% of my lung capacity.) "It is said that breathing this way for ten minutes a day can substitute for three hours of sleep," Dawn said, pulling a breath deeply into her lungs and looking divinely well-rested. Feeling light-headed, I tried to calculate the number of breaths I'd need to catch up on my sleep.

With our eyes closed, Dawn suggested we take "a mental inventory of our bodies"; I counted one spazzing sciatic nerve, a sore ankle, pains in my neck, shoulder, and low back, a groin pull, and...I hadn't even inventoried the whole store when class came to an end. Afterward I felt refreshed—as though I'd taken a fabulous nap. I exited the studio feeling loose, and hoped I could take some of Dawn's salubrious suggestions home with me. Ten bucks well spent, I went on my merry way, unscathed, and not yet a member of the Hare Krishnas (whew!).

During the following week, my body returned to hunchback status; I found myself grinding my teeth and trying to breathe deeply without much success. I've always been into "quick fixes" (in fact, chiropractic

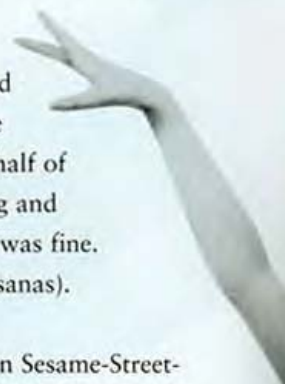
adjustments, massage, and espresso are what kept me upright), and had been hoping a single session of yoga would cure my ills. The last thing I wanted was a long-term commitment to an exotic Eastern doctrine to screw up my routine, but apparently one more class was going to be necessary to ease the pain.

The second session began as had the first, lying on our backs and breathing—trying to get oxygen to the back half of the lungs (there's a back half of my lungs?). Aside from some wheezing and phlegm-related discharges, everything was fine. We then moved into our first poses (asanas).

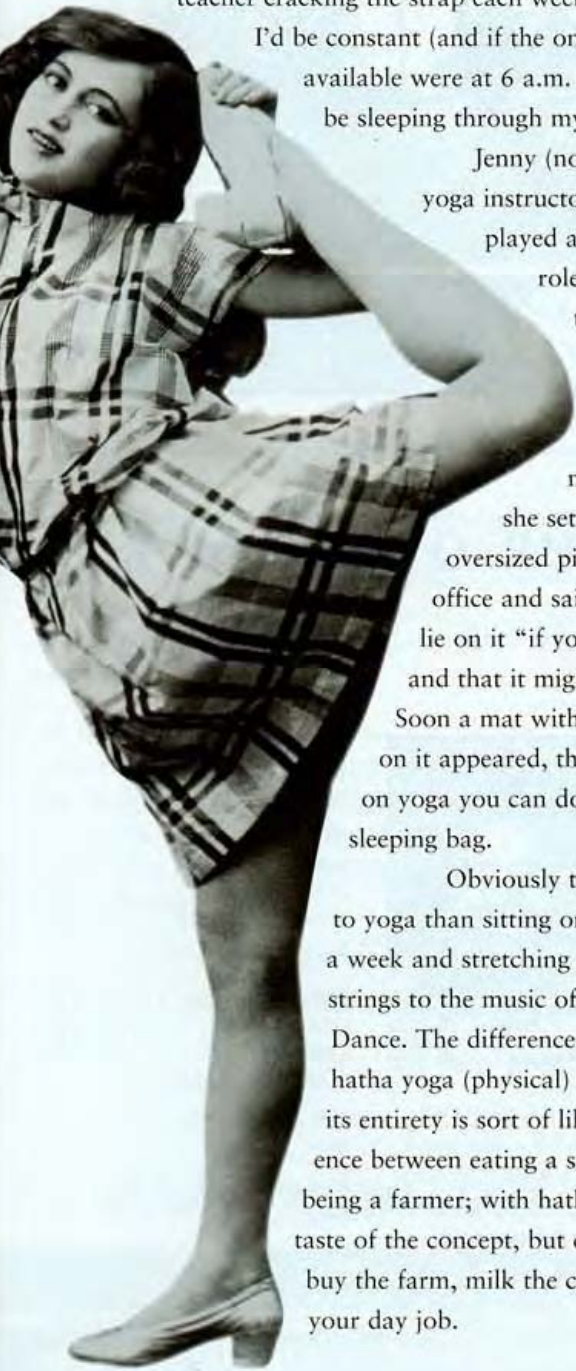
Faster than you could say "Paschimottanasana" I found myself in Sesame-Street-sounding positions: "Downward Dog," "Child's Pose," "Tree," and "Sun Salutations." Each asana was first explained by Dawn, who would contort her body and show us what not to do before demonstrating the correct posture. Apparently yoga is an at-your-own-pace practice—a "there are no wrong answers" school—which is a good thing when you're as flexible as a tree stump. Starting with a basic stance (say, standing upright with feet firmly planted in "Mountain"), we were able to remain there, or move into more difficult variations: raising one leg off the floor, cranking a leg up the inner thigh, pushing the palms together, raising the arms, then juggling three pies while the instructor threw knives at us. That kind of thing.

Throughout the series of poses Dawn interjected facts about yoga, some theoretical (sages have said yoga is the cessation of the fluctuation of the mind), some more singly specific (this is a great pose for wringing out toxins you may have accumulated over the weekend). Turns out there are yoga asanas for relieving migraines, allergies, menstrual cramps, and—best of all—bad backs (a.k.a. lousy posture). I'd gone to cure a sciatic nerve, and left thinking about the cessation of the fluctuation of the mind. That's deep.

Months went by, and Tuesday after Tuesday I found myself sweating to New Age music in an effort to grab my own toes. I rarely find time for anything new in my hectic, scrambling life. I once tried to read a book on time management, but couldn't find the time to







finish it. Yet somehow, my 5 p.m. yoga class became a priority. Meetings could be pushed off, hoop games suspended, cocktails with friends postponed. The main reason for my weekly return? Selfish joy. I simply felt better after each class. It wasn't that I'd converted, grown more flexible, or healed my back. It was something bigger—a slow trickle of consciousness, and a knowledge that my life would be worse without it.

Thank God (or whatever you believe in) for the invention of structured yoga classes. Without a teacher cracking the strap each week, I can't say

I'd be constant (and if the only classes available were at 6 a.m. I'd definitely be sleeping through my practice).

Jenny (now herself a yoga instructor) also

played a subtle, vital role in keeping the yoga ball rolling.

Buying a bolster for my birthday, she set the solid oversized pillow in my office and said I could lie on it "if you want to" and that it might feel good.

Soon a mat with my name on it appeared, then a book on yoga you can do in your sleeping bag.

Obviously there's more to yoga than sitting on a mat once a week and stretching your hamstrings to the music of Dead Can Dance. The difference between hatha yoga (physical) and yoga in its entirety is sort of like the difference between eating a salad and being a farmer; with hatha you get a taste of the concept, but don't have to buy the farm, milk the cows, or quit your day job.

In terms of expertise, I'm clearly at the beginning of the long-limbed yogic journey, one that hopefully winds its way to Nirvana—or at least the Grateful Dead. While yoga may be a full-service program of physical discipline, ethics, and practical theory, I'm taking one step at a time. (According to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, yoga has eight limbs, the last of which, attaining enlightenment, involves so many steps you'd need a turbocharged Stairmaster to get there in one lifetime.) The physical practice is more than enough for me to chew on at the moment.

Unfortunately, my path to wisdom is still filled with financial potholes and relational roadblocks I don't fully control. I watch TV with the newspaper in hand and a phone cradled to my ear—and that's just in the car! I'm selfish, self-centered, and stuck in the material world.

I've still got only one foot in the transcendental waters. Chanting embarrasses me (if we could only chorus "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" or something, I'd feel much more demonstrative). Yin and yang are unclear concepts. I'm not sure how Buddhism ties into the mix. I can't find my third chakra, much less my third eye. Even so, I can feel the benefits spilling into parts of my life. I take deep breaths when staring at my Visa bill. I'm becoming more aware of my life's pace. I'm less anxious and concentrate on tasks at hand. I'm taming my "monkey mind." And four times a month I find myself in a candle-filled room, twisting my limbs in bizarre positions and trying to "be there" in mind, body, and spirit—a Herculean task in this age of attention deficit disorder.

In yoga, it is said there are only so many breaths in a lifetime, and that if you can lengthen these (by inhaling more deeply and pausing in between), you will extend your lifespan. It's not how many years you may have, but how many breaths you have left. I'm holding mine, and taking yoga for the duration. Plus, it seems to have made me several inches taller. ■

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*Michael A. Stusser is a playwright, basketball fanatic, environmental activist, and a contributing writer to the Seattle Weekly. His favorite asana is the corpse pose (of course). The through-line in Stusser's work is a desire to find new ways to increase dialogue about the critical issues of our times, empower individuals to make change, and, ultimately, take back the democratic process.*