

Punk Rock Yoga Manifesto

Look, Work, Accept, Transcend

By Kimberlee Jensen Stedl

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*To my son Ivan, who has challenged me to practice
what I preach more than anything else ever has.*

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Finally, I am blessed by my son Ivan, who has transformed my life more completely than anything else ever could.

Foreword

I'll never forget the day I first heard about Punk Rock Yoga. I was sitting in my yoga teacher training, wondering if I was in over my head. Sadie, my teacher, was talking about ways to individualize teaching—to express our own ideas within the framework of traditional yogic thought. She mentioned Punk Rock Yoga, which was getting some attention in the press. A couple of people in the room made that face that I've seen many times since: a look of, “What the hell?” I might have made that face, too. Sadie asked us if we thought being yogis meant that we had to listen to Enya all the time. I didn't know for sure, but I knew that if I could never listen to my beloved Dresden Dolls or sing along to The Cramps again, I might have to reconsider my decision to become a yoga teacher. I went home that night and started thinking about all the things that inspired me. What would my message be when I started teaching? What would a class with me be like for my students?

I knew it would have music, and I knew that it would be music I wanted to hear. The truth is, I enjoy a strong, athletic yoga class, and the idea of moving through a 75-minute class with slow, “soothing,” tinkly, new age music in the background filled me with irritation. The thought of indie rock, or jazz, or New Orleans funk playing while I led a class through a sequence of sweat-inducing poses, though, that made me excited to teach. I went to the Punk Rock Yoga website to see what it was all about.

That night I learned that Punk Rock Yoga wasn't just yoga to punk rock music. I had my mind blown by the clarity and scope of Kimberlee's vision. She was teaching yoga the way it was supposed to be taught, and that made me see that “punk” had a lot more to do with yoga than I had realized at first. I thought about how basic punk rock is, and that reminded me of how basic yoga should be. It doesn't need a whole lot of accoutrements, as the French might say. It just requires a willing student, and a knowledgeable teacher. I also decided that it sounded exactly like something I wanted to be involved in.

Punk Rock Yoga struck a chord in me before I even became a yoga teacher. I was taken by the ideals espoused by Kimberlee, Punk Rock Yoga's founder. I thought about the elitism in certain yoga studios here in New York City, and how people were paying more attention to their fancy yoga mat bags than they were to the way they spoke to a fellow student who might have accidentally stepped on their yoga mat. I

thought about how in one particular yoga studio, the owner would frown at some of my male friends who came in wearing nail polish or had piercings. I remembered a teacher friend saying someone walked out of her class because she played 80's music one day, instead of the usual sitar.

I thought about how the behavior I was seeing actually ran counter to the most basic tenets of yoga. The Punk Rock Yoga website said "All types of music + all types of people + all types of yoga = Punk Rock Yoga." That equation was math even I could understand! I knew New York City needed a dose of yoga that came without judgment and celebrated all types of people. I also knew that I wanted to teach yoga that was powerful, fun, and respectful of tradition, while exploring new ways to interpret classical teachings. I wrote Kimberlee shortly after I completed my teacher training, and asked her if I could start a Punk Rock Yoga class in New York. It was one of the best decisions I have ever made.

I've been teaching the class for several years, and Punk Rock Yoga is really starting to catch on. We have moved from a grungy black box theater that had to be swept three times before each class to a beautiful space near Times Square. There's a church across the street that rings bells around the time we have our *savasana*. Yoga writers have reviewed the class. It was featured in a documentary for Japanese television, and I've even taught it as a free class in a certain well-known, corporate yoga apparel store. (I did say during that class that you could do yoga in a ratty pair of cut-offs just fine. I couldn't help it; it just sort of popped out!) I've tried to teach classes that are simple, challenging, and stay true to the real meaning of yoga, with no added "psychobabble."

During my class I try to remind people of their own greatness—a message I have always taken away from my conversations with Kimberlee. Kimberlee has become someone I look to for advice, and someone I consider a friend. She has a clear point of view, and a deep understanding of what yoga is really about. She gets it, and she explains it all here with no added bullshit.

This book will tell you what Punk Rock Yoga is all about. It's clear and easily understandable. If you read this book, you will know what you need to do to get on the yoga train, and ride it to your desired destination, whether you want to get physically stronger, or become "one with everything." (What did the yogi say at the hot dog stand? Make me one with everything.) You'll come away knowing the real

meaning of yoga, and you'll be able to discuss it with anyone who asks. It's broken down and discussed in a clear-headed, logical manner. The book should be required reading for yoga teachers, in my opinion. This book is simple, profound, and a lot of fun to read.

There is a real hunger for this kind of sincere, simple yoga, and there's a tribe of students interested in looking beyond what many yoga studios are selling them. We encourage a do-it-yourself approach to yoga, and this book will serve as your call to action, your toolbox, and your inspiration to start along the beautiful, frustrating, inspiring, and completely rewarding path of yoga.

Namaste,

Brian Williams
Punk Rock Yoga and Core Strength Vinyasa Instructor
New York City

About this book

You picked up this book for one of several reasons. 1) You consider yourself a punk of sorts and want to research ways to incorporate yoga into your life. 2) You have taken Punk Rock Yoga classes and want to delve deeper into the philosophy behind it. 3) Other yoga books did not resonate with you and you hope this book will. Or, perhaps, 4) you saw the title and thought, “Punk Rock Yoga? That’s so crazy I just have to learn more!”

With this book, I aim to satisfy all those needs. We will explore yoga philosophy and discuss putting it to work in your day-to-day life—not the life of a yogi secluded in an ashram but rather your life, which involves work, bills, commuting, cleaning, and relatives. However, you will not find absolutes and platitudes; this is not a super simple self-help book. I sometimes say that I wish I could write one of those “the secret to success” or “seven easy steps to a happy life” books and laugh myself all the way to the bank. But I do not think in superficial platitudes and I bet you do not either. Instead, in this book you will find different perspectives to help you decide for yourself how to not only interpret yoga philosophy, but also how to utilize it. The yogic path is not a shortcut, but rather a framework for spiritual and psychological growth. However, if you crave a four-step plan, here is mine: “Look at your stuff, work on your stuff, accept your stuff, and transcend your stuff.”

This book has been itching me for years. In October 2004, more than 50 newspapers in the United States ran an Associated Press article about Punk Rock Yoga, whereby they proclaimed it as “the latest fitness trend sweeping the nation” despite that at the time Punk Rock Yoga consisted of one weekly class in Seattle. Shortly afterward, I was approached by literary agents and drafted book proposals. After going through a couple of agents who met with little success and some publishers who would only publish me if I suddenly became best friends with rock stars, I decided to publish this book myself. By then, I had co-written and self-published two other yoga books (*Yoga for Scuba Divers* and *Yoga with a Friend*), so I was quite comfortable with the Do It Yourself publishing route.

When I finally got a head of steam to write this book I became pregnant with my first child, which put a rather large brake on my steamroller. In so many ways, having a child has truly tested my beliefs in what I say in class and in these pages. On some days, I seem to

forget everything I have learned, yet on other days it is the only thing upon which I rely. As my son toddles around closer to independence, I notice he practices strong, audible breathing when stressed, having observed me for the past two years breathing my way through struggles. As I reviewed the pieces of this work I wrote for the proposals years ago, I still find my beliefs in these words, but now I have even more to contribute.

Deciding whether or not to include poses also proved a challenge. Though yoga is primarily a mental or psychological discipline, yoga also can involve a physical practice, which is what many people think is the sum total of yoga. The poses definitely help you slow down and focus, which boosts your mental discipline. They also have intrinsic physical benefits such as strength, balance, and flexibility. Practicing poses is wonderful for the body, and can help with your overall serenity, but if you stop there, I consider it yoga with a lowercase “y.” To derive the full benefit from Yoga, I believe you need to strive to be a better person, living according to some practical behavioral guidelines, which we will discuss throughout this book.

When I stopped to really think about the book I wanted to write, the words of one of my guest Punk Rock Yoga teachers in Seattle kept echoing in my mind: “There are a million books out there on yoga poses, but it’s your ideas about yoga that need to be heard.” It’s true—there are numerous books and videos illustrating poses and, to be blunt, a hamstring is a hamstring. However, books that break down the philosophy and relate it to the lives of urban Westerners are more scarce. Someday I do wish to release a pose book or DVD, but what needs to be written first is the manifesto.

I consider this book a manifesto in that I consider this book a call to action. My blustering stops at pretending this work will impact society in the manner of Karl Marx, but I hope it stirs something in you. At some points you may disagree and think me insane, but my hope is that those points prompt self-reflection. While yogic philosophy can be very esoteric, it can also be very practical and straightforward. I hope you find this book a useful application of that philosophy. I summarized some information because, in the nature of a manifesto, I wanted this to be a quick read, with actionable items you can put to use right away.

Focusing on philosophy also emphasizes what I consider the heart of yoga. Yoga is not something that you *do* once a week at a studio, but rather a way of who you can *be* when dealing with the world.

A little Punk Rock Yoga history

When I started Punk Rock Yoga in 2003, I had a very simple goal: I hoped to create an atmosphere that would attract teenagers and other people who are not normally drawn to yoga. The class attracted crowds of all ages and what started as a small community service project has evolved into a nascent movement with numerous yoga teachers joining the fold. The more I taught and the more I immersed myself in the professional yoga community, the more I carved out a mission for Punk Rock Yoga: I want to scrub the elitism and rigidity out of modern yoga.

Punk Rock Yoga challenges stereotypes. It confronts the notion that punks are angry miscreants and that yogis are hippie contortionists. People are multifaceted and someone can be a punk and a yogi at the same time, yet many consider Punk Rock Yoga paradoxical. In fact, reactions to the name Punk Rock Yoga illustrate the absurdity of labels—by labeling someone you are drawing a box around that person, pigeonholing who you think they are, and denying the reality that people can be complex creatures.

Over the years, I have clarified my perspective to really consider Punk Rock Yoga in a broader sense—the philosophy really is DIY or Do It Yourself yoga. Of course, the punk rock movement popularized the DIY credo that motivated people to start their own record labels, magazines, clothing lines, and even form their own communities. The lesson of DIY is a lesson in self-reliance; the lesson of yoga is a lesson in self-teaching. Both the DIY credo and the teachings of yoga show people how to make their own way and take responsibility for their own lives.

So, does practicing yoga make you less of a punk? Does listening to punk rock make you less of a yogi or yogini? So-called purists in both camps will answer yes. They miss the point. You can be a punk, and a yogi, and anything else, but by defining yourself by a label you are denying your true self. Let go of your attachment to labels and boldly interpret for yourself.