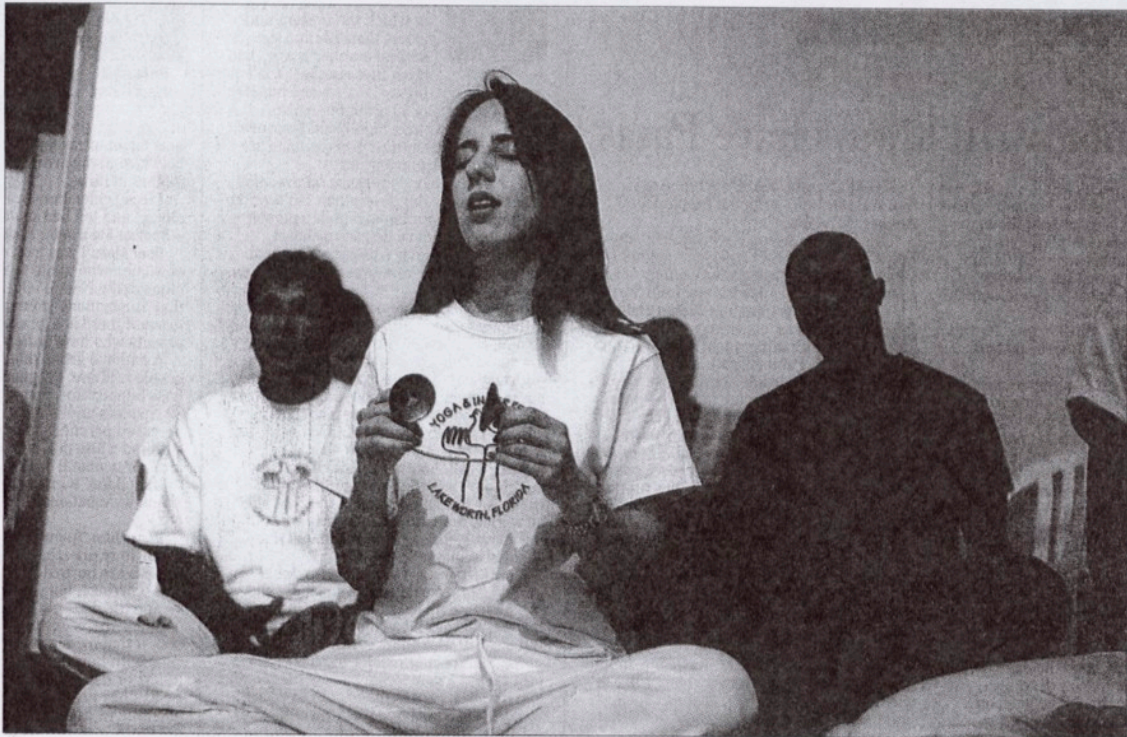


# The Palm Beach Post

## ONE WOMAN'S 10-WEEK YOGA MARATHON



Mitra Malek begins a traditional yoga ceremony by chanting with fellow trainees at Yoga & Inner Peace in Lake Worth.

MEGHAN MCCARTHY/Staff Photographer

## Can she find inner peace... without music, TV or wine?

By MITRA MALEK  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

We are here for many reasons: to bounce back from addiction, to find a greater sense of purpose, to soothe the pain of a marriage separation.

I'm here because I'm a pack rat of sorts: Instead of collecting objects, I collect experiences. Plus, the intensive teacher training at Yoga & Inner Peace is free. Anywhere else, the price tag runs at least \$2,000.

Who would pay for this kind of torment?

For the next 10 weeks, while I learn the philosophy and physical aspects of Sivananda yoga, I've agreed I won't smoke, drink alcohol, take recreational drugs, consume caffeine, watch TV or movies, or listen to music or the radio. Nor will I eat meat, chicken, fish or eggs.

This will cleanse my body and calm my mind, says my guru, Bharata. I also have to attend 6 a.m. weekday meditations, seminars, physical yoga classes, anatomy training and a CPR certification



THOMAS CORDY/Staff Photographer

Yoga instructor-in-training Sarah Blue helps David Perez, 13, with a position. The intensive 10-week program is free at Yoga & Inner Peace.

course. Plus, I must read four books and take oral tests on them. Oh, and I get to practice "karma yoga" — cleaning the yoga center, from bathrooms to baseboards.

All of this will take 20 hours a week — a part-time job on top of my regular job as a reporter — and affect nearly every waking moment.

For three years, I've enjoyed the physical benefits of yoga: The body postures increase strength and tone muscles. And they reduce stress.

But now I'm training for self-knowledge. And it's a good thing I have a goal, because this hard-core conditioning requires more flexibility than the Lotus position.

• She chants,  
• she rants,  
• she sees the light  
• How I found my focus  
• (without guzzling coffee)

### WEEK 1: I feel empowered and lithe.

I've been through meditation, chanting and a yoga class by the time I arrive at work every weekday morning at 10 a.m. Bharata pumps us with positive energy. "Three steps forward, two steps back," he says. "It's about progress, not how many times you fail."

### WEEK 2: I feel like I'm failing with great frequency, particularly in meditation.

One reason is purely physical: My back and legs resist the upright, cross-legged position we sit in for 35 minutes. My thighs cramp, and my feet fall asleep. The other matter is mental. Contrary to popular belief, meditation isn't about absence of thought; it's about focusing on just one thought or sound. This takes time, but getting there is frustrating and humbling. I worry about what happened yesterday, the month before, in the car on the way to the center. I ponder my Roth IRA, when to do my laundry, the best place to buy fresh basil. I worry that I know I'm worrying and can't stop worrying.

See YOGA, 4E ▶



► YOGA from 1E

**WEEK 3: It's starting to feel like sorority Hell Week.**

I survived that more than a dozen years ago — but will I make it through this? Bharata scolds me for being one minute late to the Tuesday night seminar, which sets me in a fit of rushing for the next few days. Our training outfit — loose, yellow T-shirt and long, white pants — feels like a pledge pin that covers my whole body. Yoga seems hypocritical, I say to myself, because it preaches finding your own path, but we dress the same and follow directions like soldiers. I'm not getting enough sleep because I have to wake up at 5:20 a.m. every weekday for meditation. I have no time to hit CVS for toiletries or read the comics, let alone a book. The absence of sound in my home feels oppressive. And I want to eat some chicken.

**WEEK 4: I'm still crabby. And hungry.**

The training doesn't seem to let you do anything in moderation, and moderation is what keeps me sane. I yearn to watch an *American Idol* elimination round so badly that I rationalize a need to turn on the tube to see if camera crews picked up a story I covered (television and radio related to our jobs is permitted) and flip past Fox to get to Channel 12. I watch one *Idol* finalist for several minutes, and then feel like an addict who's relapsed. It never happens again. Two colleagues periodically hallucinate that I'm eating meat in the office, which I interpret as an affront to my integrity. On the upside, I learn that all trainees wear the same unflattering outfit because yoga shuns the ego.

**WEEK 5: An amazing thing happened.**

I saw a bright flash of light while meditating. The phenomenon happens sometimes when your mind steadies and concentration deepens. I feel connected. To what, I don't know, but it feels great. Five days later I see a silver shimmer, like tinsel blowing in the wind.

**WEEK 6: Breathe, breathe, breathe.**

My left nostril has been consistently clogged for the 7:45 a.m. Sunday breathing class. Every week, I feel like I'm going to pass out at some point during the 45-minute session. I can't hold my breath for more than one minute, and we retain for up to two minutes. A few times, I shuffle to the bathroom to steal a few normal inhales and exhales. I feel like a wimp.

**WEEK 7: The power of silence.**

I haven't listened to National Public Radio for six weeks, and, unexpectedly, it's a relief. Usually, I click on the station while driving — wonderfully efficient: Fill time with knowledge. But since training started, I've had license to do nothing but the task at hand while I'm behind the wheel. The first few weeks, I felt edgy and restless. Now I feel as if I've found free time whenever I get in the car. My mind can wander, or I can study the sky and peer at passing houses.

**A Yoga Primer**

**What is Sivananda yoga?**

Sivananda yoga is one of the more influential types of yoga to come to the West over the past century. It's rooted in 12 basic physical postures and emphasizes meditation, a vegetarian diet and proper breathing. Sivananda was an early 20th-century doctor who founded the style of yoga that bears his name. Yoga started thousands of years ago in India, and practitioners describe it as the science, art and philosophy of right living. Moral, ethical and practical guidelines for a healthy life that lead to self-realization.

**What is the Yoga & Inner Peace studio?**

A Lake Worth studio opened by guru Bharata in 1994. Before that, he spent nearly two decades training and teaching yoga around the world, including 14 years at the Sivananda Ashram Yoga Retreat in Paradise Island, Bahamas. He also directed the Geneva Sivananda Yoga Center in Switzerland and the Paris Sivananda Yoga Center in France. Bharata trained under Swami Vishnu Devananda, a senior disciple of Swami Sivananda.

**Want to try it?**

Yoga & Inner Peace offers Yoga Alliance-certified teacher training four times a year. It's free to anyone with a minimum one-year membership at the center — which offers meditation, breathing classes and yoga classes, including pre/post-natal and yoga for disabilities (the disability class is free to the public). The guru, Bharata, advises taking classes at the center for two months before training begins. And you must finish several of the books by the training start date. The next training begins June 10. For details visit, [www.yogapeace.com](http://www.yogapeace.com) or call 641-8888.

**WEEK 8: Encroach on the roach.**

I've been waiting for the bright light to pass beneath my eyelids again, but it hasn't happened. And it's not going to because a cockroach crawled on my bare foot one dark morning during meditation and robbed me of resolve to sit still. I nervously peer at the floor every few minutes, and follow the same paranoid pattern for the rest of the course. Yoga preaches non-harm, and at this center, that means no Raid. Bharata catches any bugs he finds with his hands and tosses them outside.

**WEEK 9: No one at work wants to go out to lunch with me anymore.**

I've limited our destinations to Chili's, Atlanta Bread Company and Italian joints. I wonder if yoga has worked against me. The question has arisen in me at other times, too. Loud noises and screeching voices raise my heart rate — for the record, this is the case with all humans — only now, I'm keenly aware of it. I accompany a friend to Express at Boca Town Center, a 10-minute stop before we have dinner nearby. The club music the clothing store pumps through its speakers is so loud it shakes the display tables. I feel anxious.

"Does that bother you?" I ask a salesperson. "Yes," she says and keeps ringing up the bill. (Music is permitted in my training if it's tangential to another sanctioned activity; there's no avoiding elevator music in the grocery store or blaring hip-hop from a car in an adjacent lane. The point is to try to stay away from it.)

**WEEK 10: It feels like high school graduation week, when senioritis sets in.**

The classes and meditation feel routine. I can't wait to have time for a jog, to

lollygag in a coffee shop, to reflect on what I've experienced.

**AFTERMATH: Wisdom, worth the work.**

When training ended nine months ago, I didn't intend to get drunk or gorge on beef, and I haven't. I went back to being normal. For me, that means a cup of coffee in the morning, a glass of wine a few nights a week, movies every now and then, and eggs and some meat when I feel like it.

But several things from the training have stuck with me, for the better:

I notice tension when it rises in certain parts of my body, and I can will those areas to relax, mainly through breathing.

I recognize when I'm thinking about certain things and can identify why. That doesn't mean I can always change my thoughts. But the process has made me more patient with myself and with others.

I never again flip on the radio or television for background noise. Most of us turn the knob so we can distract ourselves — from feeling lonely or paying attention to what's going on in our heads. Ironically, that makes us feel even less connected to ourselves or anything else. You have to be away from the clamor for a considerable time to believe it.

And that is the key tenet of yoga: Feeling connected to yourself, to others, and then to something larger than yourself, however you choose to define it.

The wisdom from the training was well worth the work. I might return again.

We humans forget things, lose faith sometimes and crave a sense of purpose. I wager it's impossible to get too much training in something that offers tools to help you grow.

*Mitra Malek now teaches Sivananda yoga once a week at Yoga & Inner Peace in Lake Worth.*

**Finding inner peace...**

Mitra Malek, who loves collecting life experiences, had practiced yoga for three years before choosing teacher training, an extra 20 hours a week on top of her regular job as a reporter. No television, no radio, no meal, no alcohol. What does it all mean? Training in self-knowledge.



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