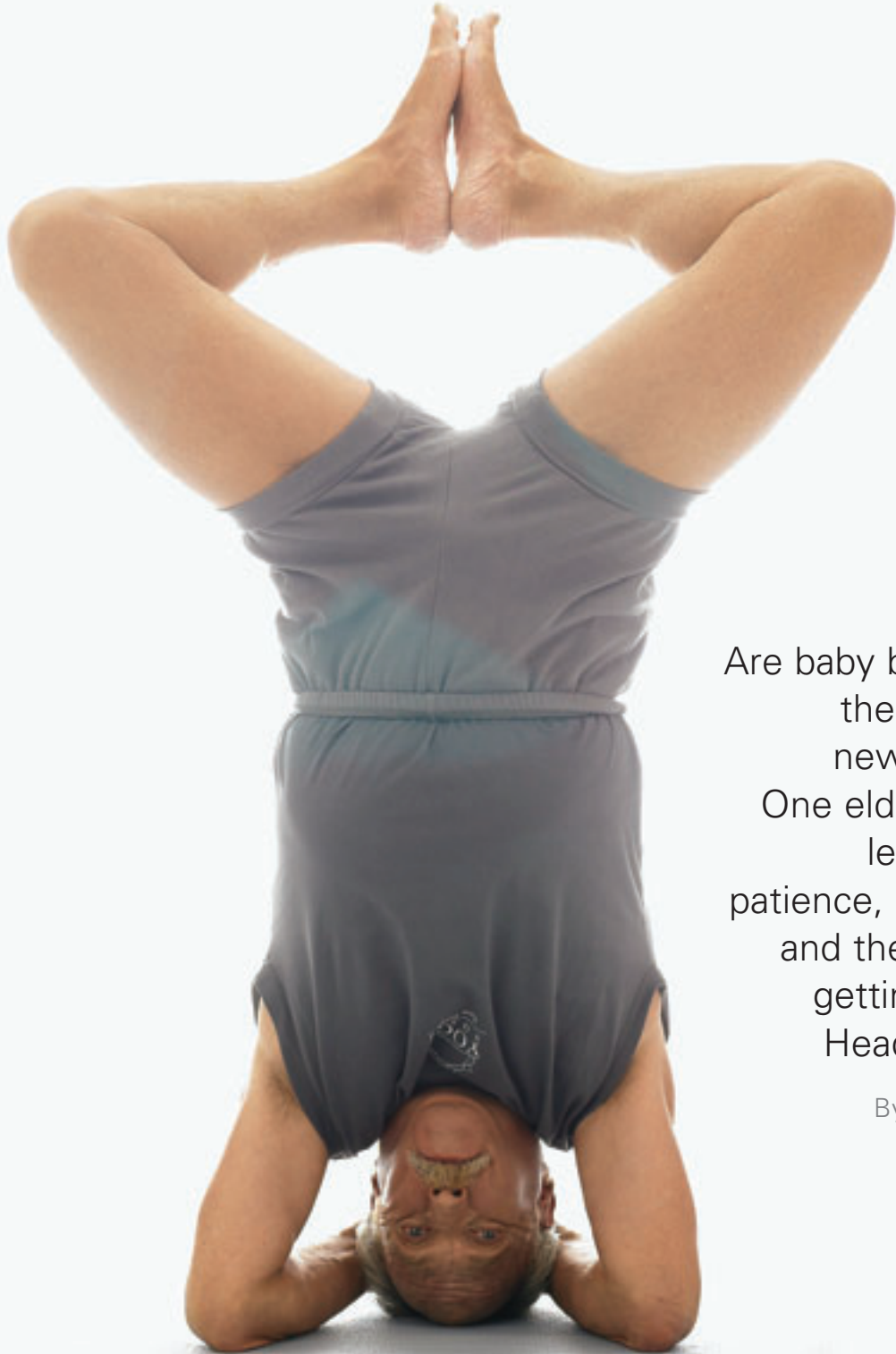


# Confessions of a 63-year-old Yogi



Are baby boomers  
the planet's  
new sages?  
One elder yogi's  
lessons in  
patience, humility,  
and the thrill of  
getting into a  
Headstand...

By Al Kelman

It's hard to pick up a newspaper or magazine these days without reading about yet another Baby Boomer refusing to accept the inevitability of growing older. The mantra of the middle-aged and beyond is: "I have seen old age. I don't like it, and I am not going to do it."

Some would say I have become a poster child (poster old man?) for yoga as an ancient solution to a new phenomenon. I thought it might be helpful to share some of my "lessons learned" with people new to yoga and people who are noticing signs of aging (even if they haven't yet accepted that reality).

I have been practicing yoga regularly for four years. It has changed my life; I estimate yoga has reversed my aging process by at least 10 years. I first heard about yoga in 1969 when I saw a friend practicing, and I thought it would be fun to try. I bought a book, Richard Hittleman's *Yoga 28-Day Exercise Plan*, and practiced by myself off and on for a couple of years. In those days, teachers were not readily available, and those that were focused mainly on the spiritual side. Students were mostly hippies looking for "enlightenment." Over time, what little practice I had faded away.

## Rediscovering yoga

In the 1990s, yoga was entering a renaissance, and several friends and family members started to practice. By that time, however, I was in my late 50s, 30 pounds overweight, and recovering from foot surgery as a result of running while wearing flimsy footgear in the '60s and '70s. The thought of doing anything barefoot was overwhelming. Old age was on the horizon, and I felt helpless and scared.

Like so many of my generational cohorts, I decided to join a gym. It was a good start. A few months later, I stumbled onto a new way of eating, called the Montignac Method. Montignac, the precursor to South Beach and Ultrametabolism, involved getting rid of the evil "3 S's"—sugar, starch, and salt. Wow! Six months later, 35 pounds were gone (and have stayed off). I thought again about resuming yoga practice, but despite my emerging, newfound energy and sense of adventure, my muscles were terribly stiff. So I spent the next three months stretching in the steam bath at the gym.

In June of 2002, I took my first yoga class. I was very

lucky. I stumbled into a Sivananda-style class with a teacher whose day job is teaching the third grade. He had just the patience I needed; no one could have been less judgmental. He assured me that if I felt better when I left class, I'd had a good practice. He also helped to quell most of my old competitive juices.

I practiced once a week for about three months; and after the summer was over, I started practicing twice a week. Four months later, after the new year, I advanced my practice to four to five times a week, which is where it has been ever since.

## Measuring progress in millimeters

We've all read about incredible yogis or yoginis and how they came to achieve a practice worthy of awe. What I brought to yoga was commitment and no talent. Every pose has taken both hard work and patience, and I have measured progress in very small increments—millimeters, in fact—and, on good days, simply the number of breaths I can take in a pose.

Practice takes patience, patience, and more patience. In the beginning, I had to dig deep inside to find the commitment to stay with it and not become despondent with my nearly undetectable progress. The weekend-warrior mentality is just as much a problem in yoga as it is in most Western sports. In those early months, I quickly became frustrated when my muscles seemed to forget everything they learned from one week to the next, with no practice between classes and that common complaint of the aging body—loss of flexibility. I felt I had to start all over with every class. The situation was exacerbated because I was beginning to actually learn the asanas, so I believed I could do them, but my stiff body was not accommodating. High frustration and serious muscle soreness!

## More yoga, less time

As I increased the frequency of practice, however, I noticed some of the flexibility and muscle memory I had developed from the previous class stayed with me. It dawned on me that progress in my practice seemed more a function of frequency than anything else. I also realized I didn't need to do a full practice every time in order to maintain my progress. Sometimes, when I don't have the time for a class, I will pick three or four asanas

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and take 10 to 15 minutes to do them. I'm convinced we are better off with an abbreviated practice five times a week than a lengthy one once or twice a week. When practicing on my own, I'm careful to vary the asanas. I "listen to my body" to understand what it needs, a concept taught by Krishnamacharya (arguably the grandfather of modern yoga).

I have to admit that while there are many asanas that I have not mastered, none of them are undoable because of my age. Never once have I said, "I can't do this; I am too old." I have said I don't have the flexibility, balance, or strength (yet). But I feel ageless in my practice. Not everyone who comes to yoga was a ballet dancer or a gymnast in their youth. Nor did all of us start practicing when we were 17. So what! Each of us is on our own journey. My former teacher was right: If you feel better, you had a good practice. If you focus on the journey, the road to wellness has a way of taking care of itself.

Every once in a while, a student I have not practiced with before compliments my ability to execute a particular asana, only for them to find out that it took me two years to accomplish it. I am both flattered and amused. Amused because, either explicitly or implied, they are finishing the sentence with "...for a man your age." My response is, "It's not my age but the frequency with which I practice." Progress comes slowly. So what!

### Boomer-friendly tips

The underlying inelasticity of my aging muscles has made it difficult for me to prosper in classes that move quickly through the asanas. I have found that yoga styles that encourage me to spend at least one minute holding a pose allow me to actually get into the belly of the muscles. They are slow to open. What may seem like a simple pose takes on new meaning when being held for two minutes.

Not sure? Try either Warrior I or II for two minutes on each side. The burn is real, but it's different from the more athletic yoga styles many people practice.

Most yoga teachers are remindful that an integral part of achieving any asana is harmonizing the breath with the movement into and out of the pose. While this is certainly true, there is another aspect to breathing that is relevant to us aging yogis: pranayama. Over the years, all of us have experienced inhaling an ever-

increasingly poor quality of air and, sometimes, ever-shortening breaths. When I first started practicing pranayama, I found air getting into places it hadn't been for years. If you accept the notion that prana really means energy and that energy enters our bodies as part of the breath, then you start to realize that lots and lots of new energy awaits you as you learn how to really breathe. Along the way, I have found that I have built up muscle as a by-product of my breathing practice. Getting oxygen into what used to be "dead space" has been exhilarating for me (literally).

### First headstand at 60

To my surprise and delight, I continue to build muscle as a result of my practice. This helps in everyday life, and I am sure it will continue to do so in the years to come. The higher muscle-to-total-weight ratio has also helped me manage my weight, since muscle burns more calories than fat. It's just easier to keep off the weight I lost four years ago.

Growing older is an inescapable fact of life. We can't halt the process, but we can alter it through movement. It's never too late to change bad habits and restore our flexibility, strength, and energy. While so many people are looking for new "cures" for the "old problem," one of the best solutions is an ancient one: yoga!

There is also a genuine psychic benefit from my new lifestyle: I have taken back control of my body. Wellness is something I work at. I am not dependent on others to apply it, inject it, or prescribe it. While this may not sound like much of an accomplishment, for those of us who have ever lost or given up control on the road to old age, let me assure you, it is a big deal!

One last note, which I share, not as bragging, but as personal excitement and encouragement for all: I had already turned 60 before I ever

executed my first (ever) Headstand.

I can't wait to see what my practice is like in 20 years and how gracefully I have aged!

Be patient... 🧘



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