

# All I Needed to Know to Survive Grad School I Learned on my Yoga Mat

By Kristi Bruce Amatucci



We call it mindfulness: intimate attention surrendered to the present moment. The art of performing a task, a pose, an act with awareness rather than oblivion. Yoga is, for me, the field where mindfulness blooms most readily, and learning to be mindful helped me survive graduate school.

## **Warrior III**

Let's start with an asana: *virabhadrasana iii*. The pose is a standing balance. Depending on the style of yoga practiced, standing poses are typically held for several breath cycles, up to a minute or more. Imagine lying face down. Now see your body suspended in the air, parallel to your mat, at waist height. The only support is one leg, straight underneath the body. The other leg extends out of the hip socket, a counterweight for the torso, parallel to the earth. Can you see it?

*Virabhadrasana iii* is part of the warrior series of *asanas*, and the English translation *warrior* indicates strength and stability, inward focus, unwavering fierceness, and steady confidence. Warrior III is a challenging pose that, like all standing poses, requires strength, endurance, and a careful attention to the alignment of all the major joints—ankle, knee, hip, shoulder. I've practiced the pose a couple of times a week for nine years, in yoga classes taught by teachers with various backgrounds and styles. I also practice it at home.

The first focus, each time I take the pose, is on gross balance skills, or, how do I engage my core muscles and the muscles of my legs so that I avoid falling on my face? Once the stillness that comes with balancing on one leg settles in, after several seconds, my attention seizes on smaller engagements. Can I raise the floating leg higher? Can I make it straighter through the knee? What happens when I drive energy out the heel of my elevated foot, imagining that it presses against the earth? And if I rotate my inner thighs toward each other, do my hips even out? How can I engage my shoulders, bringing them down and toward the spine, to open my chest? Though you might not notice the changes by looking at me, the pose is infinitesimally different with each shift in concentration.

This becoming fully present in the now, this ability to appreciate the finest nuance, this raw curiosity about what it means to hone the smallest detail, centers me. I achieve balance in that moment.

Fortuitously, I learned about mindfulness, through yoga, at the same time I was pursuing my doctorate.

I had taken yoga classes before I began doctoral work but had practiced only sporadically, halfheartedly trying to fit a weekly class into my over-scheduled life but never making it a priority. I was teaching high school English then, and frankly, I was more likely to find peace at the bottom of a Friday afternoon pint glass than on my yoga mat. My teaching environment was not an easy one; it was hard to pay close attention to my professional life because what I saw around me was often painful. My teenage students faced challenges of poverty and abuse, racism and inequality. My challenge was to entice them to see language as empowering, to help them read critically and write powerfully. But most days, the immediate challenge was to avoid being told to fuck off.

My teaching felt irrelevant to student needs and desires. I left the classroom to pursue a PhD in language education.

When my doctoral coursework began, I faced a different set of obstacles, and my daily schedule changed radically. Now I had several hundred pages of dense reading to accomplish each week. I had response papers to write. What I didn't have was a sixty-hour per week job that depleted my energy. I was still teaching, but my class met twice a week for 90 minutes each time, and my students were middle-class white women, twenty-one year old sorority sisters from suburban Atlanta.

Though my life looked vastly different as a doctoral student than it had as a high school teacher, graduate school was anything but easy. I realized that I'd need a regular stress reducer, so I started attending yoga classes at the university fitness center three days a week. I chose yoga because I had tried it before and because the physiology of my body was a good fit with the kinds of physical postures featured in hatha (pose-based) yoga. Natural flexibility means I didn't have to struggle too hard to assume most of the commonly practiced poses so I could experience instant benefits.

I thought a regular yoga practice would help me balance the various responsibilities of my new role as doctoral student. But I was also looking for something that would help strengthen my body. I needed movement and conditioning in my life to counterbalance all of the time I spent sitting—in a chair reading *Acts of Literature* or in front of my laptop where I wrote course papers and responded to students' writing. What I discovered as I continued to practice yoga was that aside from the expected benefits—an increased sense of calm, strength, confidence—the attention tools I learned infused every bit of my life as doctoral student.

Heavy theoretical texts examined in rigorous seminars became lighter as I placed them in delicate yoga-like balance. Instead of flipping through the pages of a journal article or monograph, becoming discouraged at the sheer amount of reading or the difficulty of the concepts, I kept my focus, page by page, sentence by sentence, word by word until my focus was exhausted.

As my experience in the yoga studio increased, I began to notice the physicality of my body while reading—the tension I held in my shoulders when the book was too heavy, the strain on my eyes when the light was insufficient, the jiggling of my foot when my mind wandered. The

Cartesian mind-body binary disappeared as my attentiveness moved among things physical and metaphysical. My body and mind worked together as a relay. I discovered that careful, loving attention showered on the most stubborn patches, whether they were standing balance poses or the most difficult philosophical texts, helped me blossom.

### **Crow Pose**

Another asana I practice is crow pose, or *bakasana*. Just as I finished writing my comprehensive exams, I had a breakthrough with *bakasana*. The semester-long exam writing was a high-stress period of my graduate program. Coursework was finished; it was time to prove that I could write with the theory I'd read. I had a fifteen-week semester in which to write two thirty-page papers, one methodological and one philosophical. Throughout the semester, I practiced yoga several times a week. And just at the end of it, a new alignment that I managed in *bakasana* rewarded my persistence in practicing the pose.

*Bakasana* is an arm balance, meaning the weight of the body is supported by the arms rather than the legs. I had been struggling with crow for months—and with my expectations for what it “should” look like. Even after several months of intense struggle, I still couldn't get both feet off the floor at once, nor could I let loose of the notion that both feet had to leave the floor in order for me to “really” practice crow.

Imagine the pose. Start on your hands and knees. Fingers are spread wide, palms flat, the hands press the mat away. Elbows bend slightly and stay tight to the ribcage, as the body leans forward, hips lifted. Rise to the balls of the feet and feel shinbones connect with the backs of the upper arms. Finally the torso tips forward, nose pointed toward mat, shifting the body's center of gravity over the arms. The toes lift away from the earth, and the palms alone remain in contact with the mat.

Crow pose clearly challenges arm and shoulder strength as biceps, triceps, and deltoids engage to support the body's weight. My end-of-semester breakthrough was when I discovered that the body's core—abdominals and back muscles—works hard too. The core holds the body in crow position once it is there. The weight is distributed; it's not *all* arm and upper body strength. This feeling, this expression of the pose, with toes up, is different from what I predicted it would be. I was surprised.

The determination and confidence I gained while practicing *bakasana* paralleled new understandings of my upcoming dissertation work. I finally let go of the idea that my dissertation must take the expected-in-education five-chapter format. Instead I dared to propose something new: a nontraditional dissertation, written as fiction, about the life of a high school English teacher, told in a series of interrelated vignettes. As I had to let go of my expectations for what crow “should” look like, so I also let go of expectations for my writing, ready to be surprised by what I wrote. But before I could write a dissertation in this genre, I had to convince my committee members that my creative approach to qualitative research methodology would satisfy the expectations for a social science degree in education.

I took courage from yoga and relaxed into the writing, following my curiosities about what I might produce. In preparation for my dissertation proposal defense, I crafted a substantive

example of the work I wanted to do and prepared a rationale for my writing choices. My committee members read my work and asked me hard questions. We debated issues of genre, rigor, and scholarship. In the end, they insisted I write a traditional first chapter that explained and framed the methodology before I used it. Otherwise, they were completely supportive.

The encouragement of my committee members, coupled with the utter delight I found in my writing, pushed me forward (and backward, and forward again) during all moments of doubt. In these moments I drew from the lessons I'd learned on my yoga mat with *bakasana*. I maintained writing momentum from continuous practice. The lesson from my yoga mat: don't stop writing. Be willing to accept the challenges—edits, advice, suggestions. Stay focused. Remain strong and flexible. Revise. But keep writing; follow your curiosity. Keep practicing crow pose until you get it. Finish your dissertation.

### **Corpse Pose**

A traditional yoga practice ends in *savasana*—corpse pose. The active work of the practice is finished, but the work of concentration continues, as the body lies supine, limbs falling into the mat. Feet flop gently to the sides. The distribution of weight is even on both sides of the spine. Fingers curl toward the upturned palms. Shoulders release any remaining tension. Hips fall open.

Thoughts pass through the mind, as thoughts will do. Our task is to watch the thoughts come and go. To focus on the inhalation and exhalation of breath, fully exchanging each breath. I got better, on the yoga mat, during *savasana*, at emptying my mind of relentless thoughts, stilling the movie in my mind for minutes at a time. And eventually, the regular practice of mindfulness during *savasana* did induce changes off the mat, in the way that I noticed my posture when sitting in front of my laptop, to the attention I gave to my breath, to even my pedagogy, as I continued to work with pre-service teachers.

Being present with my feelings, moment to moment, and with those of my students, enhanced my teaching. Student teaching can be terrifying for pre-service teachers. They must balance their lives as undergraduates while stepping into more professional teaching roles. Stress levels run high. I found that my mindfulness helped me in the classroom and helped my students. They described me as calm. Students learned that when they needed advice on an urgent school-based situation or just had a quick management question to ask, I would listen, giving them my full attention, and my best advice. I tried to allay their fears and even suggested that they practice *pranayama*—yogic breathing—to relieve tense situations.

The qualities of mindfulness, balance, endurance, and tranquility that I learned on my yoga mat helped me survive graduate school. I learned to attend to my desires, to defend my choices, to resist my hesitations. I learned to let go of attachments, of expectations that my scholarship would be a certain thing or act in a certain way. Yoga made me brave and resilient, gave me confidence to try new things, new ways of writing and making meaning of the world. These qualities helped me revise, rethink, and tinker anew with my never-ending questions about teaching and learning and writing. The lessons I learned from my yoga practice gave me confidence—to master a doctoral program, and to write this essay with the fluidity, grace, and ease of an *asana* held well.

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