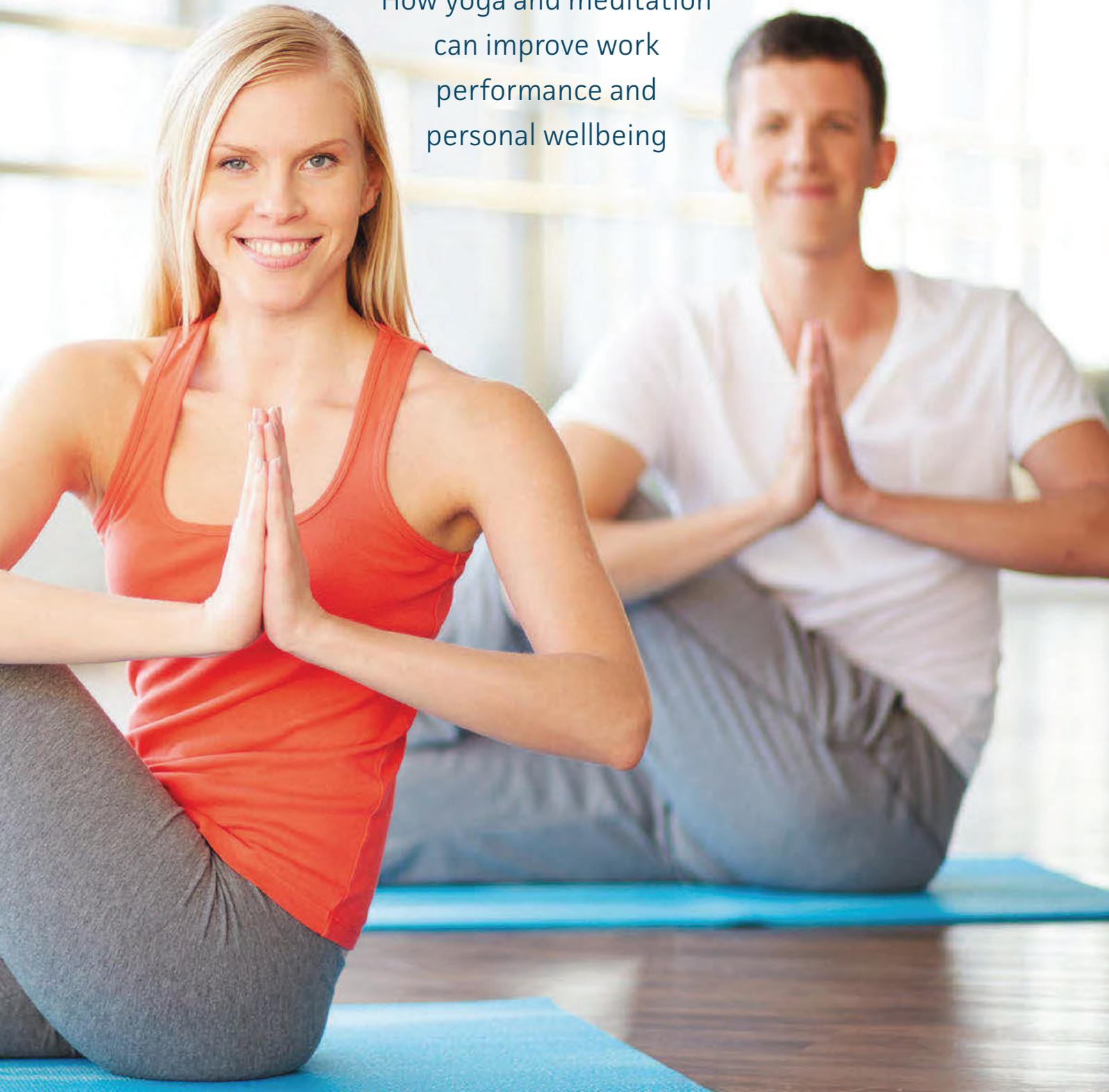


# Practising Well

## Lawyers are humans too

How yoga and meditation  
can improve work  
performance and  
personal wellbeing



Minter Ellison Rudd Watts senior solicitor Alisaundre van Ammers recently returned from India a qualified yoga teacher, with a dream of bringing the stress-reducing performance-improving practice to her colleagues. She shares the story of her own journey to mindfulness, and offers lawyers some practical tips to help them get the best out of their minds and bodies.

**Fast track to the top** Graduating near top of her class (with first class honours, Otago University 2008), cruising into commercial and litigation teams with Russell McVeagh, loving the work experience, corporate social life and intellectual challenge of 'big law', Alisaundre van Ammers (Ali) was living in the fast lane, on track to success.

"I would recommend working in a big firm straight out of law school to anyone," she says.

"I did, however, find the firm environment and the work stressful."

"I think that's a function both of my own personality—I became very driven and a bit of a perfectionist and over-achiever towards the end of law school, and the nature of the profession itself.

"Also, as most people who know me would attest, I don't really fit the conventional big firm lawyer mould," Ali says.

Legal practice attracts 'type A personalities', with high personal

standards and who tend to fret the details, she says. It's often what makes a person a good lawyer.

But, perfectionism has a price.

"I saw a lot of stress and distress around me from lawyers young and old, whose lives were dominated by their work and who seemed to feel powerless to change that," Ali says.

"I was quite affected by that and I worried about my colleagues, especially my peer group."

"When I started working long hours I stopped doing the other things I had been doing for my wellbeing. For example, at uni I was running six days a week and walking everywhere. At work, I was doing neither. I didn't find new healthy ways to cope with stress."

"In the end I decided to take some time to think about what I wanted in life and where I wanted my career to head."

**Reflections** Ali returned home to Dunedin and back to Otago University for two years, to study bioethics and health law. She also prioritised some personal time, and travel.

"I found I really missed practising law and wanted to get back into it."

But the anxiety and stress that can come with the high-pressure world of commercial law, lingered. Until she discovered yoga.

"I did it once and almost immediately started practising six days a week. I have maintained that practice consistently for almost four years and it has changed my life," Ali says.

"It was the first time I had actively and consciously attempted to regulate my breath and thoughts.

"And I found it hugely empowering to learn that I could control my physical state and therefore my stress levels.

"I don't think anyone would have considered me the yoga 'type,'" Ali says.

She admits previously being one to say 'harden up' to herself, or 'deal with it'.

"But the truth is that wasn't working and I wasn't happy."

# Practising Well

## Lawyers are humans too

“Even when [telling yourself to ‘harden up’] is working (and it does for some people), the bottom line is; life doesn’t have to be so hard.

“There are tools available that allow us to be more present and comfortable in ourselves so that we experience less suffering and more joy, even in the midst of what would otherwise cause stress.”

“Things like softness, calmness, openness are not obviously rewarded in our profession and it can be easy to shut them down,” Ali says.

“I think yoga was especially life-changing for me because as a law student and a lawyer I had become increasingly identified with my intellect—my rational mind—and increasingly disconnected from my body and heart.

“The result is a sense of being ungrounded and having worth depend overly on intellectual achievement.”

“I have softened and become more relaxed as a person and seen amazing benefits in all my relationships—personal and professional.”

**From practice to professional** Ali worked for Crown Law’s revenue team for two years before re-entering private practice with Minter Ellison Rudd Watts in 2014. In January, with the support of the firm, she took time off and travelled to Goa, India, to train as a yoga teacher.

“I first went to India in 2009 and found a certain calmness and meditative space there I hadn’t experienced before.”

“I knew I wanted to study yoga at the source (India) and from a real Indian yogi with a lineage.”

Goa is hot and stunning and a little crazy. I was at a beautiful retreat complex with thirty women and one man from all around the world. I met incredible people who I am still friends with.

“It was very different being able to spend so much time focused on myself, compared to everyday life at home.”

“When you’re busy getting stuff done you don’t have time to reflect on how you are so much or how you feel about yourself and your life.

“We were in silence a lot of the time, meditating every day, journaling and practising physically up to five hours a day. I feel like I know myself a lot better as a result.”

“It was also really intense and required a lot of hard work, practice and study. I actually found the skills I have developed as a lawyer

really helped me to become a yoga teacher—for example, being used to hard work and working when tired. Perseverance and discipline. Quick reading and book learning. Being confident speaking in public and having clear communication skills.”

“Coming back was quite hard.”

“I found it really noisy. There’s a real comedown after so much yoga and meditation.”

**Giving back** “Since I started practising myself it has always been a dream of mine to bring yoga to other lawyers, who I believe can really benefit from it,” Ali says. She teaches her Minter Ellison Rudd Watts colleagues during lunchtime once a week and is training to host classes at a local studio.

“Work has been really supportive of me teaching here and in general, which I think says a lot about the firm.”

“It’s really great for me, seeing people come to a yoga class for the first time and find they have a passion.”

“Yoga has changed my life and giving others the opportunity to experience it is why I trained as a teacher.”

Yoga, Ali says, is “something you practise, but you never perfect.”

“In that way it’s similar to law, but in all others the practices are diametrically opposed.”





“You can’t win yoga or nail it. You can only be it and experience it.”

“There’s no competition and no judgement. It’s about being aware of what is happening without willing it to be different and accepting your own limitations. We don’t get to do that a lot in a profession where we have to get it right and everyone is watching to see if we can.”

**Take a breath, take control** Law can be stressful. But it doesn’t have to be, Ali says.

“There is a lot of pressure to meet deadlines, to get things right, to meet others’ expectations and to do a lot of work in short time frames.”

“I think a lot of us run or are motivated by a bit of stress.”

Stress cumulates and compounds when it’s left untreated, Ali says.

“Physical yoga practice is an opportunity to disengage from what is causing stress and dedicate time purely to connecting with yourself and creating space in your mind.

“Yoga citta vritti nirodaha”—yoga is the removal or absence of the distractions or fluctuations of the mind.

“It helps to slow thoughts down and gives you awareness of what is on your mind and whether that’s really useful.”

For example, that voice in your head saying “we have to meet this deadline, it’s going to be so hard” over and over one-hundred times an hour will not achieve anything except an escalation of stress, Ali says.

“Moving away or letting go of such thoughts creates room for creativity and new ideas. We need this to be able to see solutions to complex problems.

#### **Yoga is, yoga does ...**

- “A lot of stress and emotion is stored in the body as tension, which we may or may not be conscious of. Yoga targets and stretches every muscle in the body, releasing stored tension. This needs to be done regularly for the body to be less tense and more balanced overall.”

- “Yoga requires concentration and improves your ability to maintain a single point of focus. This improves lawyers’ productivity.”

- “A healthy, flexible, strong body means better posture and less discomfort in the work environment. Yoga counteracts the damage we do to ourselves by sitting all day, resulting in fewer sick days and less fatigue.”

- “Yoga gives you a connection to yourself, and lets you build self-love/self-esteem. Yoga helps you place better boundaries around work, and improves your confidence.”

- “Yoga gives a sense of calm and acceptance, and makes you easier on people around you and easier to work with.”

- “Yoga gives you the ability to regulate your moods, emotions and physical state at any moment.” For example, if a meeting is not going well, and you are mindful, you can change your breath to maintain calm and focus. “You start to do this automatically in a range of situations.”



# Practising Well

## Lawyers are humans too

- “In my experience yoga can reduce anxiety and, when practised regularly, can cure it almost entirely.”
- “Yoga increases resilience and ability to deal with setbacks and challenges.”
- “Yoga provides a healthy space to feel and release emotion.”

### Practice, practise, but don't perfect

“Start a yoga or another mindfulness practice,” Ali says.

“It doesn't have to be fancy or difficult, it just needs to be regular.”

It could be as simple as following along to a twenty-minute YouTube yoga practice for beginners tutorial, five times every week. Or sitting in silence for ten minutes each night before going to bed.

“Make it a ritual.”

“Light a candle, burn some incense.”

“Do it in the same place every day and make that space special to you. Train yourself to expect to do this.”

“By setting this up you are signalling to yourself that you are important and your wellbeing is important. We are not just lawyers, we are humans and we need be looked after to flourish.”

“Practise active relaxation.”

“Watching TV is not actually relaxing for your brain and isn't

helping it unwind after a day of intense thinking. Try setting aside ten minutes to just sit and observe your breath. Guided meditations on YouTube are great for this. Do it at your desk!”

**Practise silence** “Turn your phone off and spend half an hour at home in silence after work to let your brain reset and calm itself. That means no TV, no talking to anyone.”

“Do this as you go about your business, for example as you make dinner. The morning is also a good time for silence. Remain silent from waking until you get to work.”

**Be mindful** “If you are feeling really strung out, stop what you are doing and practise mindfulness by slowly identifying and considering everything in your visual field.”

“Check into your breath and ensure you are breathing all the way into your belly.”

“Inhale I am here, exhale I am letting go. Do this until you feel calmer.”

“Recognise when you are stressed and take active steps to manage it at the time, rather than letting it build. Go for a walk and actively notice your surroundings.”

“Do yoga!”

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