

# YOGA FOR FREEDIVERS SARA'S STORY

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Do not rush into personal records, but accustom your mind to the new sensation. Freediving is about finding the balance between muscles, souplesse and mind by fitness, yoga and meditation.











I've followed the advanced freediver course and succeeded in the certification tests, but I did not attend the yoga sessions. They had not been organised in time, so I became a freediver without any real experience of the mental preparation needed of this sport. You cannot talk or read about apnea without broaching the subject of yoga, so I had to do something about having missed the sessions. When the opportunity to meet and greet a world record holding freediver arose, I was quick to secure my spot. Within a few weeks, it was time to leave for Brugge, where the event was being held.

Standing in the parking lot next to the fitness centre where the session was about to take place, I felt a little uneasy but with no apparent reason known to myself. I've read about yoga and what it can do for you, but as a believer of hard science, I'm rather skeptical of all other things. We have a magnificent biological computer between our ears and science has only scratched the surface of its possibilities, but I'm hard to convince unless there is solid proof. Nevertheless, I try to keep an open mind until convinced before I take my shoes off and take the stairs to the next level.

In preparation of this event, I've been reading about Sara Campbell. She was a PR expert working hard in London to meet life's expectations. After a few years, she felt something was missing and took up meditation and yoga. She started freediving under the impulse of a friend and soon made a name in the sport.

Having read her curriculum vitae, I've tried to imagine what she would look like, a habit I cannot stop. In doing that I was certainly influenced by the image of the last record holding freediver I interviewed. In my mind the posture of a record holder is a tall, slim and

sharp looking person. His or her formidable lung volume must be supported by long, powerful legs.

With this image, I step into the room where the event is about to begin. The room wants to invite you to be at ease and to relax, but the loud music coming from a spinning class a floor below us cries out a different invitation. I look around and see no one who matches my mental description. I discover other attendees in rather loose clothes equipped with a mat and some strange brick. The invitation mentioned to bring a fitness mat, but compared to what the others had brought with them, mine looked more like a napkin. Well, this is my first yoga session so I feel I can be excused for all the mistakes I will make and my negligence of the customs among yoga adepts.

But where is Sara? I hear English coming from a small group standing near the middle of the room. Looking at the members, I try to discover who it is speaking with a British tongue. I close in to greet her and to my surprise, Sara is not at all how I had imagined her. She's a small, normal looking person with greying hair. I sense a strong, warm personality with an air of calmness quite characteristic for somebody who has yoga as a philosophy to live by. She radiates passion and genuine interest in others. The moment I shake her hand, I feel assured that she's the record holding diver I've read about.

We're invited to sit down and relax. I look around and recognise divers I've met during some of the sessions in NEMO33 and TRANSFO. Looking at how they sit in a very relaxed way, some on that strange brick, they must, unlike me, have participated in the yoga sessions. Sara starts with a video of her world record dive of 104 metres constant weight. She invites all to hold our breath during the

projection of the dive. My personal record static apnea flirts with the 3 minutes, not the 4. Not risking a blackout in a room full of colleague-divers, I decide not to follow her suggestion and to keep breathing. Luckily she doesn't ask us to copy her behaviour at the turning point, the moment she was under the influence of depth narcosis.

Before sharing her insights into deep diving, we get a quick overview of her life. Experiencing a non-eventful, tranquil youth, she stumbled into a normal lifestyle although felt that something was missing. She was quite successful in the unforgiving PR world in London, but left a trail of multiple failed relationships, a miscarriage, an abortion and stressful hours of working leading to chronic illness, and a complete breakdown while preparing for the London marathon.

That this kind of continuous mistreatment of life could not go on became clear when she was diagnosed with a stress-related digestive disorder. Her doctor maintained the rest of her life's symptoms with medication, including daily doses of steroids. She did not accept that there was no cure, so she started her journey to find one herself.

She started exploring acupuncture, nutritional therapy, meditation, yoga – which she found boring – singing and dancing. After some emotional days with lots of crying, it dawned on her that the illness was the culmination of years of self-neglect in favour of other worldly things. Self-destructive activities most of us do to cope with day-to-day life: poor eating habits, over-exercising, over-working, binge-drinking, looking for love in all the wrong places, compulsive shopping, trying harder...were claiming their toll. Another moment of truth was during a week in Greece where she was introduced, rather by accident, to chanting. Although skeptical at



the beginning, chanting added that bit to yoga to free her emotions.

The illness broke the smoke screen of pretending invulnerable. There was no way to ignore the signal for much needed change. While threatening and painful, it enabled her to reflect on her life and to make drastic change happen. The final tipping point was the birth of her sister's baby boy late 2004, a great moment that brought back some painful moments due to her miscarriage a few years earlier. She decided to take a week off to pull herself together before rejoicing this event. To make peace with her inner self, she stayed in a peaceful Bedouin town tucked away between the mountains of Sinai and the Red Sea. This was the ultimate place for anyone looking for peace.

After a few days, she came in touch with her inner self and during a horseback riding trip, she decided this was her new home. There was no rational explanation, just a feeling, an intuition that it was the right thing to do. No rationalisation, just an emotional decision. If it didn't work out, the worst possible scenario was to return to the her current life with a dependence on medication. She was at a crossroad in life and returning to Dahab was the better option.

In the irony of things, she got pregnant in the weeks after her escape to Egypt to ease the pain over her miscarriage. Her blessed situation could have given her the excuse to stay in London and forget about her intuitive decision, but she accepted life's challenge and moved to Dahab within two months. Her second pregnancy gave her a clear wake-up call and she was determined to see it through.

Life in Dahab was not without its struggles and challenges, but she managed to stay in contact with herself and to live without medication.

Yoga gave her a resting point and the possibility to recharge her batteries. Convinced of the positive effects of yoga, she held sessions. Observing her ease to hold her breath during those sessions, a friend pushed her to take up freediving to assist her as a safety diver. Soon Sara was bitten by the freediving bug and attracted by the spiritual side of the sport. She started going deeper and deeper, pushing her own limits. Some nine months later, with a delay after recovering from Hepatitis A, she held three world records and the woman with the deepest record in the world. She had found her home and her destiny. But yoga was the thing that kept her going on.

"But you are so short," is one of the most heard comments. As yoga is at the origin of her free diving exploits, she's convinced that meditation and a good inner balance are key to freediving. Most people's minds are a mess and they don't know it. The common freediver thinks that the more you practice the better you get, but that's all wrong. Intellect doesn't solve freediving problems, it is the cause of most of them. If a freediver stops thinking about the dive, all will be smooth. Our body has the wisdom to free dive, we just have to accept it and stop thinking about it. We have to relax and let our body do its thing. Consider your mind as a passenger on your body's dive. Communicate with your body. Believe in it and do not try to manage our mammal dive reflex.

She advises to freedive with eyes closed to better listen to our body and to block off all senses, except feeling. The sixth sense, our mind, is the last one we have to put at ease and succeeding that is 80% of the dive. A good freediver trains to no longer respond to his or her mind. We have to retrain our brain. When encountering a problem, go back up a few metres to stop and relax. Why is there a problem? Do not try to muscle it out but

understand the cause. On the next dive, stop and stay head down. Relax. Thereafter, stop, relax and go 2 metres deeper. Do not rush into personal records, but accustom your mind to the new sensation. Freediving is about finding the balance between muscles, souplesse and mind by fitness, yoga and meditation.

After hearing these convincing arguments, one has to attach some credibility to words of a world record holder, and she invites us to try some exercises. Now I have to step out of my comfort zone. Listening to somebody talking about yoga is easy, but doing the exercises is something completely different. When I see other attendees fully engaged in the exercises, I decide to give it a try. Struggling to find a relaxing position and the mindset to participate fully, I do my best to copy what I see. Despite her advice not to "think" about it, my brain is attempting to grasp what I'm engaged in. It is not capable to apprehend the situation while my body seems to enjoy it.

When she explains her mantra, I've got a suspicious feeling that she will ask us to sing it. And yes, she finishes her explanation with the invitation to chant the mantra. I've lost track of my comfort zone, but the group pressure is too much not to pretend. I stumble into actually producing some of the words. My mind is still not grasping what's going on.

The mantra exercise ends the evening. I feel sweat tripling down my back and I'm wondering where that comes from. Are yoga and relaxation more active than I imagined? After saying good night, I take off back to Antwerp. While driving home, I try to give all that I heard, a place. Freediving is pushing your personal boundaries. Maybe that means breaking out of your brain patterns to explore the less logical parts of yourself? Something to reflect on.