

# To Prop or Not to Prop

*Are props a helpful supplement to your practice, or do they just get in the way? Here's how to decide when to use and not use these tools.*

*By Claudia Cummins*



The original yogis didn't practice with foam blocks, D-ring straps, or purple sticky mats. But as yoga evolved, many practitioners discovered that props could help deepen their explorations.

Among modern yogis, attitudes toward props range from the Zen-like minimalism of those who shun all but a sticky mat to the abundance of those who travel with an extra suitcase filled with yoga accessories. Regardless of where you fall in this spectrum, a few guidelines can help you make the most of your props.

Be clear about why you're using them. Mindlessly using a block to support your hand in a standing pose just because your teacher told you to won't deepen your practice. Ask yourself what purpose the extra support is serving and let that answer guide the way you use it. Are you using the block to move into a posture you aren't yet supple enough to manage on your own? If so, consider ways to lessen your reliance on that aid over time.

Be your own teacher. Use your body's signals to devise new and effective ways of using props to enhance your practice. When you sense a certain part of your body crying out for extra support in a resting pose, for example, wedge a towel or shirt beneath that area and observe what happens. Or if you're struggling to master a new pose, ask yourself whether any props within arm's reach might help. You might be surprised by the ingenious solutions you unearth.

Explore new territory. If a rolled-up blanket is supporting your back during a restorative pose, you might like to explore how varying the size and position of it alters your experience. Or if you're using a strap to help you understand a particular action or direction in a posture you know well, you may choose to repeat that same pose without props from time to time to explore the differences.

Be creative. Yoga basics include mats, blankets, straps, and blocks. But if you consider a prop to be any aid that helps you access a posture more fully, your world will widen considerably. Walls, tables, balls, books, socks, neckties, even the helping hands of a friend can all be used to deepen your exploration.

Practice nonattachment. Ideally, yoga leads us toward greater flexibility and adaptability. So don't grow so attached to your chest of yoga toys that you can't practice without them. If you use props regularly, challenge yourself every once in a while to stow them away and practice without any aids at all (that's right, not even a sticky mat). On the other hand, if you're a yoga minimalist, incorporate a few props into your practice every now and then just to explore how they might be helpful. You might be surprised by what you learn. Remember, the best yoga prop is always an open mind.

*Claudia Cummins teaches yoga in Mansfield, Ohio. At the moment, her favorite pose is Parivrtta Janu Sirsasana (Revolved Head-to-Knee Pose).*

