

yoga

JOURNAL

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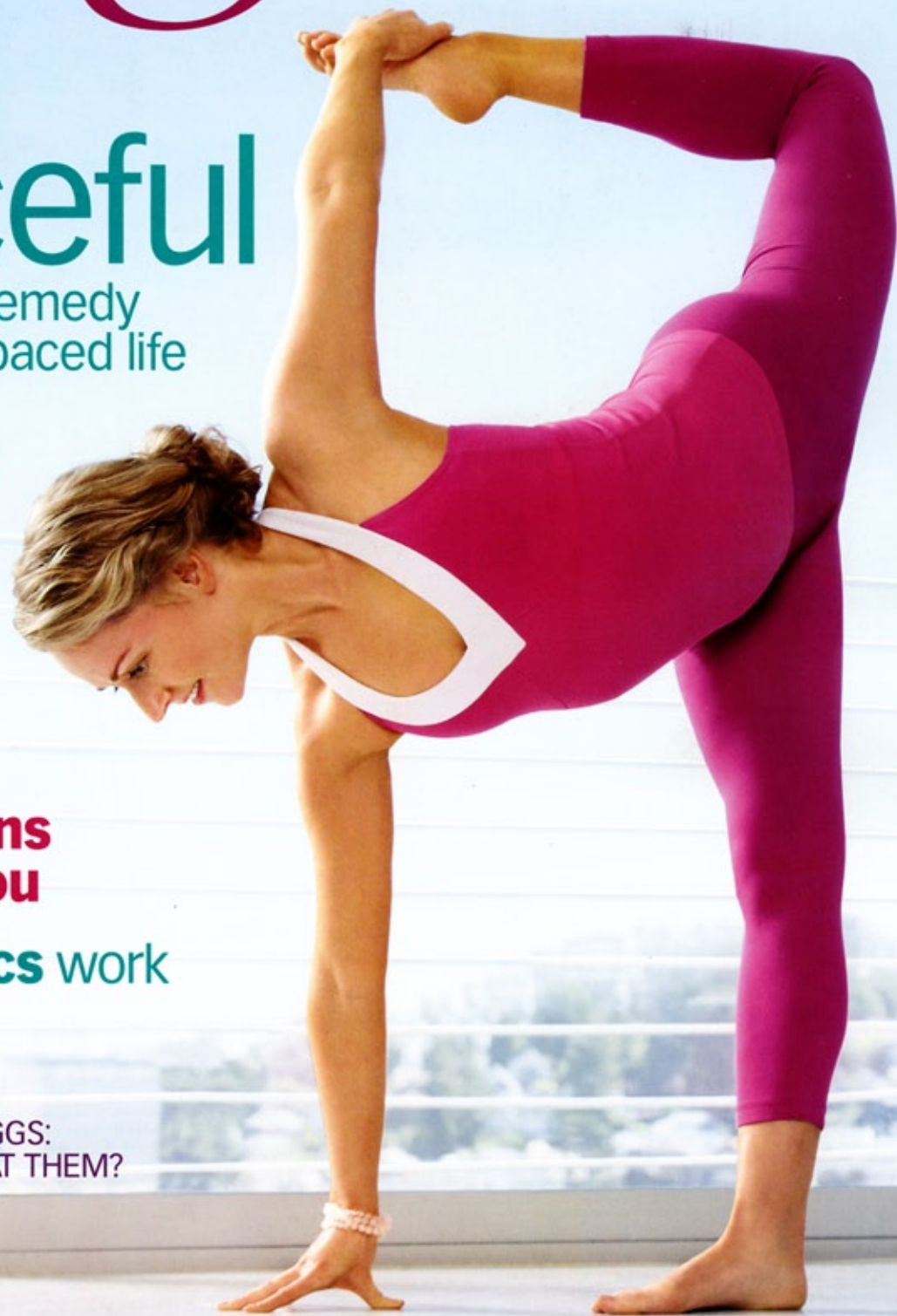
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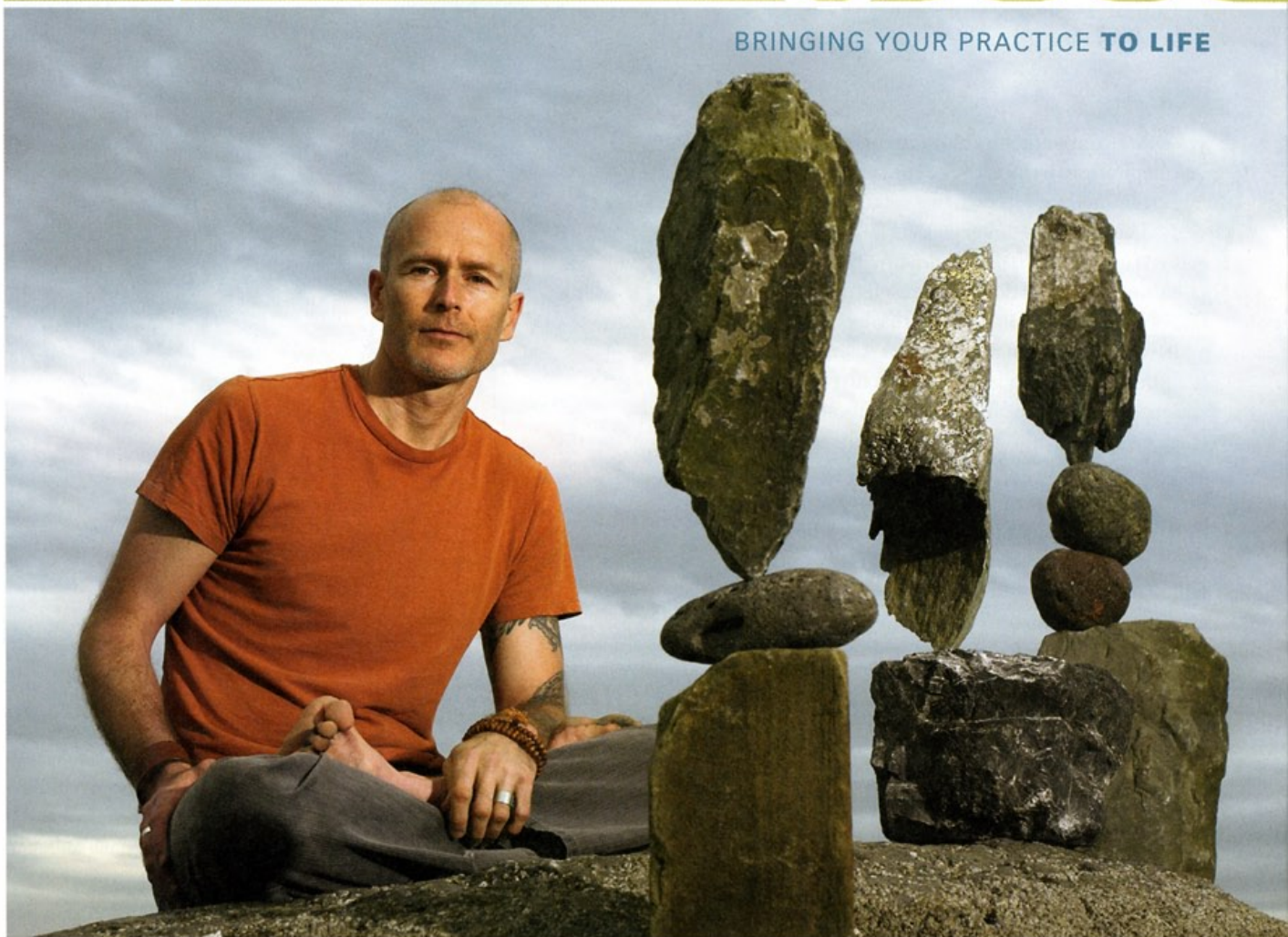
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BRINGING YOUR PRACTICE TO LIFE



rock solid

The founder of Upala Yoga practices the mindful art of stone stacking.

Shane Hart's yoga practice is rock solid. He strikes precarious balances along the Pacific Northwest shore—poses that withstand inhospitable squalls, scratchy barnacles, and crowds of curious onlookers. But the shapes he's making aren't with his body. As an artist, Hart practices what he calls Upala Yoga—or stone yoga. "People have been walking by these rocks for years. They're so mundane, so commonplace, and yet I can bring them to life," Hart says.

Hart, the 41-year-old father of three and a manager of a natural-products company, lives near Bellingham, Washington, where he does his art. *Upala* is Sanskrit for "stone," and Hart uses mere gravity and friction to build seemingly impossible towers of rocks. His work looks deceptively simple, but with progressively challenging structures, a deeper practice evolves. Stone yoga offers Hart a meditation and a centeredness beyond what he experiences in his Ashtanga Yoga practice. He calls Upala "enchanted territory," without guides; but judging from the crowds who gather to watch him (and seek his guidance), Hart is spawning a movement.

A rock artist on a San Diego beach gave Hart his initial inspiration. Over the years, he dabbled in stone balancing, but 10 years later, while his children frolicked

rock solid

➤ at a waterfront park, he finally discovered serious meditation in the art. The concept of Upala Yoga solidified for Hart when a young admirer said, "The rocks are doing yoga." His art then evolved into a spiritual discipline.

Last winter, Hart devoted himself to his practice. Every Saturday for six months, he bundled up in rain gear and fingerless gloves, spent an hour before sunrise pushing a metal cart along the coast to gather stones, and then began to stack them. The following 10 to 12 hours were a meditation on physical balance and nonattachment. His effort yielded no material reward, and by day's end, he'd assist gravity in dismantling the stacks so no injuries could result from any falling rocks. Word spread, and his weekly pilgrimage started attracting a crowd. Distractions intensified his practice. A growing mindfulness of his breath and the elements taught him that appeasing a crowd with faster or taller stacks didn't work: "The most effective way to do this is to stay centered with that stone, at that time."

Hart considers stone-balancing techniques a metaphor for life's challenges. "Sit and work patiently and mindfully; eventually the stones click into place," he says. Calling rock asanas "transient artwork," he strives not to make them permanent. For Hart, teetering stone towers are akin to sand mandalas: It can take hours or days to complete them, but only five seconds to undo them. "There's a letting go in that." JENNIE LAY

For more information, visit stonetostone.com.



Shane Hart gets grounded through "stone yoga."



constructive meditation

Go outside and create art from the world around you.

Let nature be your meditation sanctuary, and don't be afraid to get creative about it. Aided

Concentrate on subtle relationships and observe their interconnectedness. Focus on the variations of light and texture. Then use these elements in your designs.

by wind, time, water, and tides, artists like Andy Goldsworthy meditate on the natural world by sculpting sand, twigs, flowers, and stones into mystical, impermanent landscapes.

But you don't need to be a famous artist to find inspiration in nature. Whether you choose to balance stones or build sand castles, nature offers a limitless medium for those on a contemplative path. Start by focusing on a favorite spot with untamed elements, whether it's a coastline, a forest, or an urban park. Closely watch the breeze, the swirling eddy of a pool of water, the changes in temperature that make things expand and contract.

"People don't realize the magic is everywhere," says Upala Yoga founder Shane Hart, who finds enlightenment in the art of balancing stones. "To work with the earth is literally grounding. It helps you to become centered by its proximity," he explains. As a bonus, Hart says, stone balancing has also focused and intensified his seated meditation practice: "When our lives themselves become art, it's a valuable part of practice." But try not to sculpt a naturalist masterpiece that's too tangible or permanent, he suggests. Take time to appreciate the "temporal nature of the practice." J.L.

ILLUSTRATION: ANDREA COBB; PHOTO: ANDY REYNOLDS