

A Beginner's Guide To Yoga

Yoga meets each individual exactly where he or she is. If you're new to yoga, there are many things you can do to make every class enjoyable and appropriate for your body and your needs. The MOST important point is to ENJOY your practice.

LEAVE YOUR AMBITION AT THE DOOR. Yoga is a practice that will keep you interested and challenged for a *lifetime*. There's no need to achieve – or even try - everything on the first day, week, month, or year.

TALK TO THE TEACHER BEFORE CLASS. Let the teacher know that you are new to yoga (and/or to the teacher's class). Let the teacher know if you have any injuries or medical conditions, or any concerns about class.

GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION. Take care of your own needs in class, whether that's by taking a break, observing instead of doing, or modifying a pose to make it more comfortable. You can use Child's Pose, or another resting pose, to focus on your breath and rest the body.

STAY MINDFUL. Every action in yoga is intentional. Take the time to understand and approach a pose or movement at your own pace. By paying close attention to alignment and action, even challenging poses will eventually become possible and comfortable.

ASK FOR ASSISTANCE. If you're unsure whether a pose or movement is right for you, ask the teacher for help. If you have a recent injury or other special concerns, seek out a smaller, slower-paced class, so the teacher can provide more individual attention.

USE YOUR BREATH AS A GUIDE. If you cannot breathe smoothly and deeply, you may be working too hard or at risk for injuring yourself. Safe, comfortable stretching usually deepens the breath. Appropriate effort also deepens the breath. In contrast, strain of any kind (including working too hard or pushing too hard in a stretch) is usually accompanied by shallow or forced breathing.

LISTEN TO THE TEACHER'S FEEDBACK. Individual feedback is one of the most valuable benefits of attending yoga class. We are so used to our physical habits that it often takes an observer to point out how we create stress in the body.

DURING HANDS-ON ADJUSTMENTS, GIVE THE TEACHER FEEDBACK. Let the teacher know whether you prefer gentle or strong adjustments. If you prefer not to be adjusted, let the teacher know before class.

TAKE THE BEST, AND LEAVE THE REST. In any given class, some poses will feel good and others will not; some movements will feel exhilarating, and others won't. Notice what feels right for YOUR body. You can begin to include these practices in your everyday life, when you can't make it to class.

STAY OPEN. As you explore different classes, keep an open mind. No class or style of yoga is universally best for every person. As you build a regular practice, you may find that poses, practices, and classes that you didn't enjoy at first will become your favorites. As your life changes, so will your practice. Always honor your needs.

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY. Your health is YOUR responsibility - no one else's. Remember that prevention is your greatest medicine. The practice of yoga is typically not quick fix, however, with regular practice, you'll reap the benefits.

Other Important Concepts

PRACTICE AT YOUR OWN LEVEL and avoid overstretching, straining, or competing with others. Some fellow students in your class may be more flexible than you are or they may be able to hold their postures longer. Don't try to outdo anyone! Yoga is NON-competitive so be sure to rest when needed. **There is no end to your yoga practice, no goal to reach, no pose to conquer...** in fact, you will never be *done* with a pose. There will always be ways to take it deeper, to refine the alignment – there will always be people who can do better or hold it longer. So, ENJOY the journey – forget about the destination! Look to improve on your own level. As long as you are in a state of improvement, you WILL get better.

DO NOT FORCE YOUR BODY under any circumstances. Work slowly with your body and respect its limits. These limits will gradually extend and you will gain flexibility if you work regularly and sensitively at stretching your limits. Your body will get the message and the tension which is preventing you from proceeding will gradually be released. Be patient and move into your poses with care and precision.

NEVER PRESS INTO PAIN. Pain is a message from the body which MUST be listened to. In some cases, it may simply be the body's process of changing. In such cases, you simply need to bear with it and continue (without forcing) and it will gradually pass. In other cases, you may be doing harm to some part of your body and may have to stop and do some other preparatory poses/exercises before returning to that one. Anything that is causing acute, sharp pain should be stopped immediately.

BE CONSCIOUS AND CONCENTRATE on what you are doing. Keep your mind on feeling what is happening in the body and concentrate on your breath and position. If your mind starts to wander, which it inevitable will do, simply notice that you're distracted and bring your attention back to your breath – over and over and over again. If there are outside distractions, try to concentrate on yourself and ignore what is going on around you. Allow your attention to flow through the body as you become aware of each muscle and the tension and energy stored there and allow that energy to flow and the muscle to relax. Listen carefully to your body and mind dialogue with out judgment or expectation.

GIVE IMPORTANCE TO YOUR BREATHING. This is an extremely important aspect of practicing yoga. In many cases, it is even more important than the actual asanas. In general (with some exceptions) we inhale when we stretch upward or backward, expanding the body – and exhale when we bend downward or forward, compressing the body.

LOOK TO INCREASE THE DURATION OF YOUR POSES as you get better. This is one of the ways to keep improving. A comfort zone is a nice place to get to, but don't stay too long!

DON'T EXPECT INSTANT RESULTS. While you will probably feel very relaxed and peaceful after your first yoga session, it can take many weeks of daily yoga practice before you begin to reap any significant health benefits. Patience is a key you must use for the real benefits of yoga to take place. If you really want to heal, transform, or develop your body, you should try to practice regularly ~ 3-5 times per week is ideal (remember, you can practice at home too!). Practicing regularly helps you to improve and will increase your level of understandings. Not just the understanding of the poses – but greater understanding of yourself as well.

Yoga Lingo

Some Definitions Worth Knowing

Asana

A posture practiced to strengthen the body, purify the nervous system and develop one-pointedness of the mind. In hatha yoga, asana refers to any of numerous poses prescribed to balance and tune up the subtle energies of mind and body for meditation and to promote health and longevity. Each asana possesses unique benefits, affecting the varied inner bodies and releasing energies in different parts of the nervous system. While the physical science of hatha yoga can dramatically influence health and general well-being, it is primarily a preparation for the deeper yogas and meditations.

Hatha

The yoga of physical well-being; in Sanskrit "ha" means sun and "tha" means moon; yoga is the union between them; a joining of opposites.

Mantra

A repeated word or phrase (usually during meditation practice although used also as a means of concentration) which evokes focus and mindfulness.

Namaste

A respectful greeting that is accompanied by a gesture of joining one's palms, with the fingertips pointing upwards. The joined palms are brought close to the chest. The national expression of India used as a greeting or upon parting, by putting the palms of the hands together in prayer position and bowing forward. The meaning/translation of "Namaste" is:

I honor the place in you which is of Love... of Truth... of Light... and of Peace,
When you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me, we are One.

Om (or Aum)

The primal sound; the sound or vibration from which the entire universe emanates. The supreme and most sacred syllable, consisting in Sanskrit of the three sounds (a), (u), and (m), representing various fundamental triads and believed to be the spoken essence of the universe. It is uttered as a mantra and in affirmations and blessings. To yogis, it represents a vibration which they say pervades the entire universe.

Prana & Pranayama

Prana is often referred to as breath, however, it is more accurately defined as that which causes you to breathe – or your life force (life-breath); the vital force of the body and the universe which sustains life and is the power of animation. **Pranayamas** are breathing techniques and practices where prana is controlled, managed, and developed and its quantity and quality enhanced to a higher level - affecting us physiologically and psychologically. Through Pranayama practice we develop a state of centeredness, balance and calmness.

Shanti

Simple means "peace." Can be interpreted as meaning peace in body, speech, and mind (i.e. in the entirety of one's being), or as a wish for peace individually, collectively, and universally. Many yoga teachings typically end with the words "Om shanti shanti shanti" as an invocation of peace.

Ujjayi (Pranayama)

The victory or ocean sounding breath (also sounds like Darth Vader or a radiator hiss). Ujjayi breathing helps to aid in concentration and heats the body. The sound is produced by contracting the glottis (back of the throat) with the inhalation and exhalation.

Yoga

Union; to yoke or unite

How Asanas (Poses) Work

The asanas are based on five principles:

- **The use of gravity.** The inverted postures such as the headstand, shoulder stand and the reverse posture take advantage of gravity to increase the flow of blood to the desired part of the body; in the headstand to the brain, in the shoulder stand to the thyroid gland and in the reverse posture to the gonads (sex glands)
- **Organ massage.** The position of the asana causes a squeezing action on a specific organ or gland, resulting in the stimulation of that part of the body.
- **Stretching muscles and ligaments.** This causes an increase in blood supply to the muscles and ligaments as well as relaxing them. It also takes pressure off nerves in the area. This stretching is involved in all the asanas, since it has such a beneficial effect on the body.
- **Deep breathing.** While holding the yoga posture we breathe slowly and deeply, moving the abdomen only (abdominal or low breathing). This increases the oxygen and prana supply to the target organ or gland, thereby enhancing the effect of the asana. Deep breathing reduces the “fight or flight” response and aids in relaxation.
- **Concentration.** As well as breathing slowly and deeply, we also focus our attention on the target organ or gland. This brings the mind into play, and greatly increases the circulation and prana supply to the organ or gland. This concentration has the second benefit of increasing your general powers of concentration through regular practice. This benefits every aspect of your life. Your mind is less distracted and swayed by external events and you are therefore calmer and worry less. You will be able to solve day-to-day problems better and have more success in whatever activity you undertake.

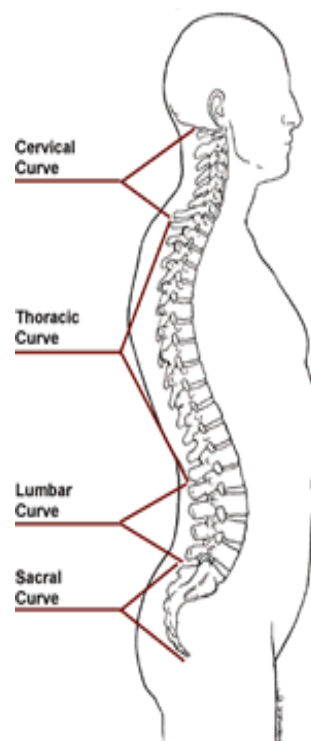
The ideal way to practice the Hatha Yoga poses (asanas) is to approach the practice session in a calm, meditative mood. Sit quietly for a few moments, then begin the asanas, slowly, with control and grace, being inwardly aware as the body performs the various poses selected for the practice session. Don't overdo the asanas or try to compete with others. Take it easy and enjoy!

Brief Anatomy Lesson

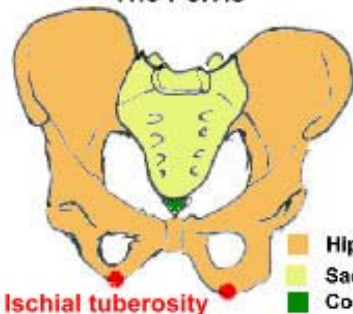
Spinal Curves

In its proper position, the spine follows natural curves, which allow for increased flexibility. These curves include:

- (1) **Cervical** (neck) The neck region of the spine containing the first seven vertebrae.
- (2) **Thoracic** (middle spine) The chest level region of the spine that is located between the cervical and lumbar vertebrae. It consists of 12 vertebrae which serve as attachment points for ribs.
- (3) **Lumbar** (lower spine) The lower part of the spine between the thoracic region and the sacrum. The lumbar spine consists of five vertebrae.
- (4) **Sacral** (base of the spine) The bottom part of the spine that is also part of the pelvis. The sacrum consists of five fused vertebrae that have no intervertebral discs.



The Pelvis



Sit Bones: Anatomically part of your pelvis, the sit bones are quite literally the bones under the flesh of the butt that you sit on. Medically known as the ischial tuberosity.

Coccyx: The region of the spine below the sacrum. It is also known as the tailbone

Sternum: Also known as the breast bone.

The Eight Limbs of Yoga

(aka Ashtanga)

When most people think of yoga, it is the asanas or physical poses/postures that come to mind first. And yes, they are a big part of yoga, but what many people do not know is that the asanas are just *one* part of a very old and vast system called yoga. First put into words by a great Indian saint, Patanjali in his yoga sutras (a sacred text), yoga had until then been selectively passed down through the centuries from the teacher by words to the eager mind and promising memory of the student. Yoga means to bind, yoke or join together the body, mind and spirit, through the use of the breath. The ultimate goal of yoga is to remove our contact with pain and sorrow, and to experience love and bliss.

It is said that in the beginning yoga was developed as a way to prepare for the body, mind and soul for meditation: preparing the body by strengthening the spine and opening the hips and joints to allow the meditator to sit for many hours comfortably, quieting the mind and increasing awareness, therefore allowing the spirit or soul (perhaps previously hidden) to emerge – like a beautiful lotus flower from a pond of muddy water.

Ashtanga refers to the eight limbs of yoga as explained by Patanjali in his sutras. They are summarized below:

Yama = ethical disciplines of life, and is divided into five key points:

- Non-violence
- Truth
- Non-stealing
- Discretion and control of sex
- Non-coveting (*not hoarding excessive material possessions*)

Niyama = rules of individual discipline are again divided into five areas:

- Purity (*such as body, food, thoughts*)
- Contentment (tranquil mind)
- Conscious self-discipline
- Study or education to achieve personal growth
- Faith (*in Higher-Power, Universe, etc.*)

Asana: physical postures which often occur as a series of poses, designed to exercise every muscle, nerve and gland in the body. Through which we remove toxins and negative emotions. Therefore we remove disease and gain a healthy and strong body and mind.

Pranayama: science of breath or respiration which involves various breathing practices designed to cleanse the body, strengthen the respiratory system, soothe the nervous system and reduce cravings. Ultimately, it will also bring us to a higher awareness and closer to God or the Creator (whoever/whatever that is for you).

Pratyahara: balancing and controlling the mind so to achieve equanimity where the mind is still, calm and aware. In fact this is a big step towards establishing real awareness.

Dharana: concentration which can be done using various techniques that develop better focus. This can be done through: a mantra or sound such as om, aum "amen", love; a light or flame; or even just focusing on one particular task, sport, activity. All these things will help develop someone's concentration.

Dhyana: meditation is the state that arises when the flow of concentration is uninterrupted for a period of time general for more than a more a minute or two (this sounds easy but once you try it you realize it is difficult).

Samadhi: Otherwise known as Nirvana, Divinity or Enlightenment. This is a state which in fact cannot be explained. It usually takes place after many years of meditation when one goes beyond consciousness into a completely blissful state, loses all sense of I or ego, and then beyond into one with the universe.

Why Do Yoga..?

There's a short answer AND a long answer to that question. The short answer is that yoga makes you feel better. Practicing the postures, breathing exercises and meditation makes you healthier in body, mind, and spirit. Yoga lets you tune in, chill out, shape up – all at the same time. For many people, that's enough of an answer. BUT, there's more if you're interested.

For starters, yoga is good for what ails you. Specifically, research shows that yoga helps manage or control anxiety, arthritis, asthma, back pain, blood pressure, carpal tunnel syndrome, chronic fatigue, depression, diabetes, epilepsy, headaches, heart disease, multiple sclerosis, stress and other conditions and diseases. What's more, yoga:

- Improves muscle tone, flexibility, strength and stamina
- Reduces stress and tension
- Boosts self esteem
- Improves concentration and creativity
- Lowers fat
- Improves circulation
- Stimulates the immune system
- Creates sense of well being and calm.

And that's just the surface stuff. In fact, most of the benefits mentioned above are secondary to yoga's original purpose. According to the ancient yogis, true happiness comes from union with the divine consciousness. The various yoga practices we use are a methodology for reaching that goal. In Hatha yoga, for example, postures and breathing exercises help purify the mind, body, and spirit so the yogi can attain union. Pranayama breathing exercises help clear the channels which carry prana (universal life force) throughout the body, allowing prana to flow freely.

Many people want to know if they will become "enlightened." Well, you might... but then again, you might not. But it doesn't really matter because yoga is a process, and there's a lot of good to be had along the way. Even if you don't believe in the spiritual side of life, you can still do yoga – and if you do yoga, chances are that you will feel its psycho-physiological effects. Yoga helps us get in touch with our true selves. Between work, home and all of the demands and stresses in between, it's easy to lose touch with who we are, that core essence with which we were born. Rushing around all day it sometimes feels like the "I" inside is simply the result of the things we do all day – or the effects those things have on our minds, bodies and spirits.

Ever say "I am hungry" or "I am stressed"? We identify with our conditions. It's like "hungry" or "stressed" is a name (*Hi. I'm Stressed. What's your name?*) As a result, our identities shift with our moods and conditions. In truth, however, we are not the conditions we experience or things we do. We are not our jobs or the thousands of tasks that make up our jobs. We are not the sensations or emotions we feel. We are not the car we drive or the house we live in. We are not "*S/he Who Must Pay Bills.*" We are not Mr. and Ms. Stressed. Strip away the emotions, sensations, and conditions and somewhere deep down inside – you are still there. Strip it all away and you find out who you really are.

The techniques developed by the yogis to transcend also help us strip away the things that try to mis-define us – the emotions, sensations, desires, achievements and failures of daily life. Through yoga we learn to develop a greater awareness of our physical and psychological states. As a result, we're in a position to better manage our reactions to the thoughts, feelings and responses we have to the various situations we deal with every day.

With greater awareness comes the sensitivity and skill to find and remove the physical and psychological blocks that often keep us from our true selves. We no longer identify with our conditions. Instead of saying, "I am stressed," we begin to say, "*I feel stress,*" or "*stress is present.*" It's a subtle but powerful difference. Or better yet, we say "*I feel anxiety and fear, and that's causing stress and in particular it's causing tension in my neck and shoulder.*" So we breathe deeply to soothe the anxiety. We review the events that led to the onset of those feelings, and in the process they lose their grip on our nervous system. We intentionally relax our shoulder and neck to prevent the stress and tension from building into a permanent condition. Yoga gives us control of ourselves. It helps cut through the layers of mis-identities that arise in response to our actions, experiences, and feelings. It calms the frenzy, clears the clutter and allows us to get back in touch with ourselves. Yoga is union with self.

Whether you pursue yoga for its health benefits, as a spiritual path, or for its psycho-physiological benefits, yoga is a methodology for developing a deeper experience of your self and the world... *And it makes you feel really, really good.*

Wanna Know More...? Our Recommendations

Books

- ★ "Moving Into Stillness" by Erich Schiffmann
- ★ "Yoga the Iyengar Way" by Mira Metha
- ★ "30 Essential Yoga Poses" by Judith Lasater
- ★ "Yoga Mind, Body, & Spirit" by Donna Farhi
- ★ "Kiss: Guide to Yoga" by Shakta Kaur Khalsa

Magazines

- ★ Yoga Journal Magazine (www.yogajournal.com)
- ★ Yoga International Magazine (www.yimag.org)
- ★ Fit Yoga (try Borders)
- ★ Ascent (www.ascentmagazine.com)

Audio CDs

- ★ "Yoga Sanctuary" by Shiva Rea
- ★ "Drops of Nectar" by Shiva Rea
- ★ "The Yogi's Companion" by Lauren Peterson

DVD / VHS

- ★ Vinyasa Flow by Seane Corn
- ★ Backyard Series by Erich Schiffmann

Music

- ★ "Essence", "Embrace," or "Love is Space" by Deva Premal
- ★ "Flores" by Mirabai
- ★ "Yoga Rhythm" by Soulfood
- ★ "Yoga Rhythms" by Shiva Rea
- ★ Namaste (End of Suffering)

Websites:

- ★ www.holistic-online.com/Yoga/hol_yoga_home.htm
- ★ Yogajournal.com

Buy Yoga Gear On-Line

- ★ Huggermugger.com
- ★ Gaiam.com
- ★ Barefootyoga.com
- ★ Energymuse.com (we carry the jewelry in our boutique)

Try Amazon.com for new (and used) books/CDs ... or Half.com for used books and CDs