

- 1) **What is Yoga?** While you will often see or hear **Yoga** defined as "an Indian Sanskrit word which can be translated to mean "union" or "discipline". We could then define Yoga as a discipline that leads to inner and outer union, harmony, and joy", but this is only partially right. Yoga has also been defined as "a process of channeling the activities of the mind in the desired direction, and sustaining that focus without being distracted." So "both the movement toward the goal, and the state of absorption itself, are Yoga." Through the practice of Hatha Yoga, we will unite our minds with our bodies using Breath (Pranayama) and Postures (Asanas). Practicing Yoga will increase your strength and your flexibility. A regular Yoga practice helps to relieve stress so you are more relaxed, able to sleep better, and have more energy.
- 2) **Getting Motivated:** To establish as successful yoga practice, you must understand exactly why you are practicing. Whatever your goal – stress reduction, heightened awareness, greater flexibility/strength – it should be personally meaningful. Think about these three questions:
  - Do I really want to have a yoga practice?
  - Why?
  - What do I expect of the practice?

Try to clarify your desire to practice and determine how important yoga will be to you. Your commitment to practicing must be clear. For example, if your main reason for wanting to practice is to reduce the stress caused by your hectic daily schedule, but your best excuse for not practicing is that you don't have time, you have a problem with internal consistency. With this lack of clarity, you run the risk of unintentionally sabotaging your intentions.

Motivation for practice must be personal. Try this little exercise. After your yoga practice, describe in writing how you feel. Be specific, taking time to identify your thoughts, feelings, and sensations. If your response is generally positive, you can motivate yourself by recalling these benefits. Don't evaluate your practice until you have completed an initial period of commitment – ideally, at least three times per week for a period of one to two months. Once this period is over, skip a week and see how you feel. If you miss your practice, begin again. If your life feels just fine without it, then maybe it is not your time or your path. A personal practice must be a gift to yourself, not a burden.
- 3) **Guidelines for Practice:** Before beginning your practice, be certain that you understand the following guidelines:
  - Don't eat for two hours before practicing. (One hour minimum.)
  - Practice in a clean, quiet, flat area out of direct sunlight
  - Wear loose, comfortable clothing, and bare feet.
  - NEVER EVER BOUNCE INTO OR BOUNCH WHILE HOLDING A STRETCH. Rather allow each stretch to develop gradually. Bouncing can push your muscle beyond where it can, at this moment, stretch, causing possible tearing of the muscle, nerve damage and tearing of tendons or ligaments.
  - Always warm up first with some standing poses and/or breathing techniques. (Think of warm taffy and how easily it stretches, and cold taffy and how easily it breaks!)
  - NEVER DO ANYTHING THAT HURTS. Intentionally causing your body pain is NOT Yoga. Pain in a part of the body will also cause muscles to tighten up to protect the area – so you lose any gain you may have achieved. Yoga will help you relieve pain, so don't cause it intentionally. Yoga will help you relieve stress, so don't cause yourself stress by pushing too hard. You don't need to push past your limit to enjoy the benefits of Yoga. Honestly. However, remember, if you have arthritis or some other condition, such as a area that was injured but is now healed, you may experience pain even with a small movement. You may have to move that area even with the pain to finish the healing process, and get back your normal range of motion – and this could take weeks or months, but the end result is worth it. Go as far into each pose as you can while maintaining proper alignment.

Yoga is not a competitive sport – except with yourself. Even if you can only do a forward bend as far as your knees, if that is as far into the pose as you can go, and you are maintaining good form, you will be getting as much from the posture as someone who can bend to the ground – in some cases you will be getting more benefit – or a different benefit – than what you will get when you can easily touch the ground. Once a posture becomes very easy, you may want to move on to a more advanced variation of the posture – keep it challenging.

  - EVERY BODY IS DIFFERENT, so everybody's Yoga will be different. Ignore what other people are doing (except the teacher, of course) and do your Yoga for YOU.
  - Don't practice with a fever. If weak or tired, do a supportive practice. If you have taken any pain medication, even an aspirin, you will not be able to feel your "edge" as well, so go even more gently so you don't hurt yourself without feeling it – until later.
  - In each pose, observe the following: How do you feel? How do you respond to the pose? Where do you feel strength, fatigue, weakness, or tightness? Does the pose elicit an emotional response? What does the pose teach you about yourself?
  - Ideally, practice 3-5 days a week. (But if you can't, don't feel guilty. It is better to practice just a little – and enjoy it – than not to practice at all.)
  - Regularity is key. Ideally, practice at the same time each day.
  - At the end of a Yoga practice you should feel energized, or relaxed, or calm – i.e. you should feel good, NOT be in pain or distress. How you feel will depend on what your body/mind needed from the Yoga practice. If you are very tense to start, you may be so relaxed you just want to sleep after a class. Or relieving the tensions may give you more energy.

There are times when you may feel sad or stomach upset from the release of toxins. At times like this just take a few more minutes to rest (either in the Yoga room lying down, or in a chair in the other room). And drink plenty of water for the next few hours to help flush the toxins out of your system.

If you feel physical pain after a practice, you may have tried to go too far into an asana, or tried to do an asana that your body wasn't ready for today. Try to review in your mind what asana or asanas that may have been, and avoid doing them for awhile, coming back to them gradually in a couple of weeks.
- 5) **Organizing Your Practice:** A balanced practice should have a sense of flow and movement. This flow generally begins with a warm-up and centering phase, gradually makes a transition to a period of increased intensity focusing on a particular category of poses, and culminating in a final stage that cools and quiets the nervous system.
- 6) **Warm-up and Centering:** The warm-up and centering phase is very significant. It helps you realize that your practice of the postures is a separate part of your day, a time to take the energy you normally expend on the world and turn it inward to nurture your body and mind.

A ritualized beginning is crucial, as it provides structure. If this portion of the practice is handled in a non-feeling, mindless, remote-control way, then the activity becomes stretching or tensing or breathing rather than Yoga. Self-study should go on at each moment, to ensure that you get the most benefit from each asana, and to insure you do not over-extend your boundaries or under challenge yourself.

Use the centering phase to tune in to and honor what your energy level actually is, rather than coming into the practice with an expectation of what your energy should be and then doing poses to try to shift it. Use this time to determine whether the rest of your practice will be active and vigorous or passive and supported. Be certain that your decision results from your body's needs and not from your ego. To practice passively at a time when you need to work more actively is laziness. To practice actively when supported work is more appropriate is violence.

By supported practice, we mean doing the asanas gently, working to just below your edge or boundary. An active practice is working at your edge and trying to expand you edge just a bit.

- 7) **Extending Your Limits:** The yoga perspective recognizes that each of us is made up of a great many forces, feelings, limits, possibilities, and passions. These aspects exist within your body and your mind and collectively define the boundaries that you usually identify as your "self" – "me." Physically, these limits are experienced as muscle tension, restricted movement, and pain. Psychologically, limits are experienced as dogma, ignorance, and fear. Most limits have the potential to continually change and restructure themselves. Now, if I sit on the floor and try to reach over to touch my toes, I might notice that I can only stretch to about five inches away from my toes before I experience tension and slight discomfort – not pain. At this point, the muscles in my lower back and the muscles in the back of my legs are just too tight to allow me to stretch any further. At this point I am experiencing one of my boundaries. This point, this "edge," is a highly important place, for within the yogic philosophy, this edge is considered to be my creative teacher from whom I can learn about myself. If I approach this teacher/edge with love, sensitivity, and awareness, I will discover that my teacher/edge will move and allow me a greater range of motion. If I shy away from approaching my teacher/edge, I will learn nothing new, and in time my own dogma/tightness will contract upon itself and I will grow even tighter. If I try to blast past my edge, I might fool myself into thinking that I have learned and expanded, but in fact what usually happens is that I am only impressing myself with a temporary surge of ambition and that this feeling will probably contract upon itself with fear and subsequent tightening, forcing me into greater confusion (maybe pain) or a potentially dangerous misunderstandings. Physically, when I approach my edge gently and consciously, my body responds by focusing energy and attention on this spot, encouraging the blood and energy to bathe the related muscles and organs with vitality and life, thus allowing me the experience of true growth and self-nourishment. But if I do not try to reach my edge, my body, having no point of focus, will find it difficult to isolate the place and nourish it, and little growth and improvement will follow. To state the extremes: If I never explore my limits, my body-mind will gradually tighten and become unconscious. If I regularly explore my limits in a caring and adventuresome fashion, I will expand and grow in a vital fashion. But if I try to push myself past where I am honestly able to go, I will no longer be practicing "yoga" but instead will be practicing "greed," and I will probably be met by pain and disease. Stated simply, it is the difference between ignoring yourself, listening to and loving yourself, or violating the trust you are building in yourself. Now, what does all of this have to do with health, dis-ease, and personal growth? Well the implication of this yogic perspective is that health, dis-ease, and personal growth are all aspects of the way in which you deal with yourself. When you are being loving to yourself and are without chronically painful conflicts, your body-mind will manifest a state of health. Similarly, when you are being unconscious and unloving toward yourself, you run the risk of moving your body-mind into a state of dis-ease and stress, which could undermine your health and hamper your growth. This perspective also suggests that the most effective and efficient way to develop yourself is to be as mindful and as aware as possible, all the while being respectful of self-limits and appreciative of continually regenerating expansiveness.
- 8) **Correct Breath:** You will learn "complete, three-part breathing" called Ujjayi breathing. This is breathing with the diaphragm – stomach moves out with the inhale, then you fill the lower lungs, then the upper lungs. You will also learn to make a slight "noise" while you breath. This will help to keep you focused on the breath, and on your Asana or Asana series. You will generally exhale when bending forward. Inhale when bending backward. Twisting on an exhale. Generally, you work with your diaphragm. Movements which expand the chest and thorax are initiated during inhalation. Movements that compress the abdominal area and thorax region are initiated during exhalation. When you are holding a posture, come into the posture with the correct breath, then breath naturally while you hold the posture. Then inhale, and as you exhale, release the posture. Start the breath slightly before moving into a posture, finish the breath just after you have reached your limit in the posture. There can be a slight holding of the breath at the end of the inhale and the end of the exhale. There are many different types of breathing (and holding the breath) which can be done during, before, and/or after a posture or series of postures. Beginners only use Ujjayi breathing.
- 9) **Have Fun:** Most of all, have fun. Enjoy Yoga and you will learn to enjoy yourself – your inner-self – and your body. I think you will be surprised at what you and your body will be able to do after only a few weeks. We will laugh a lot, groan once in awhile (including me) – but at the end of each class I believe you will feel both relaxed and invigorated (and they really are not contradictory).