

THE ESSENCE OF YOGA: YOGA BASICS WEEK 1

INTRO: Why are you interested in yoga?

My goals: At the conclusion of this course I hope that you will have a basic familiarity with the context in which the yoga poses are practiced and with the basic vocabulary of yoga. Yoga does not require a particular belief system, but it is helpful to understand how the yogis view human beings and the human condition. I also hope that you will have a good understanding of the most common yoga poses so that you can practice them correctly and safely.

Possible Resources:

Yoga The Iyengar Way. Silva, Mira and Mehta Shyam.

Yoga Zone Introduction to Yoga. Finger, Alan with Al Bingham. There is also a DVD.

I. WHAT IS YOGA?

A. Is the Olympic gymnast doing yoga?

Why are you doing yoga? While the Olympic gymnast is satisfying ego in a competitive quest to win a trophy, the yogi is on a spiritual quest toward finding the True Self that exists beyond ego.

"Yoga is the cessation of the waves of activity arising in the mind." (*Yoga Sutras* 1:2) Thoughts perhaps cease, or perhaps we simply learn to observe them rather than identify with them, which leads to greater self-awareness and connection with your True Self.

Yoga is, therefore, not a competitive sport. The word for a yoga posture is "Asana", which comes from a Sanskrit word meaning "seat". The very first recommendation is that you be "steady and comfortable" in the poses. Nowhere is a pretzel mentioned! Yoga is a voyage of self-discovery toward optimal health. The postures are only a tool. Beginning with body awareness, yoga ultimately leads to greater self-awareness in general. This development of what the yogis call Witness Consciousness leads to a clearer connection to your higher self and greater equanimity in life. Oh yeah, and a stronger more flexible body is a happy side benefit!

Moral: You cannot, therefore, judge anybody's yoga practice by the complexity and difficulty of the poses they achieve.

B. Is yoga thousands of years old?

Yes, but the oldest forms of yoga do not necessarily include the physical postures. There are many types of yoga. For example, Bhakti yoga, the yoga of devotion, focuses on chanting and meditation. Asana entered yoga later and originally consisted mainly of seated poses for meditation. Hatha yoga, the physical yoga, emerged from Tantra yoga, which instead of renouncing the body considers it an important means to understanding the universe and the True Self.

Yes, but yoga is always evolving. Hatha yoga was later influenced, for example, by a Danish form of exercise called "primitive gymnastics" in the early 20th century. Yoga was originally taught one-on-one, so the fact that there are classes with groups of people also reflects a western influence. Marketing now certainly has an impact as well.

Moral: There is, therefore, no right or wrong way to do yoga as long as you are safe.

C. Yoga comes from a Sanskrit word meaning "yoke" and points, therefore, to union.

- It can unite body, mind and spirit
- It can unite Personal Consciousness with Universal Consciousness
- It can be a healing force to bring harmony to wherever you are experiencing separation in your life, restoring unity with the True Self.

D. Union is a common theme!

- Hatha (the physical branch of yoga): Hatha means "sun" and "moon".
- Namaste: "The divinity within me honors the divinity within you." "Namaste" is traditionally said when greeting somebody or taking leave, and it reminds us of the fundamental spiritual unity of all humanity.
- Anjali Mudra (prayer hands): This mudra unites the hands and the two sides of your body, also the sun and the moon.

II. LOVE YOUR BODY! BLAME THE POSE!

A. It is more important to do the pose CORRECTLY than to do the full expression of the pose. Change the pose to make it work for YOU!

If you don't do the pose correctly you are not stretching and strengthening the correct muscles. You are not establishing the correct lines of energy. Most important, if you do the pose incorrectly you risk injuring yourself! OUCH! Work to your edge; respect your limits!

B. SAFETY FIRST Ahimsa (non-violence)

1. **PHYSICAL SAFETY:** If it hurts, don't do it! Some gentle muscle fatigue is fine as your muscles strengthen. Some gentle muscle tension is fine as your muscles stretch. Joint pain is NEVER fine. Sharp pain is NEVER fine. Remember: "steady and comfortable". Remember ahimsa!

2. **SPIRITUAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY:** OBSERVE. DON'T JUDGE. "Yoga is awareness in action." (Bhagavad Gita II:50) Notice and release critical thoughts about yourself and others. Thinking negatively of yourself or others is another form of violence. Don't judge yourself for thinking critical thoughts! ☺ Simply observe. (AH! There's another critical thought! Interesting!)

C. MODIFY THE POSE.

Like flowers, the yoga poses are beautiful in all of their stages. Which is more beautiful, a rose bud or the fully opened rose? Whatever your best expression of the pose is, when done correctly, it is perfect and beautiful.

The instructor will INVITE you to try something OR NOT! It is ALWAYS appropriate:

- to ask questions
- to modify a pose by doing a different version or by using props
- to not do the practice at 100% of your physical ability
- to skip a pose and rest.

III. QUICK FLEXIBILITY ASSESSMENT

Hips: When cross-legged, are your knees high above the floor? Sit on a blanket or two, a block or a bolster. Place support under your thighs.

Hamstrings: Are your legs bent went stretched out on the floor? Sit on a blanket.

Shoulders: Can you raise your arms straight overhead without lifting your shoulders? If not, leave your arms in a V shape or use Cactus Arms.

IV. ABDOMINAL BREATHING

general benefits: Abdominal breathing activates the relaxation response, massages the digestive organs, creates space and ease for the movement of the diaphragm, and enhances air flow to the lower lungs.

V. ANJALI MUDRA

Anjali means "greetings", "invocation", and "union". The two hands coming together also represent the dualistic nature of the world. A small space is left between the hands. This empty space represents the universal soul or Spirit.

Place the hands together in front of the heart. Leave a small, empty space between the palms. Sense the contact between each of the fingers and also the contact at the base of the palms. The forearms move gently toward parallel to the earth.

General Benefits: Invokes the spirit within ourselves and those we meet. The hollow space signifies our ultimate spiritual nature which is both full and empty.

VI. ASANA

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|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Downward-Facing Dog | 6. Stork |
| 2. Mountain Pose | 7. Staff Pose |
| 3. Half-Moon Series | 8. Seated Forward Fold |
| 4. Chair Pose | 9. Child/s Pose / Puppy Stretch |
| 5. Warrior I | |

VII. BENEFITS OF STANDING AND BALANCING POSES

Standing poses help to develop concentration, build strength, increase coordination, balance and poise, and focus attention in the body.

VIII. HOMEWORK

- Check your posture when standing, for example, while waiting to check out at the supermarket.
- Check your breath. Find one or two things that happen regularly during the day that will remind you to check your breath.
- Practice Ahimsa, and notice your self-critical thoughts.
- Stretch every day. Then, practice a pose ... or two!

 you•go•yoga	THE ESSENCE OF YOGA: YOGA BASICS week 1 practice
WARM UPS	<p>Comfortable cross-legged position (tip! Engage your lower back muscles.) Sun Breath (tip! Coordinate breath with movement.) lateral side stretch head, neck and shoulder release (tip! Relax into the exhale.) arm circles (tip! Find your shoulder blades.) Rock the Baby /Baby Cradle Table Top six movements of the spine Sunbird balance</p>
ASANA	<p>Child's Pose → Table Top Downward Facing Dog → Table Top Rag Doll Mountain Pose (tip! Posture.) Half Moon Series (tip! Keep shoulders relaxed. Practice against a wall.) Chair Pose (tip! Keep your knees over your ankles, weight slightly in heels.) Warrior 1 (tip! Keep your hips facing forward.) Stork (tip! Keep hips level and even. Find your drishti.) Staff Pose Seated Forward Fold</p>
COOLDOWN	<p>Bridge warm-up Reclining Twist Sacrum Release</p>
RELAXATION	<p>Corpse Pose (savasana) Peaceful Color</p>

THE ESSENCE OF YOGA: WEEK 1 PRACTICE					
 Sukhasana Easy		 Baby Cradle	 Marjaryasana Cat	 Bitalsana Cow	 Threading the Needle
	 Balasana Child's Pose	 Adho Mukha Svanasana Downward Facing Dog			
 Tadasana Mountain	 Standing Side Bend	 Utkatasana Chair	 Virabhadrasana I Warrior I	 Utthita Hasta Padangustasana Extended Hand to Big Toe	
 Dandasana Staff	 Paschimottasana Seated Forward Bend				
 Apanasana Knees to Chest	 Jathara Parivartanasana Reclining Twist	 Paschimottasana Seated Forward Bend			

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