

Developing Your Own Yoga Practice

By Hart Lazer

Have you ever been so inspired by a yoga class that you could hardly wait to try the poses at home - only to find that when it was time to practice, you didn't know how to begin? Perhaps you found yourself standing uncertainly in your living room, wondering: What poses should I do? In what order? When should I practice, and for how long? For many yoga students, these questions can become a barrier to practicing at all.

While many books, audiotapes and videos provide guided sequences and instructions for specific poses, most won't help you establish, organize, and implement a balanced daily asana practice. For the first four years of my yoga life, I had no idea how to practice on my own. As a beginner, I was lost in a world of follow-the-leader sequences that often included poses far above my level. I received little instruction in the proper flow of practice and often practiced poses in combinations that I now know can put my joints and muscles at risk.

To help other beginning and intermediate students who may be struggling with a similar lack of information, I have come up with detailed guidelines for developing and sustaining a yoga practice in the style taught by B.K.S. Iyengar. These guidelines assume that the practitioner (1) has a basic familiarity with Iyengar yoga; (2) has no major health problems; and (3) is regularly able to devote at least one hour to practice. (If you can't spare a full hour, this article also suggests strategies for more abbreviated practice sessions.)

Why practice?

We expand energy in many ways. We talk with our friends and loved ones, go to work, hurry from place to place and from task to task, with little time left to feel and respond to our bodies and our beings as a whole. Consequently, we often operate out of reflex conditioning or feelings of duty and responsibility. This overloading tends to manifest itself as resentments and frustrations that lead us to act in ways that don't originate from the core of our beings. Without regularly nurturing and taking time to honour that core, we may become alienated from it. The techniques that best allow us to gain access to our core self vary from person to person. Whatever method we use, we must penetrate through our psychological and emotional layers to a quieter place within, a place of silence that effortlessly generates healing and nurturing.

According to Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, which are the ancient set of aphorisms that guide yoga practice, practice is a time for the harmonizing of the three gunas, or energies: *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*. As students, we come to our practice with a combination of these gunas. Usually one is more active than the others. *Sattva* is the guna of tranquility, manifesting as joyful,

relaxed alertness. Often described as pure and good, it is identified with the colour white. Tamas guna is identified with sleep, inertia, and the colour black. Inactive, immobile, cold, and heavy, it moves downward in the body. Rajas is the guna of activity, identified with the colour red. Energetic and youthful, it moves upward in the body. Each of these energies is useful in some situations, less useful in others. A well-organized asana practice will help you to bring the gunas into balance by increasing the energies you need more of and decreasing those that are overdeveloped.

Getting motivated

To establish a successful practice, you must understand exactly why you are practicing. Whatever your goal—stress reduction, heightened awareness, greater flexibility—it should be personally meaningful. Contemplate and then answer in writing the following questions: (1) Do I really want to have a yoga practice? (2) Why? Be specific. (3) What do I expect of the practice? This exercise can help you clarify your desire to practice and determine how important yoga is 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: Describe in writing how you feel after a good yoga class. Be specific, taking time to identify your thoughts, feelings and sensations. If your response to classes is generally positive, you can motivate yourself by recalling these benefits. Some people, however, respond with comments like “I was very sore for the next three days” or “I'm so tight that stretching hurts” or “Some poses are emotionally painful for me”. If you have such a response, you're likely to find regular practice more difficult. Yet your body is also likely to be the kind that benefits most from a regular daily practice. Have enough faith in yourself, your teacher and your body to continue exploring the work. With regular practice, your body (and mind) will begin to change more rapidly. Because you're releasing muscular tension on a daily basis, you'll soon find that the poses come more easily.

Don't evaluate your practice until you've 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's not your time or your path. A personal practice must be a gift to yourself, not a burden.

Obstacles to practice

We often sabotage our practice by making excuses for not doing it. Make a list of your 10 best excuses. Try not to censor yourself—just free associate. This exercise removes obstacles to practice from the recesses of the mind, where they can seem insurmountable. When your

obstacles are listed, you can attend to each one systematically, eventually clearing the path. Perhaps the removal of the obstacles will occur in a day; perhaps it will take months. No matter—the removal itself may need to be your practice for now. Compare your list with the obstacles described by the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. According to these ancient texts, the obstacles to practice are lack of interest, doubt, laziness, sensuality, false knowledge, failure to concentrate, pain, despair, unsteadiness of body, sickness, and unsteadiness of respiration. Of these 11 obstacles, only four have to do with the physical body. The rest are psychological, reflecting the connection between body, mind and spirit. The wisdom and applicability of this ancient list continually astounds me. How does this list compare to our own? How do these texts suggest you deal with your obstacles? To answer these questions, consult and study the ancient works. The weakness of excuses is easily recognizable when put in writing. For example, one of the most common excuses is "I don't have any props like the ones we use in class". But lying around your house are many of the items you will need. Instead of blocks, use hardcover books. Old neckties work well as substitutes for belts, and countertops will do if you have no wall space. Firm blankets can be used for padding and support. If you're really ready to commit to a practice, buy a couple of yoga belts, a sticky mat, and some foam blocks, and you will have almost everything you need for a good beginning and intermediate practice. Scratch off the no-props excuse. Continue to deal with each item on your list until you feel free to practice. Once you've removed your obstacles, assess how much time you're prepared to commit to yoga. Be as realistic as possible. Make an initial estimate, then deduct 15 percent to allow for over enthusiasm.

If you find yourself saying that you don't really have time, spend a day or two writing down what you do with each 15-minute period of your waking life. In most cases, you will find at least half an hour that might be designated for asana practice. If you find some time but still can't commit to using it for yoga, then reexamine your priorities to determine whether regular yoga practice is what you want right now. If it isn't, then acknowledge this fact and just practice when you feel like it.

Making a contract

If you've found some extra time to dedicate to yoga, then you're ready to move on to the next step: making a contract. The contract should be a set of significant but realistic commitments. If the contract is unrealistic, it can become a source of stress and guilt, which are unhealthy and unyogic.

Most of us have been raised to believe that a written agreement represents a deeper commitment than an oral one. The writing of a yoga contract requires us to record on paper not only our intention to practice, but also the specifics: How long will we practice? How many times per week? What time? Where? If you feel resistant to writing out a contract, try it anyway. Writing it out will deepen your commitment, whereas mental contracts are easily shifted, compromised, or completely forgotten.

Guidelines for practice

Before beginning your practice, be certain that you understand the following guidelines:

1. Regularity is key. Ideally, practice at the same time each day.
2. Ideally, practice six out of seven days, with the seventh being a day of complete rest. (But if you can't, don't feel guilty. It's better to practice just a little—and enjoy it—than not to practice at all).
3. Don't eat for two hours before practicing.
4. Practice in a clean, quiet, flat area out of direct sunlight.
5. Don't bounce into a stretch: rather, allow each stretch to develop gradually.
6. Go as far into each pose as you can while maintaining proper alignment.
7. Don't practice with a fever. If weak or tired, do a supportive practice.
8. 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?

Organizing your practice

A balanced practice should have a sense of flow and movement. This flow generally begins with a warmup and centring phase, gradually makes a transition to a period of increased intensity focusing on a particular category of poses, and culminates in a final stage that cools and quiets the nervous system.

For beginning and intermediate students, I suggest working with a basic practice that emphasizes standing poses every day. In conjunction with the standing poses, work with a subemphasis: either forward bends or backbends, alternating daily when possible.

Woven into your practice should be the core poses that B.K.S. Iyengar recommends doing daily: Salamba Sirsasana (Headstand), Salamba Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand), Halasana (Plow Pose), Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose), Viparita Karani (Supported Inverted Pose), and Savasana (Corpse Pose). These poses, known as "The Big Six" are not beginner poses and require a fair degree of proficiency in practice. Variations of these poses can be practiced if you are not yet able to do the poses, if injured or unable to do these poses due to a medical condition in which inversions are contraindicated. Also note that except for Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose), these poses should not be done while menstruating, as inversions should not be done during this time.

Please note that the rules presented in this article are by no means etched in stone. They are simply a guideline for beginning and intermediate students. In Iyengar yoga, students are always encouraged to feel for themselves what works and what doesn't and to adjust their practices accordingly. However, the sequencing designed by B.K.S. Iyengar based on 50 years of experience should only be altered after you fully understand the effect of the

traditional order. Without a foundation in the proper sequencing, it will be difficult to discern the effects of your changes. For your own well-being, please stay with the basic rules.

Phase One: Warmup and Centring

The warmup and centring phase is very significant. It helps you realize that your asana practice 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, mind and soul. In addition to centring you, this portion of the practice prepares your body by opening the hips, groins and shoulders. Because certain poses prepare us more effectively for certain types of practices, it is important that you make some basic decisions before starting: What will the major emphasis of my practice be? Will I work with forward-bending or backbending poses? How much time do I have today? Without this decision-making process, practice becomes casual and unfocused. I'm not suggesting that there's no room for intuitive practice. I do suggest, however, that you limit how often you work that way. Deep practice, encompassing the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, is more likely to arise from an organized, structured approach. Having answered these questions, you can use this first phase as a time to open and prepare your whole being for practice. A ritualized beginning is crucial, as it provides structure. If this portion of the practice is handled in non-feeling, mindless, remote-control way, then the activity becomes stretching, as opposed to asana. Svadhyaya, the study of the self, must go on at each moment, to ensure that practice is not limited to the physical level.

Use the centring phase to tune into and honour 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 *alaysa* (laziness). To practice actively when supported work is more appropriate is *himsa* (violence). Find a combination of poses that both centres you and prepares your body for the type of practice you've chosen.

I have two basic introductory sequences: one for when my subemphasis will be forward bends and one for when it will be backbends. I usually begin with Virasana (Hero's Pose) for five to 20 minutes. Other good opening poses are Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose), Padmasana (Lotus Pose), Siddhasana (Sage Pose), Gomukasana (Cow Face Pose), and Tadasana (Mountain Pose).

In Virasana, I experience inner quiet while enjoying subtle yet deep work in the groins and the lower back muscles. If my subemphasis is forward bends, then from Virasana I move into Adho Mukha Virasana (Downward-Facing Hero's Pose). If my subemphasis is backbends, then I flow from the Virasana to Supta Virasana (Reclining Hero's Pose). Both Virasana variations penetrate physically and emotionally, preparing you for whichever subemphasis you have

selected. For example, if you're planning a backbend practice, Supta Virasana is ideal preparation, addressing the major areas that must be opened for backbends—the groins, chest, shoulders, front thighs, and lower back. Every muscle fibre and braincell becomes aware that backbends are forthcoming. Prior to a forward-bending practice, Adho Mukha Virasana neuromuscularly suggests the forward-bending action, while simultaneously preparing the groins and the sacroiliac region, where openness is crucial.

In this first phase of practice, the concentration with which we perform the poses moves us closer to our spiritual centre. Our personal attraction to particular poses allows us to centre more easily in some than in others. Our responsibility as students is to open ourselves to this state in every asana, thus allowing each one to nurture us fully.

Phase two: Intensity

The second, most intense phase of the practice may be structured in a variety of ways. You might try standing poses first, then Headstand and its variations, followed by backbend or forward bend preparation, backbends or forward bends, and finally Shoulderstand and its variations. Another option is to do your Headstand variations before your standing poses. If you've not been taught Headstand or Shoulderstand, substitute Downward-Facing Dog Pose for Headstand and Viparita Karani for Shoulderstand. (Headstand and Shoulderstand should not be practiced without instruction from an experienced teacher. If practiced incorrectly, they can be risky. If you have any doubts about whether you should practice these poses, please err on the side of caution.)

Whether you're doing forward bends or backbends, the emphasis of a beginning and intermediate practice should be the standing poses. Ideally, do all of the standing poses that are neuromuscularly consistent with that day's subemphasis. When preparing to do backbends, don't confuse the body by doing a forward bend, and vice versa. For example, on forward-bending days, delete Virabhadrasana I and III (Warrior I and III), the two standing poses that are considered backbends. On backbending days, delete forward-bending standing poses, such as Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), Parsvottanasana (Intense Side Stretch), and Padangustasana (Big Toe Pose).

The standing poses should be worked daily, fairly quickly and smoothly, once to each side. Each day pay particular attention to one or two poses, repeating them a number of times. After a month of working in this way, you will have deepened your understanding of each standing pose in a focused way, while at the same time you will have practiced all of them fluidly and consistently.

Upon completing the standing poses, you're ready to approach the subemphasis of the practice—backbends or forward bends. First, “inventory” your body, running your attention through it to determine whether you're ready to move into this portion of your practice or whether you would like additional preparation. Personally, I like to prepare certain areas more

deeply, depending on the subemphasis for that day. On forward-bending days, I often do Supta Padangustasana (Reclining Big Toe Pose), Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose) with one leg up the wall, or a lengthy Uttanasana. On backbending days I generally deepen the opening of the front thigh muscles with Bhekasana (Frog Pose) or another frontal thigh stretch, along with some shoulder-openers like Garudasana (Eagle Pose) and Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose).

Rules of sequencing generally suggest a progression from easier to more difficult poses. A good backbending sequence might be: Salabhasana (Locust Pose), Dhanurasana (Bow Pose), Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward-Facing Dog Pose), Ustrasana (Camel Pose), backbend in the chair, Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose), Purvottanasana (Front Body Stretch), Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward-Facing Bow Pose).

A forward-bending sequence might be: Dandasana (Staff Pose), Janu Sirsasana (Head to Knee Pose), Ardha Baddha Padma Paschimottanasana (Half-Bound Lotus Seated Forward Bend), Trianga Mukhaikapada Paschimottanasana (Three-Limbed Seated Forward Bend), Upavistha Konasana (Seated Angle Pose), Parivrtta Janu Sirsasana (Revolved Head to Knee Pose), Parivrtta Paschimottanasana (Revolved Seated Forward Bend), Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend).

Whether practicing forward or backward bends, begin by repeatedly holding each pose for a short time, before holding for a longer time in a deeper stretch. This approach will allow you to progress gradually, enhancing correct muscle use. In the short term, this technique will give you a much deeper opening when you do go all the way into the pose. In the long term, it will increase your strength, stamina, and flexibility.

When you've completed this portion of your practice, be sure to release the areas that have been so deeply opened by doing some twisting postures. If your back is feeling good after backbends, a couple of simple twists will suffice. However, if your back is sore, you should do many more twists, emphasizing the deeper ones. (For beginners, standing twists and reclining twists provide a better release than the seated twists.) Following the twists, counterbalance the practice with passive, supported asanas to close the area that has been opened. After backbends, a long, supported Paschimottanasana or Upavistha Konasana will balance your muscles and energy. After forward bends, doing supported Setu Bandha or lying backward over a bolster will bring you into balance.

Once you've taken some time to release and balance, conclude the intense phase of your practice with Salamba Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand) and its variations.

Phase Three: Quieting

The remainder of the practice cycle will emphasize neurological, physiological, and emotional quieting. This portion of the practice often includes Halasana (Plow Pose), supported Setu Banda Sarganvasana (Bridge Pose), Viparita Karani (Supported Inverted Pose), and Savasana (Corpse Pose), in that order. Halasana, Setu Bandha Sarvangasana, and Viparita Karani are key resting, rejuvenating, and therapeutic poses. They soothe and cleanse the body and mind, bringing about a deep sense of calm. In these poses, the body is relaxed and receptive, and gravity helps bathe and soak the organs with cleansing blood. The brain remains quiet and passive. Heat in the skull is replaced with a sense of coolness and openness, because blood and fluids are drawn to the brain by gravity rather than active muscular pumping.

In my own early practice, I often found myself physically and mentally exhausted by this phase of the practice. As a result, I tended to delete or abbreviate the restorative poses, skipping straight to Savasana. When I did so, I was inevitably shaky, irritable and easily agitated. In contrast, when I began to practice the restorative poses regularly, for a minimum of five minutes each, I would finish my practice feeling quiet but alert.

Always conclude your practice with Savasana (Corpse Pose), vitally important in a culture where stress-related diseases are wreaking havoc. This period of deep relaxation can range from a few breaths to half an hour or longer. It is a time of neurological acceptance in which the body can integrate any changes that have taken place as a result of the practice.

Remember that this third phase of the practice is as important (if not more so) than the other two. Even when time is short, including these poses can create a balanced practice that leaves a feeling of completion and wellness.

Brief practices

This article has focused on how to structure a long practice. But don't feel that without at least an hour to practice, there's not much sense in doing anything. On the days when your time is limited to 15 or 20 minutes you can choose from a variety of options such as: (1) 15 minutes of Sun Salutations and five minutes of Savasana; (2) one pose that you like, one pose that you don't like, then Savasana; (3) Sirsasana, Sarvangasana, Halasana, Setu Bandha Sarvangasana, Viparita Karani; (4) four or five standing poses, Sarvangasana, Savasana; (5) a short sequence of your own that includes all three phases of practice.

Journaling

A final component of establishing a practice is using a journal. Journaling allows you to keep the systematic track of the poses and practices you do, and your response to them. A journal should include the date; time of practice; duration of practice; order of asanas; asanas avoided; feelings and insights; and knowledge gaps. This process will not only help you observe your own growth, but will come in handy if you're having particular problems. For

example, if after certain practice sessions you are irritable, referring to your journal will help you systematically determine which poses led you to feel this way. If you still can't sort it out, take your journal to a skilled teacher who can evaluate your sequencing. Recording classes or workshops in your journal is also helpful.

At the end of each month, write for half an hour about any pose that you choose. Here are some questions to get you started: What is the overall feeling of the pose? What are the specific instructions for doing it? What are some refinements to it? What other poses help you prepare for it? What props might you use to deepen your understanding?

Organizing and establishing a personal practice is by no means a simple or casual process. Obstacles arise each day that can be easily justified as good reasons not to practice. When you submit to these obstacles and lose our motivation, we must call on our self-discipline to assist us. The discipline to practice despite other pressing matters is of key importance.

Whether we enter our practice rajasic or tamasic, practice can move us toward a more sattvic state. When we act from this state, our interactions with the world are more harmonious. Thus our practice is not only for our own benefit but is truly a practice for the planet as a whole.

RESOURCE B.K.S. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga* is available through YJ's Book and Tape Source on page 84.

This article was originally published in *Yoga Journal*, September/October 1991.