



7 Key area's of Asana Practice

Many people in the western world first come to yoga attracted by the fabulous physical benefits - body toning, muscle stretching, increased flexibility, and increased strength.

Perhaps because this is what you first SEE, it is the most obvious benefit. However, it is by no means the only powerful one and many experienced yogis believe it is merely the beginning.

But hey, you're just wondering if you can even do the postures, right?

So let's break things down a little ...

First let's take a look at the following 7 key areas:

1. Physical
2. Mental
3. Intention
4. Attention
5. Skill
6. Breathing
7. Emotional

1. PHYSICAL

The most obvious thing about any hatha yoga practice is the physical element, otherwise known as the 'postures', 'poses' or 'asanas' (the original Sanskrit name). These can be daunting to anyone, let alone someone just beginning a yoga practice.

Keep the following in mind:

* Everyone's body is different - we all have our own challenges! Just because someone else seems to be more flexible and can “get into a pose” further and more easily than you, does not mean they are doing it well, or even gaining as much benefit as you are.

* Try not to think of them as 'poses', this really doesn't help. It is easier in the beginning to think of them as 'stretches' that liberate your body, mind, feelings of happiness, spirit and soul.

* Remember, “yoga” is NOT the posture. Yoga is the PRACTICE. It does not matter what you can and cannot “do”. It is a JOURNEY.

* So only go into poses to the point of feeling a good stretch, never to the point of extreme pain. You will want to aim for a level of 'discomfort' that shows your body YOU CAN stretch.

* If you have physical 'issues' - old or current injuries; you are carrying a few extra pounds; you feel stiff or have restricted movement:

1. Talk with your instructor when you arrive - they'll make time to understand the needs of your personal practice. So take advantage of it.

2. Let go of the 'perceived inability' in your own mind, and just allow the postures to do their work.

3. Resist trying to exactly copy other students and faithfully follow your instructors instructions. They are there to help you access the best possible results and are trained and skilled to do so. If you need some modified poses initially, they will assist you.

* Please know that you are never too old, too sick, too stiff or too heavy to do Yoga.

* Many first timers are concerned about what they might “look like” - either in their yoga gear, or just simply feeling silly in the room when everyone else appears to be consummate professionals. Our advice is to let it pass in your own mind, every time it comes up and simply RE- FOCUS ON THE TREMENDOUS BENEFITS YOU ARE BRINGING TO YOURSELF.

2. MENTAL

There are one thousand things to pay attention to on your first class. So switch off that chatterbox in your head and bring focus to your breathing, it will help tremendously.

You'll arrive with a mind packed full of "What will this be like? Will I be able to do it? What if I can't? Did I let the babysitter know when I would be back? What is for dinner tonight? Why was work so stressful today? etc etc"

Get out of your head and into your body!! Here are a few tips;

- * Imagine as you enter the yoga room or practice space that the thoughts of your busy mind have been neatly packed into a bag and left at the front door for you to collect on the way out. Any that remain really important will be there for you when you leave!

- * Try to get into the room with enough time to lie down for a few minutes before class starts. Our world is busy enough with little space for ourselves. You have already made this time for yourself, so take full advantage of it, revel in it, bask in it and use it to relax your mind a little.

- * Anxiety only comes from thinking about the future. If you are thinking about the "next pose" then your mind is already in the future. Bring it back to now by focusing on your breath.

3. INTENTION

Take time at the beginning of each class to set an "Intention". It will give you a focus or a purpose for your practice that day. It can be a prayer, a dedication or even a mantra. It can be for yourself, someone else, or even a cause.

Why are you doing this? Keep coming back to your original intention - even when the going is "difficult" or you feel as if you have plateaued in your practice.

4. ATTENTION

As we said before, there are one thousand things to pay attention to in your class. So here is a useful metaphor to help you appreciate that you are continuously learning.

Imagine you have been given \$10 of “attention”.

Every time you are asked to put your attention on something, you will 'spend' \$1.

When it is your first class you'll be directed to:

- * Sign in
- * Leave your shoes outside the Yoga room
- * Put your mat down
- * Breathe in a certain way
- * Move in a certain way
- * Move into a posture
- * Adjust a posture
- * Get out of a posture
- * Breathe in a certain way (again)
- * Have your towel in a certain arrangement
- * Put your water somewhere
- * Sometimes be reminded to drink
- * You'll notice perspiration
- * You'll notice stretches
- * You'll notice tightness in your body
- * You'll notice flexibility in your body

Now the \$10 has gone and you're 'in debt'! And for some people this can feel a little confusing.

But, as you learn poses, sequences and “how this works in MY body”, things will start to fall into place over the next few classes, and you'll be able to 'spend' your \$\$ of attention on new things.

So remember, EVERYBODY has limited attention. Placing it on what you “can do” and noticing how that attention moves and develops is one of the lovely elements of a growing yoga practice.

Consistent practice can take you to a place where you can shift from “thinking to “feeling” in your yoga poses and then you will begin to build an attention surplus.

5. SKILL

Perhaps surprisingly, there are more skills to learn in yoga than just yoga postures and getting in and out of them.

You'll actually need to UNLEARN some things!

You'll learn new skills in breathing.

Skills in balancing.

Skills in quickly recovering from or even avoiding stress.

Relaxation skills.

Concentration and focus skills.

Skills to quieten the mind.

Skills to hold the skeletal body in a more effective position: sitting, standing, walking.

Like any skill, you can learn the essentials quickly, but really refining them takes some time, good intention and attention.

And some of your “less empowering habits” (you know the ones!) take a little skill-building to overcome.

For all this to happen in your first class here is quite frankly impossible ... BUT, your first class here is likely to leave you feeling incredibly good. Perhaps cleansed and clear-minded. Perhaps 100% de-stressed.

Of course nothing is guaranteed in the first class - what we can and will say is that a dedicated Yoga practice can and will change your life ... if you want it to.

6. BREATHING

We mentioned it before, but breathing is such an important part of getting the most out of a yoga practice - that many teachers say that "it is all about the breath".

A full yoga breath is a learned skill!

And once learned, is the most wonderful thing to do for your body, mind and soul. Fresh oxygen is our lifeblood. If, for instance, when stressed, you are able to continue to take in the fullest breath available, you will be much more empowered (and feel stronger) than someone else who is 'gasping' - or even worse, holding their breath.

You will be asked to control your breath by taking a full 6 second inhale and a full six second exhale.

Other than in particular breathing exercises, you will be asked to breath only through your nose.

You may be asked to move on different parts of the breath...for example "inhale your arms up....exhale your leg back".

If a posture is 'difficult', ask yourself the following questions:

- * Am I breathing through my nose?
- * Am I taking full breaths?
- * Or am I "holding my breath"?

7. EMOTIONAL

So once this all starts to come together ... in that you begin to understand the alignment of poses; you learn to breathe more effectively; your body opens up and lets go of tension ...

... not surprisingly there can be "emotional releases".

Sometimes we laugh together in class when someone makes a breakthrough. Maybe you'll hear someone sigh with an 'ah- ha!'. And maybe even a tear shed from time to time. So although we say you should be silent in class, sometimes the class is far from silent. And sometimes it is totally silent and focused, one never knows.

Human beings are “creatures of emotion”. So try not to put too much deep meaning into emotions that come and go in your practice. Just be an observer. Tell yourself "Hmmm, that's interesting" and move on.

Equally you will find your overall emotional balance will improve over time. Maybe, as many of our students do, you'll find yourself just 'smiling for no good reason'!

There is no question that a sense of peace of mind and a deeper positive emotional connection with life and the people around you is possible to achieve quite quickly with Yoga.

You'll need a regular practice to hold onto it though!