

Bringing Purpose to the Practice

All the disciplines of yoga are intended for one purpose: to awaken in you a new sense of balance and harmony that will gradually reintroduce you to yourself.

STRETCHING

Stretching feels good. It is invigorating, and makes us more flexible...

What creates resistance to flexibility? Some joint resistance is structural and cannot be changed, but most resistance varies from day to day—and over a lifetime. The three main areas that concern us, as yoga students are:

1. Tightness in muscles and connective tissue
2. Habits of posture and movement that unconsciously reinforce joint restrictions
3. Mental states that lead to physical tension

If we are to bring about change through yoga, we must work with each of these. The approach should be one which is gentle and non-judgmental, allowing you to observe the way the body (and mind) feel in postures.

BODY, BREATH, AND MIND

The key to bringing awareness to a yoga posture is to observe what is going on inside it. Then with practice you will learn to make adjustments so that the flow of energy you experience internally establishes the body in the most balanced alignment possible. Your goal is to develop ease and stability. Imposing an idealized notion of what a posture should look like can create tension or even injury, so stay present with the physical sensations arising inside you. Be aware of inner boundaries. At the same time, explore the edges of your awareness, sensing what you might be missing when you focus too intently.

Breath awareness is an important way to maintain this “soft” focus; being conscious of the breath allows you to “listen” to the impression that is being made by the posture

as a whole. It’s not unlike listening to a symphony orchestra: from time to time, you shift your awareness to the violins, the French horns, or the timpani, but you do that within the context of the sound of the entire orchestra. Similarly, awareness of the breath allows you to observe delicate physical sensations, patterns of internal energy, and even passing thoughts, yet remain aware of the internal unity of the pose.

When approached in this way, each stretch or yoga posture becomes a vehicle for self-awareness, and its effects are magnified by actively collaborating with it rather than resisting its challenges. You will learn to perform the pose correctly—the methods for entering, holding, and leaving it. You will be able to identify the range of effects each posture has on the body, breath, and mind and reap the benefits of practice. Does the pose require strength? Then by slowly increasing your holding time you will develop a stronger body. Does the posture require balance? Then regular practice will improve your concentration. Are you anxious in the pose? Then relaxed breath awareness will help you uncover the source of your tension and transform your perception of the pose as well as your self-confidence.

In the process you will find that learning to respond to each posture and stretch from the inside out is a gratifying challenge. Your knowledge of your body will grow; you will feel more coordinated in your movements; your posture will improve; your circulation will improve and wastes will be eliminated from your body more efficiently; your breathing will deepen; and overall, your efforts will contribute to a positive self-image. The postures will then begin to flow naturally, each arising out of your own awareness of what needs to be done to bring yourself into mental, physical, and spiritual harmony.