



The journey into asana and beyond

Over much of the world, yoga studios are springing up on every corner with glamorous pictures of bendy ladies doing fancy poses. Well-read beginners to long term teachers, tackling the subject of the yoga explosion, comment that the physical poses (asana) that many people are doing are not yoga. When do stretching exercises identified with yoga become yoga, and what can you do within a holistic practice to take full advantage of the huge benefits available to you?



PUT SIMPLY, stretching becomes yoga when done with a degree of mindfulness, such as paying attention to the physical sensations, the breathing or positively focused intention behind the practice. Without this the stretches, or yoga asana, can be the same as doing reps in a gym or warm up exercises before a jog. Done mindfully, asana can begin to help us find freedom from suffering in the body, as well as, more importantly, the mind. This is essentially the ultimate aim of all yoga techniques.

Asana often proves a useful gateway even to those who go to yoga classes simply aiming to tone up. In the stillness of the class they find a moment of serenity normally missing from their daily lives. This can be a break from their daily adrenaline ride, but can also be a glimpse of a feeling of acceptance, of being in the moment, of a place without want or suffering.

However it's described or explained, it's often alluring enough that it draws people into a regular practice that leads them into exploring the yoga beyond asana.

HOW YOGA CAN HELP CHANGE THOUGHT PATTERNS

It is easy to see how doing forward bends for a year can lengthen your hamstrings and change your body, but it can be more difficult to see how you can change your thought patterns and outlook. It is possible, and indeed common, to make positive change across all aspects of your being as we experience how the mental and physical interconnect.

Physically stretching into the spaces in our own bodies can release mental echoes of irritations stored within the body, as well as educate us how to calm the mind with the breath

clouded by anger or fear, we can find how the outlook from the yoga class can re-emerge to lift us beyond our normal negative response.

It's good to know when you are working with asana, or other yoga techniques like pranayama, chanting, meditation and positive affirmations, that you are unwinding stuff that can arise as physical symptoms, such as chronic back pain and headaches. Yoga techniques help to release you from continuous stress cycles that can cause these bodily responses. If you always feel as if there is a large bear standing behind you, you can be stuck in a fight or flight mode where it's hard to free yourself from chronic ailments as your natural healing processes are shut down.

Ancient yogic knowledge can provide a framework to help us understand and change these patterns. This wisdom is best seen as a key to accelerate and take full advantage of the learning you may have begun to experience in your asana as well as in your life.

This body of knowledge is too large, or possibly our personal understanding too superficial, for us to be able to condense it easily here. But if grasped and internalised, integral aspects of Vedic knowledge – like you are perfect and fully acceptable right here in this moment – can begin to reverberate throughout your whole awareness, and in this way help to change your thought patterns.

Both positive and negative habits are known as samskaras and are seen as grooves in a muddy mind field, or alternatively as ingrained neural pathways by modern science. The more we avoid these negative ruts the less power they have over us. Another attainable concept contained in the Vedic approach to freedom from suffering is letting go of anything that doesn't serve you: thoughts, habits, relationships. We don't necessarily have to root out problematic behaviour; simply seeing it clearly is the beginning of allowing it to melt away and encouraging good patterns to emerge. You can start by 'practising' this in a yoga class and move to taking it off the mat – try it in your everyday life and 'test' yourself in tricky family situations!

YOUR GREATEST TEACHERS

Yoga is the exploration of yourself, even the difficult and grotty bits. Maybe you start to understand you blame people close to you for the difficult situations in your life. Your close family and friends, your grumpy neighbour: these are your best teachers. You can't control their behaviour, but you can control how you react to



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as we encounter, and learn to benefit from, challenging sensations.

On the mat asana help us shine a light on what and where destructive patterns are causing disturbances in our minds. Certain poses may repeatedly bring up similar mental states. If you are alert to this, you may find some poses bring up feelings of fear, insecurity or doubt in your life, while other poses bring up an inflated sense of importance, or success, and so on.

Recognising these mental states and how they relate to our physical situation begins the journey to increasing our control and the ability to transform them. Simply noticing our anger or fear in an uncomfortable pose, then learning to breathe, acknowledge and accept its presence, creates a positive momentum we can take off the mat. When facing an unpleasant situation in life where we tend to react badly, as we become



it and how it affects you. Once you start to see more clearly these patterns in close relationships you can start to change, not by force, but by compassionately watching and accepting. It is amazing how change in yourself, however subtle, can inspire change in others without them even knowing. They say that the teacher comes when the student is ready, so if a particularly difficult person comes along then this is your time to be grateful, to be yoga in action – not as easy to do in real life as it is to write about. Often your greatest critic is yourself. One well known teacher, Ana Forrest, says, ‘Never say a harsh word to yourself again,’ so recognising harmful internal dialogue in how you speak to yourself is an important part of your yoga development.

Whether deep in a jungle retreat, or in the office or at a family party, whichever style of yoga you are practising, whichever techniques you are using, there is a moment when the sparkling essence of yoga appears – the tickle of freedom from artificial constraints. It can just be a glimpse of peace and contentment, but the more you practise, the more it comes; and the more attached to it you become, the harder it is to find! It is not easy and often you’ll feel as if you are going backwards, but it is worth it and with mental commitment you can broaden your practice, and this liberation may start to infiltrate your every moment.

NADI SHODHANA

Pranayama can be translated as breath or energy management. Nadi shodhana is a deliciously satisfying, accessible pranayama and on its own it can be a complete practice. An easy method to get out of the stress zone and grab a glimpse of the peace we’ve been talking about. Not only is it very pleasant at any time of day, it has great effects before or after asana. You breathe through alternate nostrils to calm the mind and balance the energy in the body so you are neither too hyperactive nor too lazy.

- Sit comfortably on the floor, cushion or chair with a straight spine.
- First and second finger of the right hand fold into your palm (see picture).
- Breathe deeply in and out, then cover right nostril with right thumb.
- Inhale through left nostril, then cover left nostril with third finger.
- Release right thumb, exhale from right nostril, then inhale on the right side.
- Cover right nostril with right thumb again.
- Uncover left nostril and exhale – this is one round – always finish breathing out of your left nostril.
- Begin the next round by inhaling through the left.
- When finished lie down and relax for a while afterwards (shavasana).




Aim for two to five minutes to begin with but if the breath is even slightly strained then stop and rest. If it feels instinctively right to have another go then after a while, try again but some days the right thing to do is to stop. Even if you normally have a smooth nadi shodhana at times it can be rough and tiring. Welcome this challenging day as an opportunity to learn to observe and accept. Normally you see serenity arising, but try to be equanimous when frustration or confusion arrives instead!

As your practice deepens you can start to work on lengthening the breath and feeling the moment when you change gear from inhalation to exhalation. This slight pause as the breath changes direction becomes a moment to hold the breath in or out. Holding the breath out tends to be harder so observe how the mind reacts.

Nadi shodhana is a valuable part of a holistic yoga practice that anyone with a couple of minutes and a chair or space can do. It’s a simple but highly effective meeting point between the body and mind. As the breath is gently regulated, the body relaxes and in turn the mental chatter slows. 🙏

Photos: Yoga Rocks



Helen and Phil began Yoga Rocks and continue to lead the team on their idyllic retreat. At Yoga Rocks they celebrate the similarities between yoga styles and the teachers they invite have in common a wish to spread BIG love, openness and joy. All the teachers are committed to making your yoga retreat an incredible and transformative experience.

For more information visit yogaholidaysgreece.com