



Karuna Yoga Newsletter

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What Is Yoga?

This is such a huge question. Yoga means different things to different people. Some people practise yoga as a way of keeping fit. Others see yoga as a way to simply stretch the body or to relax. Many people practise yoga as a way of attaining spiritual enlightenment. Whatever your reason is for practising yoga you can be sure that it will help you both physically and mentally. It may take months or even years for you to feel any difference but slowly it is having an effect on your health and well being. Yoga can be thought of as a lifelong journey and has so many benefits for people of all ages.

The ancient sage, Patanjali, wrote the Yoga Sutras and outlined the basics of yoga known as the eight limbs or steps. These eight steps basically act as guidelines on how to live a meaningful and purposeful life. They serve as a prescription for moral and ethical conduct and self-discipline; they direct attention toward one's health; and they help us to acknowledge the spiritual aspects of our nature.

The eight limbs or steps are yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana and samadhi. These are stages in an individual's life journey through yoga. Each step must be understood and followed to attain the ultimate goal of yoga, that of emancipation of the self.

Most people in the West start with asanas (yoga postures). Patanjali clearly states in his sutras that the asanas should be mastered before moving on to the next step. This may take many years. Over the next few months I will attempt to explain each limb or step so you have a clear understanding of the path of yoga.

Yama (the first limb or step)

Yama requires tremendous inner discipline. Yama explains the codes of behaviour to be observed and followed in everyday life, reminding us of our responsibilities as social beings. Yama has five principles. These are: **Ahimsa** or non-violence, **Satya** or truthfulness, **Brahmacharya** or chastity, **Asteya** or non-stealing, and **Aparigraha** or freedom from desire. Let's face it. The world would be a much better place without violence, cruelty, cheating, dishonesty and greed.

- **Ahimsa** requires us to replace negative, destructive thoughts and actions with positive, constructive ones. Anger, cruelty, or harassment of others are facets of the violence latent in all of us.
- Lying, cheating, dishonesty and deception break the principles of **Satya**.
- **Brahmacharya** does not mean total abstinence, but denotes a disciplined sexual life, promoting contentment and moral strength from within.
- Practising yoga helps to discipline the mind, freeing it from material possessiveness, and bringing it into a state of **Asteya**, or freedom from greed as well as **Aparigraha** or freedom from desire.

Posture of the Month – Uttanasana (Intense forward stretch)

The spine receives a deliberate and intense stretch in this asana. The word *ut* means “deliberate” or “intense” in Sanskrit, while *tana* means “stretch”. The practice of Uttanasana helps the body and the brain recover from mental and physical exhaustion. This asana can help those who are prone to anxiety or depression as it rejuvenates the spinal nerves and brain cells. It also slows down the heartbeat.

Technique

1. Stand in Tadasana with your legs straight and fully stretched.
2. Tighten your kneecaps and then pull them upward.
3. Raise your arms toward the ceiling, the palms facing forward. Stretch your whole body while taking one or two breaths.
4. Place your hands on your hips with your elbows moving back as you squeeze your shoulder blades together.
5. Exhale and bend forward from the waist. Keep your legs fully stretched. Make sure your body weight is placed equally on both feet.
6. **Beginners:** bend your arms and hold your left elbow with your right hand. Hold your right elbow with your left hand. Hold the posture for one minute.
7. **Intermediates:** bend your torso further and place your palms on the floor in front of your feet. Move your hands back and place them next to your heels. Rest on your fingers and thumbs, with your palms raised off the floor.
8. Keep your thighs fully stretched and feel the energy flow along the back of your legs, into your waist and down your spine. The pressure on the inner and outer edges of your feet should be equal.
9. **Intermediates:** exhale and push your torso closer to your legs until your face rests on your knees. Push your torso and abdomen further down toward the floor until your chin touches both knees. Hold the posture for one minute.
10. To come out of the posture, place your hands on your hips. Inhale and slowly come up keeping your chest lifted and your back straight. Stand in Tadasana.

Cautions

If you have low blood pressure, come out of the posture gradually to avoid dizziness.

In Uttanasana we rely on a release to occur so that we can bend. Instead of “allowing” the various muscles to release, we create strain when our intention takes Uttanasana deeper than the physical body can handle. Here are two ways to feel lightness when you move into or out of the position.

Block position: Place one or two blocks between your thighs about 1 inch from your pubic bone. Don’t squeeze hard, just hold them. Move into Uttanasana.

Strap position: Take the block(s) away and tie a strap around your thighs (midthigh height). Gently press out, and then move into Uttanasana.

Benefits of this posture

- Relieves mental and physical exhaustion
- Slows down the heartbeat
- Tones the liver, kidneys and spleen
- Relieves stomach ache
- Reduces abdominal and back pain during menstruation
- Reduces depression if practised regularly
- Increases blood flow to the brain
- Strengthens and stretches the hamstring muscles
- Increases the flexibility of the hip joint



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