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# **TRUE YOGA IS SIMPLE**

## **13 Steps To Deepen Your Home Practice**

by OLGA YUMASHEVA

Illustrated by  
Leysan Shaikhieva

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## **FOREWORD**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Each person we meet, each situation we encounter has something for us. But most of the time, we are too much in a rush to see it.

Before I get into the story, I'd like to thank a few people who have really shaped me and the way I see things.

Of course, it's the talented yoga teachers I met on my way: Surinder Singh, Asish Sharma, Suryans Thakur, Diana Schopplein, Sergei Mikhailov. I was lucky to see yoga from different perspectives.

Much gratitude to Spiritual Masters I happened to come across live or through the web: Om Baba, Lisa Cairns, Adya Shanti, Roger Castello, Samdarshi, Tigmonk, Mooji and many others. It's great that you share wisdom with all of us and give inspiration to walk our path consciously.

I doubt, my teachers will ever read through these lines. Yet, I believe it's worth mentioning their names. Who knows, maybe there's something out there for you, and this book is just a bridge to get you to something bigger.

There's a tale about a Master and a Student. It was told by an Indian Brahmin who likes interpreting the scriptures in his own modern way. In fact, if you know a more correct version of this tale, I'd be happy to hear it.

Anyway. So, one day there was a Master and his disciple. In India,, teachers are given very high respect. People believe that they can reach the Truth by serving their Masters, being in their presence.

Our disciple was very hard-working, very loyal, and very sincere. Every day he prayed to Lord Shiva asking to give him the Ultimate Knowledge. And in his prayers he always remembered his Master and thanked life for being around him.

One night the student woke up and saw that the Master was away. The following night - the same.

The disciple started worrying about his teacher. So, in the evening, he secretly followed his Guru and saw that he went to a bar.



The student was waiting in the bushes. After a while, he saw his Master leaving the bar drunk and with the traces of lipstick on his face.

In the morning the student came up to the teacher and said, 'You don't have to go all alone at night. It's dark, scary, and you're old, you're getting tired fast. I will wait for you in town, and carry you back to the ashram on my shoulders.'

When the night came, the Master went to the bar again. Lots of drinks, drugs, dancing, and prostitutes... He was enjoying his time while his student was patiently waiting in the bushes.

Lord Shiva saw the sincerity and loyalty of the disciple and appeared in front of him.

'What are you doing here? Don't you see that your Master is fake? I am Shiva. It's me you were looking for. Let's go from here.'

I saw your truthfulness; I saw you prayed to me every day. You wanted to enter into the Kingdom of Truth; I will take you there.'

And, the disciple replied, 'Yes, I wanted to reach the Truth, but I can't go anywhere without my Master.'

Shiva couldn't resist the loyalty of the student and agreed to take the fake Master to the Kingdom of Truth.

So, they enter the bar and tell the Master that they are taking him with them.

But the Master says that he can't go anywhere without his prostitutes. Now, Shiva has to invite the prostitutes to join them.

But the prostitutes don't want to go anywhere without their pimps. And the pimps don't want to go without their drug-dealers.

Shiva turns to the disciple and says, 'Can you see? Just because of your sincerity and genuine loyalty I had to admit all these crappy folks in my Kingdom of Truth'.

The point is, personal qualities of the teachers are much less important than the sincerity of the aspirants.

I've seen true hearts around fake Gurus. And, they were developing regardless of their unworthy Masters. They were progressing due to their own loyalty and love.

And I've also seen the most corrupt babas (monks) being utmost true during the Pooja

time (making ceremonies and worshipping God).

So, I thank all True and Fake Masters. For they are a genuine reflection of what's inside of us: a bit of this, a bit of that.

I would also like to thank Marie Forleo, a great entrepreneur and speaker. Taking her course on Marketing I saw that being successful in life and society can go together with genuine service. She was the one who actually inspired me to express myself through writing.

And, certainly, big gratitude to my family and friends for accepting me with all my goods and bads, and supporting me regardless of the decisions I make, crazy at times.

I'd like to honour my Mum for emphasising the need of learning English. This language has opened lots of doors for me: doors to knowledge, experiences, relations and understandings countless times.

Warm hug to my Grandma for creating opportunities in my life. You gave me freedom and choice to do things others won't dare to do.

And much love to my daughter, who became my anchor. Without you, I would have been lost. You gave me strength, motivation and grounding. I had to stop wandering around and stuffing myself with intellectual knowledge. Around you, yogic science started opening up to me.



*Pic.1 Surya Namaskar*

# PROLOGUE

Just about a week and the teacher training course (TTC) finishes for all the students in my class, but not for me. The last days the pain in the lower sacrum has gradually increased. It hurts when I do Upward-Facing Dog, it hurts when I try to open my hips. I feel it when I'm sitting, and I feel it when I'm sleeping.



*Pic.2 Upward-Facing Dog*

I'm looking for advice from experienced yoga teachers around, but my case seems quite rare, and all of them merely say, 'Just stop the practice for a few

months.' I realize that I can't complete the course. I'm tired of constant pain, I feel lost, I don't have a clue whom I should approach to resolve my situation.

And here my journey into self-exploration and truly mindful practice start.

**Hello, my dear reader,**

My name is Olga Yumasheva, and I'm an active practitioner of yoga. When I say, 'I practice yoga', I don't just mean that I step on my mat every day, although it's almost always the case. I also point to the fact that the principles of yoga overflow from the mat into my daily living. They have shaped and continue shaping my understanding of situations, my reactions, and my behavior.

Like most students, when I just started, and the first few years I couldn't see what yoga was about. I treated it as a physical exercise, blindly followed the instructions, sweated, blushed, struggled for breath, and competed on 'who can do the most advanced pose.' I was dependent on group classes, lazy to practice at home, and needed a push from the teacher. I attended as many classes as possible, aiming to progress faster, went into extremes of having too long practice or no practice at all.

I kept on losing motivation, gave up practicing multiple times, and tried hard to force myself to get back on the mat. I made promises to

myself to do it tomorrow, and postponed it, and postponed it, and postponed it.

### 3 MAGIC KICKS

Then I had three ‘**magic kicks**’ from life that loosened my dependency on group classes and forced me to turn towards a more mindful, enjoyable, and beneficial self–practice.

**KICK 1.** I was fortunate to take my TTC as a beginner. Of course, I didn’t start teaching right after getting the certificate. But what I got there was rounded knowledge about yoga: pose mechanics, the connection between asanas and energy centers, benefits of asanas for physical/emotional/mental health, principles of asana sequencing, yoga philosophy, etc.

After the course, I could attend further group classes with my eyes wide open and critically assess them. To see things, we need to know where to look.

**KICK 2.** I was even more fortunate to get injured during my TTC. And that was the second big kick because I couldn’t find

external help. I was forced to acknowledge the responsibility for my own stupidity and impatience and do my own research to fix myself.

The pain was one of my best teachers. It sharpened my learning curve. I had to listen to my body, be gentle with it. Otherwise, it just hurt badly. My physical condition didn't allow me to continue with attempts to jump over my head and perform asanas that were beyond my level.

Instead, I learned about the beauty of simplicity. I added focus and mindfulness into my practice. So, easy poses started giving me incredibly profound experiences.

**KICK 3.** And finally, I was blessed with a kid, and I'm raising her as a single mom. In a way, it's a life constraint, but it gives me multiple benefits in my practice.

First of all, I have to lie in Shavasana with kids' songs in the background. So, I'm forced to improve my concentration power.

Secondly, I can't afford a 1,5-hour practice. I have 15–20 mins all in all. And in between my kid can come up, bring a ukulele and make me



play a song. I have to keep it short, and it makes it easier to have a consistent practice.

The short practice also teaches us to prioritize, do what's really important, and combine techniques to maximize the benefits.



*Pic.3 Shavasana*

And lastly, I know that if I skip my practice, I will just collapse. I need something to rely on, to give me the strength to fulfil my 24/7 mommy duties and not get overwhelmed.

Without these threemagic kicks, I believe I would still be running for 6 group classes a week and hunting for a selfie in Scorpio pose.



*Pic.4 Scorpio pose*

## **MAIN MISTAKES**

The main problem for beginners in yoga is over-relying on group classes and not questioning whether what we're doing actually benefits our health or ruins it.

Since childhood, we've been taught that the harder we try, the faster we progress, the longer we practice, the more benefits we get, the more complicated things we do, the higher results we achieve. And once we step on the mat, we apply the same principles to our yoga practice, not realizing that instead of getting healthier, we may harm ourselves.

When we do something beyond our level, we stress out our nervous system. Instead of releasing tension, we accumulate it.

If our hips are very tight and we push the legs too wide, we get micro-injuries.

If holding breath doesn't come easily, but we follow the instructions of the teacher and make a pause of 4 counts, we induce enormous amounts of anxiety into our system. When we're holding breath, we are incredibly receptive to both positive and negative emotions. If any discomfort is felt, we should stop performing the breathing exercise immediately.

Unfortunately, most beginners miss the whole point of yoga. Going deeper in yoga isn't about performing more advanced asanas. It's about better alignment with your own self, understanding your bodily needs, keeping strong and focused on challenging situations, gradually getting your life more and more balanced.

Indeed, it takes time to let your mind mature, appreciate the value of simplicity and

consistency. But it all starts with correct intellectual understanding.

## **WHAT'S in the BOOK?**

What I tried to do here is cut corners for you, so that you can avoid the stupid mistakes typical for most beginners in yoga.

It's essential to develop the right attitude and do things mindfully from the start. So, choose exercises that match your particular needs, and keep your self-practice short. This will save you time, money, health.

The tools offered are available to everyone. Whether you're a ballerina or a Pinocchio, there're things you can do right now to get a profound experience of union and peace with yourself. You just need to bring concentration to what you're doing.

I also believe that each of us is so unique that there can't be rigid rules in yoga. That's why you won't see precise instructions on the asanas: do this and that.

What you will find is a call for action, various suggestions on how you can customize your

practice to serve your unique needs. You will need to test proof of them. No intellectual knowledge can substitute direct experience. You have to try things to understand what works best for you.

## **YOGA. WHAT'S REALLY the POINT?**

To start, let's understand what yoga is about. Apart from various health benefits yoga provides, there're also certain qualities we develop while practicing. We train them on the mat again and again, and slowly they become a part of our nature, overflow into our ordinary life, giving us invaluable advantages.

### **CENTER**

First of all, the practice helps us to find a center. Every day we meet people, face stressful and challenging situations, perform multiple duties at work and in families. It's not surprising that we may get overwhelmed or feel drained.

If we don't have a center, we're likely to go into extremes: either happy-happy or really

low and depressed. It feels fantastic to be at the top, but it hurts hard to fall down. And, in the absence of a so-called 'center,' we can slip into depressive states for days, weeks, and months. We need something stable, something we can rely on, something we can come back to find inner strength, inspiration, and balance.

Once we have a consistent yoga practice – not long, not difficult – just regular, we can use it as a core, as a central point of our day. When emotions arise and take me over, I tell myself that it's okay, tomorrow I'll start my day with some yoga, release the tension, reload my system, get centered and strong again to face whatever comes.

The feeling of a center allows me to go sideways without having a fear of falling. And as time passes, I notice that my life also levels out and becomes more of a 'golden middle' way: there aren't so many positive/negative peaks. I just feel peaceful with myself.

## **SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

The second good thing yoga teaches us is listening to our bodily needs. Of course, it doesn't happen when we blindly follow the instructions. It only happens when we do things mindfully, only then we can hear what we truly need. And the more we listen, the better we can hear.

Again, it starts on the yoga mat, but gradually the understanding expands and reaches the other aspects of our life. We realize which activities give us pleasure and which make us exhausted, which people and habits help us to rise up and find emotional balance, and which are toxic, pull us down, and make us stressed.

It doesn't happen immediately. Yet, looking back, we notice that we invite into our life more and more of those things that make us uplifted and that we minimize our engagement in those things that don't resonate with our nature and bring us down.

## CONCENTRATION

The next benefit yoga gives is it improves our concentration abilities. In modern times we are so much disturbed by technology and choices that we can't focus on one thing for more than a few minutes. Innocent as it may seem, the lack of concentration makes us jump from one idea to another and doesn't let us finish things.

Working on concentration in balancing poses, meditation, pranayama, Trataka (or gazing at one point without blinking the eyes), we bring in the focus into the other duties we perform during the day and, certainly, become we more efficient.



*Pic. 5 Trataka*



## **CONTROL THE MIND**

Becoming the master of our own mind isn't easy, but yoga and meditation definitely help.

The majority of people are totally under control of their mind; the internal dialogue goes on endlessly in their heads. They jump from one thought to another, and can't find a 'switch off' button to simply relax and enjoy the moment of silence. Only in rare cases, we manage to find such an activity that takes us all in, enables us to cut off the ever-wandering mind, dive into the process, and enjoy the experience.

With yoga, we learn not to get involved in every thought that pops up in our mind during the practice. If it comes, we don't try to fight with it, we simply shift the focus back into the body and don't follow the thought. We don't let it unfold and capture all our attention.

When we manage to develop this pattern during the practice, it overflows into our regular life. We see a thought coming up, but we don't get caught into the story it offers unless it's about something we need to solve at this very moment.

We learn to ignore useless thoughts. We stop worrying about things that are beyond our control right now. We don't create limitless projections into the future since we no longer see any sense in it, and we want to use our energy efficiently.

This way, we don't overthink and don't get mentally burnt out. We use the mind when we need to perform some practical tasks, and then we switch it off and relax.

## **OBSERVATION**

Observation is another fantastic quality we gain through yoga practice. Performing asanas, we notice how our body feels in a given pose. Sometimes we feel discomfort, but we don't react on it immediately; we simply acknowledge it.

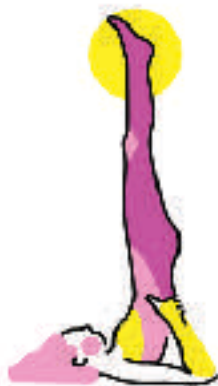
When we lie down in Shavasana, all we do is observe what's happening inside: the bodily sensations, the energy flows, the blockages. We don't rush into actions.

The more we practice observation, the more it becomes a part of us. Gradually we notice that

dealing with unpleasant people and situations; we also don't overreact. We observe what's going on inside of us, we feel the emotions as they arise, but we learn to keep a distance from them. We give ourselves time to choose the most appropriate action to take. A response, not a reaction.

### **SPECIFIC NEEDS**

We can design our practice in such a way that it helps us address our particular needs. We might feel not confident enough or, on the contrary, too proud. We might be too rigid with ourselves and others or too soft. We might be lazy or overactive, extremely down-to-earth, or always flying high in the sky. We might want to bring in some creativity into our life or get some more grounding.



*Pic. 6 Shoulderstand*

Yoga has tools for all of that. For example, working on core muscles, we increase our willpower and self-confidence.

Standing poses give us a sense of grounding and build our stamina.

Performing Hip Openers, we can master the flexibility required for coping with life challenges.

Through asanas that work on our Throat center (like Shoulderstand or Camel pose), we boost our self-expression.



*Pic. 7 Camel pose*

Performing Balancing poses, we get centered and improve our concentration skills, etc.

It may sound a bit naive, but it really works. Whichever quality we want to master, it's good to train it on the mat and

let it overflow into our ordinary life.

## TWO PATHS

When we move into a new activity, no matter what it is, we need to decide which tools we are going to use and how much time we are going to spend. We also need to consider our strengths and weaknesses; we need to see whether there is a specific deadline to deliver a result. And then, we select the most appropriate method for us to progress in our endeavour.

There are two major different paths one may choose when it comes to yoga, our spiritual practice, or any aspect of life we want to work on. We either go for a short way full of thorns, or we go for a longer but smoother path.

When I just started my spiritual journey, I was always trying to find a shortcut. Surrounded by people who were inspired by the idea of reaching enlightenment, I gave up on my career and social life. I started overloading myself with all sorts of spiritual practices: long meditations, yoga, pranayama, mantra chanting, reading the scriptures, pilgrimage, fasting, abstaining from excessive social engagement.

Intellectually I knew that all those practices were highly beneficial, but I was lacking the juices of life. And, of course, the periods of total devotion to spirituality didn't last long. My practice was on and off. Every time I started, I would approve of myself. Every time I stopped, I would blame myself.

At that point, I was attending spiritual gatherings of one enlightened teacher, and most of his devotees were much more disciplined than me. So, not only I separated myself from my ordinary friends who weren't practitioners and, as I assumed, couldn't understand my priorities and pains, I also felt like a black sheep around these well-organised spiritual seekers. The isolation was growing, yet no enlightenment was coming my way.



*Pic. 8 Half Lotus pose*

Many times, the teacher would speak about the concept of a thorny way and a smooth path full of roses in the context of choosing an appropriate spiritual practice.

He was associating the thorny way with the masculine principle. It's more rational, more intense and serious. He was saying that taking up a difficult task you discipline yourself more and progress faster. But you can easily slip down and fall, and it's hard to rise up again and continue your journey.

The path full of roses he was associating with the feminine principle. It's more loving, playful and flexible. I remember him saying that if meditating for 2 hours a day is too much for you at the moment, you can start with something you truly enjoy.

It could be playing a musical instrument, drawing or taking care of your garden. It can be anything. Whatever you personally like and don't feel pressured to practice on a daily basis, choose that. Then you gradually master the skill you've selected and have a core practice to stick to.

This way you get a feeling of grounding, of having a center. You can do all your daily duties and meet all sort of pleasant and unpleasant circumstances on your way, but you have something to come back to. As the time passes, the nervous system strengthens, your mind cools down and your inner resistance fades away, you can always add up some more challenging practices. Let it be more of an inner calling rather than a forced decision.

I was always considered a bright student. So, taking an easy but long path couldn't look appealing to me. I guess it all comes from our childhood: we see our parents praising us for excellent grades at school, and at that moment we feel loved. Subconsciously we start associating love we receive from others with our good behavior and success in social activities. And, this makes us nerds and workaholics.

Alternatively, we may try to do something naughty and get the negative attention from our parents. Negative attention is still attention. It means that our parents care about us.



Since we don't feel love inside ourselves, we always aim to find this love elsewhere. The area of spirituality wasn't an exception for me, and I used both methods.

On the one hand, I was always naughtier than the rest of the students. I acted like a black sheep in the flock. And on the other hand, I wanted to be the best performing student; I wanted to show my teacher how fast I advance and get his approval. Obviously, I chose a short thorny way and kept on falling and falling and falling.

Until I realized this: it's not me who always wants the challenge, it's my tricky mind. It's the mind who tells me that I will feel loved if I'm the best student. It's the mind who tells me that I need to rush in my development. And it's the mind that tells me that complex tasks are more beneficial.

In a way, the mind doesn't want us to reach self-realization, for it will no longer dominate our living. Self-realization means there is no constant dialogue in our heads, so the mind doesn't get its food, i.e., thoughts. The mind knows that the shortest way might be the longest one, for we'll keep on falling down. It

knows that when we take up more difficult tasks, when we have to overcome the obstacles, we get a sense of discomfort.

And the mind is here to help us process our complaints. It doesn't want us to go for things we mostly enjoy, because then we might get too engaged in the process and stop thinking.

When it comes to spiritual development, finding a shortcut is a trick on its own. After the initial calling towards self-discovery, there's normally quite a long way to self-realization. And the timing doesn't depend upon us. We simply entertain ourselves with whatever practices we use until the time comes.

These practices can make us more balanced, calm and content, or they can make us more miserable, proud and judgmental. But they don't lead us to self-realisation.

So, doing yoga or meditation for the sake of getting enlightened is a false idea. It's much better to let yourself enjoy what you naturally love to do than constantly punish yourself with hard tasks expecting the return to pay off.

The question of which path to choose pops up many times in our life. It's not that we favour only the rosy or only the thorny ways. The choice depends both on our inner potential, on our preferences and on the circumstances we find ourselves in.

For example, at one point I had to go through an interview in French. I had only one month to go from the level of 'can barely make a sentence' to the level of 'can speak about work, education and life prospects.' So, of course, I had to choose the short and thorny path. I went to Paris, took 40 hours of French classes a week, lived in a French family and had to hang out with locals only. This was very challenging, but I had a deadline as an extra kick.

In some areas of life, we actually need a thorny way to stay focused, but when it comes to yoga or other spiritual practices, I wouldn't recommend rushing, trying too hard and doing things beyond your current level. Let your progress come from within, don't force it.

## **GROUP CLASSES vs. PERSONAL PRACTICE**

If you have attended at least 5 or 6 yoga group classes, most likely, you've heard from your teachers that having a self-practice is essential. But beginners tend to ignore this advice. They prefer going to more classes rather than actually rolling out their mat and doing some exercise at home.

And it's understandable. Some of us may feel not confident enough to do yoga independently, and, indeed, we don't want to hurt ourselves. Some students might strive for perfection and believe that experienced teachers could help them perform the asanas correctly. Some people might be merely lazy and need to be pushed.

### **ALL the WAY IN**

The thing is that many students don't understand that group classes can't serve as the core of yoga practice. All energy practices, be it yoga, meditation, Chi Gong, Five Tibetan

Pearls or whatever else you may choose, help you increase your energy level.

So, imagine you go to daily drop-in classes for a month or two, your body gets accustomed to a certain amount of energy, and then the yoga school you attend closes for reconstruction or your teacher leaves, or you go traveling. You stop practicing, and very soon, your energy level drops.

In a few weeks you're likely to start feeling down. Emotions overwhelm you even more than before; you feel tired, dissatisfied, you can't properly relax and restore. After a while, you realize that you need to start practicing once again and begin to look for new yoga classes to get back on track.

Yoga is such a practice you can't stop without having to pay the exit fees. So, it might seem that we need to decide right from the start whether we are serious about it, whether we're able to exercise on a long-term basis. And if not, we'd rather not invest our time in it.

Yet, no one comes into yoga without an inner calling. I'm not talking about a one-off class: your friend invited you, you came and never

wanted to go again. But if you go for classes regularly, nobody forces you; you personally have the interest to go deeper, there's no way out for you.

You may explore and choose other energy practices that better blend with your nature. But you won't get rid of dissatisfaction by dropping yoga and forgetting about the experience it gives you.

Every time we stop practicing we have to overcome our laziness and inner resistance to resume the practice. We can use the energy of the group to give us extra support especially when we just start and need a company of like-minded people. But we should make sure that our practice is consistent and uninterrupted.

That's why we need a self-practice. This way, we stay independent and untouched by ever-changing life circumstances. Our practice shouldn't be extensive; it shouldn't be demanding. It should be very simple and comfortable. It should be relatively short and definitely enjoyable. Then it will be easy to stick to it.

## **From INTELLECTUAL UNDERSTANDING to DIRECT EXPERIENCE**

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that going to classes is useless. When we initially listen to the instructions and try to copy the asanas, we get an intellectual understanding. And it's great if someone can explain things that we are new to.

Think of a dictionary. We check with it when we're not sure about the meaning of a word, or how it's pronounced, or we need to find synonyms to make our speech more eloquent.

The same way yoga group classes are highly beneficial when we treat them as a point of reference. They help us learn the technical aspects of asanas, we get corrected on asana alignment, we can pick up new ideas and bring them into our regular practice. Dictionaries don't eliminate the need for live conversations, and group classes shouldn't substitute self-practice.

Experienced teachers know what they're talking about, only because they took time to

really feel things in their body. And now it's our turn to make our own self-exploration.

Unfortunately, we aren't taught at school to seek for knowledge inside ourselves. We only learn how to get it from external sources. We type in our request in Google Search and get results within seconds. Having fast access to tons of information – that's what we are used to.

Finding answers within ourselves takes time and requires patience. But we cannot skip this step, for yoga is not about intellectual knowledge. It's about direct experience. Not just reading somewhere that Shoulderstand helps you release the tension in the legs, but really feeling whether this pose is right for you.

There are multiple poses that give similar health benefits. There's no practical need to work on all the 84 classical asanas. Doing too many things, we're likely to touch a bit on everything and not go deep enough on anything. The point of yoga is not to know how to do all the poses intellectually. The goal is to align with our nature.



Once you come across an asana that gives you pleasure, try to bring it into your self-practice. Pick 5 to 10 asanas that serve your needs and do them regularly. This way you'll be able to truly experience the poses.

The execution becomes automatic. You don't have to think about instructions. When you don't use your mind actively to get in a pose, the mind becomes more still. Less thoughts arise to disturb your bodily experience. Now you can move to a more subtle level in your practice where you observe the energy flows within your body and maximize the benefits you get out of every asana you perform.

## **INDIGESTION of INFORMATION**

Unfortunately, enthusiastic beginners become greedy for knowledge. They go to six group classes every week and stuff themselves with information.

If we eat too much, the food won't be properly digested. If we don't stop here and take even more food, at some point, we might feel that we want to throw up. It goes the same way with information. If we take it in small

portions, we can receive the full benefit. But if we try to consume large amounts in a short time, we're likely to get overwhelmed, burnt out, and might even stop practicing.

We like to have a choice, get a touch on various styles of yoga, see different teachers, understand multiple asanas. It's natural and it certainly helps us to find things that resonate with our soul. But it's crucial to make sure that you take the time to digest the information.

It's a false idea that the more classes you attend the more things you learn. It makes much more sense to attend 1 or 2 group classes a week rather than 6 classes a week.

This way, you can focus on asanas and tricks you liked or want to understand better. You can bring a couple of new things into your daily practice and convert the intellectual understanding you gained from the teachers into your own direct experience. You might even like to record the class, listen to the instructions a few times at home, and work on better asana alignment.

If you take an intensive yoga course, make sure that after it finishes, you spend some

time working on things you've learnt there. Don't rush for more classes and new information. Don't overload yourself. Stuffing ourselves even with truly beneficial things pushes us out of balance, and that's not what yoga is about.

If you get new information every day you stress your brain with the high volumes of knowledge. You can't memorise the things you see. During the class the teacher shows certain yoga tricks that seem very cool, but when you come home you just can't remember them. You roll out your mat to do some exercise and you get confused on which asanas to perform. It takes time to get emotionally connected to things we learn.

Consuming too many things and trying to speed up the progress, we simply remain on the level of intellectual knowledge. And we want to go further than that.

## **SCARED of INJURIES**

Getting injured is a constant risk we face in life. We might get hurt not only on the mat but on the street, when chopping a potato at home

or taking the stairs at the entrance of a restaurant.

Yet, when it comes to yoga, many students believe that an experienced teacher can save them from injuries. As rational as it may sound, relying even on a very knowledgeable teacher can't guarantee that nothing happens to us during the class. Instead, most of the injuries I've heard of occurred during group classes and not when people were practicing at home.

It happens for various reasons. Sometimes the teacher can really lack the experience and push you to do things beyond your level. At times even a good teacher can overestimate your ability to perform an asana. The teacher may judge based on your physical conditions, observe the way you do other asanas and think that our arms are strong enough to go for a Headstand. But maybe today you aren't at your best psychologically to go for something new.

Also, during a group practice, it's not possible to see what all students are doing, so there's an assumption that the practitioners don't go crazy and tackle things that are too complex for their current level. But, in fact, seeing

others doing a beautiful asana, we can lose our mind for a moment and rush into copying the pose. The teacher can't be responsible for our own stupidity.

It certainly takes some courage to switch from group lessons to personal practice. But doing yoga at home, we tend to be more mindful and risk-averse. Hence, our self-practice leads to much fewer injuries on the way.

Moreover, it teaches us to feel our body and fix it ourselves. As I've said, I had an injury in my sacrum area. And after I managed to restore myself, I stopped being scared of injuries. I realized that everything is fixable.

I keep my practice simple, but things happen. So, if one day I overstretch or pinch a nerve, I don't panic. I accept the responsibility to work on the problem and resolve it over the next few days.

Often, I start with the adjoining areas. I warm them up; I stretch them in order to improve blood circulation in those areas and then I go to the place that actually gives the pain. I took this principle from Swedish massage course I attended. They would always rub the least

strained side of the body first, and then, when the whole body is relaxed and the overall blood circulation has improved, they would work on the more tensed side of the body. Following the same logic, I usually manage to get rid of the discomfort within a day or two.

Fixing yourself is a part of the process and a great tool to learn about your body. Everything is figureoutable.

# 13 STEPS TO MINDFUL & CONSISTENT PRACTICE

## 1. AIM for SIMPLICITY

Many beginners don't have a personal practice because they think they need more knowledge of asana alignment and don't want to make mistakes. But, in fact, there're plenty of simple asanas and exercises that we can do right from the start.

Think of Cat-Cow pose, rolling our shoulders back and forward, Butterfly pose, or lying down next to the wall and leaning our legs against the wall (Legs-Up-the-Wall pose). These things don't need much understanding



*Pic. 9 Cat-Cow pose*

or alignment, but they're certainly beneficial for our health.

When you develop your self-practice keep an eye on things that come easy. Choose 5 to 7 asanas you feel comfortable to do right now. As you attend more group classes, you can always pick up more asanas and modify your practice.



*Pic. 10 Butterfly pose*

The mind is likely to tell you that simple asanas are just for beginners and they can't bring you the same benefits that complex asanas can. Yet, this isn't true.

It's the nature of the cunning mind always to look for complexity and strive for more. More things, more experiences. We can't appreciate simple things until we lose them. It could be our health, spending time with relatives or in



nature, or just free time when we don't know what to do with it. We get bored and want more adventures.

Why is it like that? Because the mind is hungry. It gets fuelled with thoughts, and it pushes us into activities that generate thoughts. The more complex things we work on, the more complex thoughts we process, the more powerful the mind gets, the more it can control our living.

The mind always tries to take us out of simplicity. The simpler our life gets, the more likely it is for the thought process to stop. And then the mind loses its dominant position.

It takes time to let your mind get mature and appreciate simplicity. Keeping your yoga practice easy, you move a step forward. But aiming for complex asanas and changing your practice every single day, you merely entertain our mind, supply it with thoughts, and make it stronger.

*Pic. 11 Legs-Up-the-Wall pose*



I'm not saying that there shouldn't be a bit of a challenge in our practice. Of course, we want to grow and master certain asanas. But if every asana we perform is a challenge, the whole practice becomes unpleasant. We face enormous resistance to step on the mat, and in the long run, we're likely to stop doing any yoga at all.

Remember: it's not the physical complexity of yoga asanas that provides real benefits, but a high level of concentration. If we're truly focused, even the simplest asanas can lead to a transcendental experience.

If a Scorpio pose is quite easy for you, it can bring you there. But if you need to think of too many things to get into the pose, your mind remains active. You stay at the level of a normal physical exercise. This is not yoga.

## **2. SMALL STEPS**

Earlier, we've said that many beginners tend to rely on group classes and avoid the personal practice. Yet, some students are different.

They go to the other extreme and have a super extensive self-practice. They come home and spend two or three hours on the mat.

The rational mind, of course, thinks, 'the longer, the better.' But there're two main reasons why I suggest going for a shorter practice.

One is that if you start with a very long workout, it'll be hard to maintain it. The circumstances will change; you will need to fulfil your daily duties, go to work, take care of your family, or even go and see your friends.

You'll be eventually forced to shorten your time on the mat. Quite soon, you may realize that a 1,5-hour practice is not realistic, and it makes much more sense to do asanas for 30 minutes.

Lowering your standards feels terrible. You're likely to feel guilty dozens of times, blame yourself for breaking your own promises, feel like a loser who lacks willpower. So, act wisely.

Take modest steps, set smaller goals, and achieve them. That's how you get more disciplined, train your willpower, build

confidence, and finally feel good about yourself.

The other reason why a long practice isn't recommended is that we lack concentration power. We're so distracted by technology, social media, by choices and opportunities that we just can't keep concentration for long hours like the yogis of ancient times.

The recent study shows that an average person can stay focused for about 18 minutes. And we want to exercise for 1,5 hours? Is it really worth it? Will we be able to concentrate on your bodily sensations? Or, are we going to perform the asanas mechanically while our mind wanders and thinks about all sorts of things but not the inner energy flows?

I believe that 15 minutes on the mat entirely focused works much better than 2 hours of practice in the absence of concentration.

Give yourself time to train your concentration skills. It won't be fast, but don't rush, don't jump over your head. Your practice time may gradually increase. But let it happen slowly and make sure that the time to spend on the mat is

not longer than the time you're able to stay focused.

For some people, a more widespread practice could be a way of hiding from life and its challenges. I've seen many students, especially in India, who deepen into their practice out of fear of rejection and failure. They justify their isolation from the rest of the world by their high pursuits. But, in fact, they don't see a way to integrate into the wider society and are reluctant to take responsibility for their own life.

Life is not given to us to spend it entirely on spiritual practices. We don't live to practice. It's the opposite: we practice to live in a more balanced, calm, and happy way.

### **3. GIVE YOUR BODY WHAT IT NEEDS FIRST**

When you come to your first class of yoga, you're already good at some asanas and not so strong at others. Think of your previous experiences: maybe your Mum took you to a ballet studio when you were a child, and your body's already quite flexible, or perhaps you

went to the gym for a couple of years, and your core muscles, your legs, and arms are well-trained.

On top of that, your body was initially designed uniquely. Your body constitution dictates what you're better at and what kind of practice you need.

According to the ancient system of Ayurveda, everything in this Universe is formed out of five basic elements: earth, water, fire, air, and ether. Each person gets a unique combination of these elements in his or her body at the time of birth.

This combination makes us look and act in a certain way. Some of us are more active, others are more passive, some of us are stronger, others are more flexible, some of us are tall and thin, and others are shorter and heavier.

The proportion of elements in our body doesn't remain constant. It alters all the time. It changes when we take food, for each meal is made of the same five elements. So, we add up fire element when we take spicy food, and we add some earth element when we eat wheat.

The mixture of these elements in our body is also altered when we move to a different place and experience different weather. It also changes through all emotions we feel and all possible activities we engage in during the day.

The closer is the current proportion of the basic elements to the ratio we received at birth, the healthier we are. For this reason, Ayurveda prescribes specific diets and yoga asanas to eliminate the imbalances and go back as much as possible to our original proportion.

Our dominant elements tend to gain more power over time, pushing us out of balance. For example, fiery people usually love spicy food. Consuming too much of it, they may get too much fire inside and start acting aggressively. Or, think of earth–watery people, they don't like to be physically active. Avoiding sports, they become even more stagnant.

From an intellectual point of view, it makes a perfect sense to offer a more calming and cooling practice to a fiery nature, a more stimulating exercise to an earthy–watery person, and more relaxing and quieting

practice to an airy person. And that's actually the stance Ayurveda takes.

But from personal experience, I realized that it works a bit differently.

**EXAMPLE 1:** Let me give you a personal example. I have a lot of fire and air in my body constitution. And, strictly speaking, I should build my practice around such asanas that make me less fiery and more stable.



*Pic. 12 Headstand*

But if I take this approach, am I going to enjoy my practice? Definitely not. My body loves being active. Passive yoga classes totally freak me out. So, when I step on the yoga mat, I lovingly treat my body and first give it what it needs.



I start with dynamic exercises and work on core muscles. Then I give myself some relaxation time performing Backbends and deep Twists that I naturally enjoy. Then I train my arms in Headstand, which is again one of my favorite asanas.

After this, I do some variations on Plow pose and Shoulderstand. This is already more in line with what Ayurveda recommends for my body type.



*Pic. 13 Deep Spinal Twist variation*

I've given my body what it loves, and my nervous system has cooled down. Now I can tackle more challenging asanas or poses that are less comfortable for my body type.

My hips are quite tight, so Hip Openers are, by far, not my favorite poses. Yet, nobody likes a painful cycle. Thus, improving blood circulation in the pelvic region is essential.

To make it easier, I do a passive Hip Opener: I use a brick, go into Legs-Up-the-Wall pose (Viparita Karani), and spread my legs wide. This pose is very safe and highly recommended to Pinocchios like me. The gravitation does all the work, while you are only lying down and relaxing.

Comparing to active Hip Openers, you're less likely to spread your legs wider than it feels comfortable. So, no micro-injuries along the way.

After this Relaxation asana, I take a challenge and perform Wheel pose. I work on it gradually, staying longer in the asana, going up and down, and increasing the angle between the



*Pic. 14 Wheel pose*

thighs and the belly.

Then some compensative Twists, some more Plow pose variations to release the lower back tension, and I go into Shavasana.



*Pic. 15 Lying Down Twists*

As you can see, I switch between heating and cooling poses between dynamic and passive things. This way, I never feel too tired or too bored during practice. It also blends with my

airy nature: working on one type of asanas feels too stable for me.

Finally, I open my eyes after Shavasana, stand up, and do some Balancing poses. These asanas don't come easy for my body type, but after a rounded workout and proper relaxation, they become manageable.

**EXAMPLE 2:** Another example comes from a friend of mine who complains that she can't make herself do even a few rounds of Surya Namaskar in the morning.

Her body type is flexible. Unlike me, she's very good at Hip Openers and Forward Bends. Her muscles are weaker, and she's naturally a more passive person.

Ayurveda would prescribe her lots of Standing asanas to build her stamina. So, it's logical that Surya Namaskar should be a perfect practice for her. Yet, the idea of performing it doesn't turn her on.

Why? Because her body loves passive things. She enjoys a more relaxed practice and is a bit lazy to do really active physical exercises.



*Pic. 16 Paschimottasana (Seated Forward Bend)*

For her type, it's good to start with Restorative poses, do some proper stretching or Shavasana. When the body gets what it loves, when the nervous system gets some rest, then she can go for things outside her comfort zone and perform some asanas that require muscular work.



*Pic. 17 Restorative poses (1)*

In fact, these asanas won't look so scary any longer. A calm mind doesn't panic on every challenge it encounters. When you're not in stress, your body is more open and performs

better even on those things that seemed difficult once you just stepped on the mat.

**EXAMPLE 3:** Another friend of mine does 15 minutes of Surya Namaskar every morning for the past 20+ years. This is all yoga exercise he does, and it serves him well.

What is the difference? This man is much more down-to-earth. You've certainly met such people. The doctor tells them to take pills 3 times a day for the next 4 months and do 40 minutes of specific exercises, and they just do it. They don't struggle to take this advice. They're practical enough to follow what serves them best.

So, this friend of mine is a freediver. He is about 60 years old now, and he continues taking part in championships and winning medals.

He knows that he needs some yoga to stay in shape and do what he loves most, i.e., diving. He understands that Surya Namaskar gives a rounded workout, and he sticks to it. He's very grounded, and this practice is in line with his nature.

## 4. YOGA ≠ PUNISHMENT

Upon completion of my TTC, I was lacking an understanding of many asanas and principles of alignment. To find the missing pieces of the puzzle I started taking drop-in classes from various teachers. I got particularly excited about Iyengar yoga with its incredibly detailed instructions. I believed that such classes could help me understand the poses faster.

I have to say there is a big difference between Iyengar classes in India and Russia. Of course, Indian teachers provide extensive Iyengar-style explanations on the poses, but they also make sure that you perform various types of asanas during the class. This gives a rounded workout and a pleasant feeling of lightness all over the body after the practice.

Iyengar studios in Russia take a different approach. They split the training into four weeks and concentrate on one type of asanas each week: Standing poses, Forward Bends, Backbends, and Relaxation poses.

I really loved the week of Backbends. This type of asanas was reasonably easy for me, and I could enjoy the practice. As to the Forward

Bends' week, it was like a nightmare for me, and I hated all the seven days of training.



*Pic. 18 Locust pose*

I also disliked the week of Relaxation asanas. Each class was loaded with Hip Openers, which is not my best area. The overall dynamics of the class was too passive for me; it was making me really sleepy after the practice.

So, basically, I was enjoying yoga only one week a month and punishing myself doing



asanas for the sake of knowledge for the rest of the time. It's not surprising that after a while, I lost motivation, gave up, and stopped practicing at all.



*Pic. 19 Wide-Legged Forward Bend*

Yes, for a while, I did a lot of yoga asanas, but I hated my practice. So, instead of finding balance in life, I felt dissatisfied, impatient, and fiery. I was getting more and more out of tune with my inner nature.

It's hard to last long doing things you don't naturally enjoy. A sense of internal resistance

arises, grows, and eventually takes you away from the mat.

So, when you attend yoga classes or do yoga at home, pay attention to things that give you pleasure. Pick them up, do them regularly, and you'll see that pleasure is the greatest supporter you can have in your practice. It motivates you better than any argument your rational mind could think of.

You may intellectually know, 'This asana could really help me cure my lower back pain.' But if your overall practice isn't enjoyable, you can always find reasons to postpone yoga until tomorrow, which never comes.

When you fall in love with something, say, you go on holiday, and for the first time in your life you swim in the sea and totally love it. Do you have to force yourself to go and swim the next day? Certainly not. You just follow the calling of your heart and swim every single day you're next to the sea.

In the same way, if you choose the path of pleasure in yoga, you're more likely to stick to your practice and do yoga regularly. You won't need to convince yourself to step on the mat:

the discipline and consistency will come from within.

Moreover, when you respect your bodily needs, the body starts to open up and share its secrets with you. This kind of knowledge you won't get from any teacher, no matter how experienced he or she is.

It's your inner wisdom. The more you experiment and actively listen to your body, the better you feel what's right for you and what isn't. Gradually you understand how you could adjust the asanas to work on muscular tension in a particular area and what other poses you need to add to your practice.

Doing the things that your body loves, you get more tuned with it. Punishing yourself with rationally correct choices, you just get further unbalanced.

Once you feel your body, your practice becomes more subtle. It's no longer about making a pose look good or going for a more challenging asana. Yoga becomes a truly meditative practice. You observe the flows of energy inside your body while standing, sitting, or lying down in a specific position.

Yoga is not about going to hundreds of yoga classes or doing asanas just for the sake of getting knowledge. Yoga is a genuine connection to ourselves.

## **5. FOCUS on STRENGTHS**

Designing the core of the personal practice, focus on your strengths. Don't punish yourself working predominantly on challenging areas, no matter how beneficial it may seem from a rational point of view.

Think of your ordinary life. What is likely to give you more success: building on your strengths or rectifying your weaknesses?

We usually spend more time building on our strengths. And we deal with our weaknesses once that bring us discomfort. When we encounter an obstacle that doesn't let us progress, we put some effort into overcoming it.

For example, you might be very creative, but lack some video editing skills to bring your creativity to the world. So, you go and spend some time learning basic video editing. You

don't make video editing your profession if it's too technical for you.

The same way, if you realize that tight hips cause pain during your cycle, you add some Hip Openers to your practice, but you don't make them the core of your workout.

Or, if your sink is backed up, you clean it or call the plumber, but you don't become a plumber yourself.

Likewise, if one day you feel a muscular tension somewhere in your body, you find ways to stretch, you work on it for a day or for a few days. You make sure you've pushed the blockage out, or you go for a massage session. You don't start building your practice around this area unless it's a chronic issue. You focus on your strengths and deal with the obstacles as they arise.

Select some 5 to 7 asanas as a core. They'll give you a feeling of stability. They'll keep you grounded, support you, and center you.

When we feel the center, we can go sideways. We can do all the daily duties we need to do and know that there's something we can come back to, something that is reliable and gives

us strength to overcome the stressful situations.

## **6. ADD 'NON-CORE' ASANAS**

After you've figured out asanas you're good at, you genuinely enjoy doing, and set them as the core of your practice, you may add more things on top. You may deliberately include even some 'uncomfortable' asanas into your workout for a few reasons.

**a) CHALLENGE.** We naturally enjoy the feeling of progress.

Imagine you need to solve a math test. Maths has never been one of your strongest areas, and it's been 10+ years since you finished school. You don't feel particularly comfortable to perform the task, and you aren't sure you're going to make it.

But you take time, work hard and eventually you solve it. You check the result with the answer sheet, and it's correct.

What are you feeling? Great joy. You're proud of yourself that you've managed to solve it. It builds on your self-confidence. If you need to take the same math test once again, you don't get stressed about it. The more you exercise, the easier it gets.

It works the same way with yoga asanas. Specific asanas might be initially outside your comfort zone, but you set an intention and work on them. You practice and practice and practice. Slowly you improve. And at some point, you notice that it has become relatively easy to perform them.

Your achievement makes you happy. It also prepares you for challenging situations in ordinary life.

Once they come up, you're likely to have more faith that you can cope with them.

And, of course, the asana you've mastered enriches your practice. Now it takes less effort to get into the asana; you don't need to think of instructions, your body doesn't resist the pose. So, you go to a more subtle level, observe the bodily sensations, and the energy flows, maximizing the benefits of the exercise.

**b) PERSONALITY.** Bringing in more asanas of a certain type can help you shape your personal qualities.

**EXAMPLE 1:** If you **lack willpower** and finishing things sounds like an issue for you, you may want to include more asanas that work on core muscles.

Yogic texts often talk about two energies present in our body: masculine energy and feminine energy. The first one is associated with the Sun, the second one – with the Moon.

It's believed that our inner Sun dwells in the Solar plexus, while our inner Moon abides within our skull on the level of mid-eyebrows. That's why a lot of yogic practices are built around these two centers.

So, the Sun gives us the energy of a masculine nature. What does it mean? It means that it's very active. Males are



*Pic. 20 Chair pose*



warriors. They set goals and don't stop until they achieve them.

When we need this type of energy, when we need to be decisive and complete things, we may use exercises that heat up our inner Sun.



*Pic. 21 Seated Twists*

This could be Twists, Plank pose, Dolphin pose, Chaturanga Dandasana, Chair pose, Boat pose, and all the exercises on abdominals you know from your gym or fitness studio.



*Pic. 24 Chaturanga Dandasana*



*Pic. 23 Dolphin pose*



*Pic. 22 Plank pose*



*Pic. 25 Boat pose*

You can add up some Nauli, Bhastrika, or Kapalabhati if you like. Whatever trains your belly area works here.



*Pic. 26 Nauli kriya*



*Pic. 27 Bhastrika/ Kapalabhati*

EXAMPLE 2: If you often feel overwhelmed and want to **get more balanced** in life, you may also like to alter your practice.

This time you'll work on your third-eye region and your inner Moon. While the Sun is like fire, it heats us up; the Moon is like water, it cools us down and makes us calmer.

To work on the third-eye center, we may add up Balancing poses (like Tree pose, Dancer pose, Sri Krishna's pose).



*Pic. 28 Dancer pose*

We can use a small concentration exercise: close our eyes and concentrate on the point between eyebrows. We need to stay entirely focused for 1–3 minutes at a time, then relax.

The mind will try to wander around. We need to keep on catching it and bringing the attention back to the mid eyebrow center. We can also internally chant Om mantra at each exhalation to deepen the practice.



*Pic. 29 Sri Krishna*

This exercise is short but very powerful. So, it's recommended to work on it slowly, starting with one minute twice a day.

To feel more balanced, we could also do some meditation. We can choose any technique we like and try it for a few days to see if it fits with our nature.

Never been to a meditation class and have no idea where to start? Go to Youtube and pick a

Guided Meditation or Yoga Nidra. Make sure you don't hate the voice of the speaker, and the background music doesn't irritate you. Then just sit down or lie down, listen, and relax: easy to follow and no preliminary knowledge required.

Another option is breathing exercises. Pranayama is a powerful practice, so start from the basics and never rush for complicated things. Your nervous system might be not ready for them, and you don't want to let pranayama ruin your health.

You could start with a simple version of Alternate Breathing. Do the equal number of counts when you inhale and exhale and don't hold your breath.

Use Nasarga Mudra to stimulate the region between eyebrows: place the tips of the index and middle finger on this spot; thumb, ring, and small finger are relaxed and used to close the nostrils (ring and little finger are joined together).



*Pic. 30 Nasarga mudra*

Females are recommended to use their left hand and start the cycle inhaling from the left nostril. Males should use their right hand and start the cycle inhaling from the right.

Apart from working on your balance, these exercises help you get access to your own inner wisdom. Tantric texts state that our inner Moon contains the nectar of wisdom and immortality called 'Soma.' Stimulating the mid-eyebrow center improves our intuitive skills.



*Pic. 31 Crow pose*

EXAMPLE 3: You are too radical, too rigid, too critical, and you want to **add** some **flexibility** in the way you deal with people and life situations. This time you may add up some Stretching asanas, some Hip Openers to work

on your flexibility. Rigidity many times comes from tight hips.

**c) DAILY NEEDS:** Our daily life is a constant stream of events and challenges. Sometimes we need to alter our practice to deal with a current life situation.

For instance, you might be working on a project and **feel stuck**. Try to spend more time on Inverted poses. This way, you can improve the blood circulation in the head region, shift your perspective, see things from a different angle and, perhaps, get some new ideas.

Or, you might **feel** totally **exhausted** and need to restore your energy balance. Working on the belly area helps you generate this energy. Doing a few Twists or core muscle exercises could serve the purpose well.

Or, you are on vacation in a tropical country, and your body **can't cope with the heat**. You are super lazy to go anywhere, and all you want to do is lie down in bed and sleep.

You may bring in some cooling asanas (like Shoulderstand, more Seated and Lying down poses) and exclude some of the heating asanas you usually perform at home (like



Headstand, Handstand, core muscle exercises). This will help you to cool down and become functional once again.

**d) EMOTIONS:** Coping with our feelings is another big thing. Many times we feel overwhelmed, but we don't actively work on pushing the emotions out. We can forget about them, but our body doesn't.

It stores the unreleased emotions; it accumulates them. Unreleased emotions create blockages in our energy channels, and can even cause a decrease.

Each emotion is stored in a specific organ or body part. Like, sadness accumulates in the lungs, anger in the liver, stress in the shoulders. To deal with an emotion, we can increase the blood circulation in the related body part, bring more energy to this area and push the blockage out.

Say, somebody was rude to you at work. You didn't reply, but inside, you still feel **angry**. As already mentioned, anger accumulates in the liver and disturbs its normal functioning. To release your irritation, you may add some

Twists and core muscle exercises to your daily practice.

If conflicts at work make you not angry, but rather **upset**, you may prefer to do Backbends and some breathing exercises to open your lungs.

Releasing emotions is one of the hot yoga topics on the internet, so finding suggestions on what you could do in your particular case won't be an issue. You can always try what others suggest and see if it works for you.

**e) HEALTH ISSUES:** Depending on whether the issue is acute or chronic, you may include additional asanas in your practice for shorter or longer periods.

**EXAMPLE 1:** Your **legs ache** after a long walk, or your legs got **swollen** after a flight. You can put them up and rest with the wall for a while to allow lymphatic fluids to drain from the legs.

You can do it as a one-off exercise or repeat the exercise daily if you like. It depends on

how much the legs hurt, how often the problem arises, and how much time you're ready to spend on yoga per day.

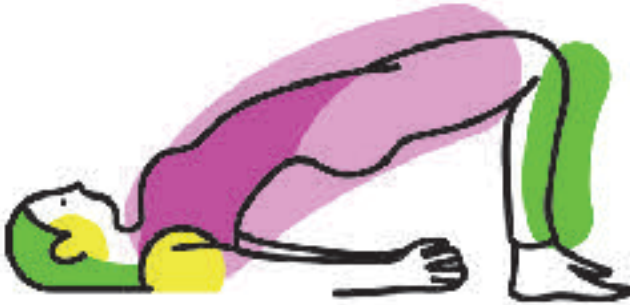
EXAMPLE 2: If you have **seasonal allergies**, you may alter your practice for a few months.



*Pic. 32 Fish pose*

You can add Plow pose to open the muscles at the base of the skull and the back of the neck where the pressure tends to accumulate, Shoulderstand to open the nasal passage, Fish

Pose, Bridge and Wheel pose to open the lungs.



*Pic. 33 Bridge pose*

When the flowering season finishes, you may go back to your standard practice.

**EXAMPLE 3:** Many females complain about **pain during** their **cycle**. It's a good idea to get ready for it in advance. Doing Hip Openers regularly will improve blood circulation in the pelvic region, and doing inversions will improve gland function, hormone secretion, and circulation.

Hip Opening asanas and Forward Folding with the use of props (blankets, bolsters, ropes) are also highly recommended during the cycle.

Whether Inverted poses should be practiced during the period isn't so straightforward. I cover it in more detail in the 'No Rigid Rules' section. But bringing in more Inversions before the actual cycle starts is definitely beneficial.

**EXAMPLE 4:** The ultrasound showed **descending kidneys**. The doctor recommended me to put on weight. Clearly, the option of having a few extra pounds around my waist didn't sound appealing.

Instead, I decided to stay longer in Inversion poses. It might take me a few years to bring the kidneys in their upright position. Luckily, I enjoy these poses, and I'm happy to have them in my daily practice.

Remember: no rush, no crush. You can't go for 20 minutes of Inversions right away. It takes time.

In the beginning, it's better to stay in a pose for 1 or 2 minutes and let your body get

accustomed to being upside down. You don't want to hurt yourself rushing for therapeutic effects of a 20-minute Shoulderstand. Use yoga to cultivate patience.

To maximize the healing impact of the poses you perform, it's a good idea to use props: extra blankets, bricks, walls, etc. Feeling comfortable is important. The body relaxes, the energy flows smoothly, and you can stay longer in the poses.

For example, I always use the wall to do Headstand. Can I get in the pose without the wall? Yes, I can. But I choose not to unless there isn't a wall around.

I like the feeling of safely the wall gives me. I can lean on it from time to time, do variations on the asana, feel more comfortable to adjust the pose, stay upside down for more extended periods.

The same idea applies to the first example with seasonal allergies. Use a brick under your pelvis in Bridge pose. The pose will become super easy to perform, and you'll be able to stay in it for a longer time. To save your neck

from overstretching, use 3 or 4 folded blankets in Shoulderstand and in Plow pose.

While most yoga schools don't have too many quilts in class, it's worth having your own props at home for personal practice.



Making a few changes here and there in your yoga practice is vital to meet your current needs. But don't get too excited about modifications. Your workout should have a core that remains unchanged.

You see 20 different asanas on a yoga class, and then you try to include all the 20 asanas in your personal practice. Don't let your mind trick you when it says that you need a great variety of asanas. You'll perform most of them on a surface level, and you'll hardly go deep on any of them. It's wiser to choose quality to quantity.

Treat yoga classes as general education. They are made for all types of students and have to include numerous asanas. At school, you learn all sorts of subjects, and then you realize what

exactly you like and what you are naturally good at, and you chose that for your career.

The same way during a group class, you're given all sorts of tools. Then you identify what your body mostly needs and make it a core of your practice. The rest of the tools you've learned you use whenever you want to address a specific issue in life or to bring in some challenges to your daily practice.

## **7. CONSISTENCY on TIMING**

Want to be consistent in your practice? Choose the timing and stick to it. Think of your eating habits. If you manage to take food at the same time, your body will know when it's food time, and it'll start generating digestive fluids. So, the food is likely to be better digested.

It works the same way with yoga. If you stick to the same timing with your practice, say, you do yoga at 10 a.m., around that time, you'll feel an inner calling as if something is pulling you to the mat. You'll feel subtle, meditative energy inside. And it will be easier to practice and stay consistent.



When I talk about the timing of your practice, it doesn't have to be in the morning. The schedule is a personal thing and depends both on your preferences and external circumstances you may find yourself in.

The benefit of morning practice is that you can include all sorts of things in it. You need to feel awake and have the strength to do things throughout the day, so it's a good idea to focus on energizing asanas. It can be Twists, Backbends, Standing asanas, asanas that work on core muscles and heating Inversions like Handstand and Headstand. These are mainly the things my body likes, so I usually go for morning practice.

Now, morning practice can mean very early in the morning, or it can be a bit later. You might be familiar with the concept of Brahmamuhurtha (or 'The Creator's hour'). It's the time that begins 1 hour and 36 minutes before the sunrise. It's considered the best time to do yoga and meditative practices, for the mind is still, and the practitioner is likely to enter into deeper meditative states.

I have to say that I enjoy waking up early, but doing yoga first thing in the morning doesn't

work for me. I have fast digestion, and I'm just super hungry when I wake up. So what I do is I take a shower, eat something, I clean the apartment allowing the food to digest. Then I step on my yoga mat.

My yoga practice is reasonably active, but I like to switch between intensive and relaxation poses not to get too sweaty. Taking a shower right after the training isn't recommended. It stops the release of toxins out of the body and washes out the positive energy you generated while on the mat, instead of letting it soak in.

If morning seems too early for you and you prefer to practice after work, generally speaking, your practice should be less intensive. To avoid sleeping problems, you may go for more cooling and calming asanas. These could be Seated poses, milder Twists, more Forward Folding asanas rather than Backbends, more cooling Inversions such as Shoulderstand, and Viparita Karani (or Legs-Up-the-Wall pose).

At times I realize that I'm totally drained, and I still need to do things later at night. In this case, I go for a small practice in the evening. Since I'm tired, I start with Lying or Seated

poses, but I also include energizing asanas like Dolphin, Plank, or Headstand to give me some strength.

There're no rigid rules in yoga as long as it feels good and serves the purpose. Since I was addicted to Coca-cola for many years, neither caffeine nor energizing poses disturb my sleep. But if you're more sensitive and tend to suffer from insomnia, you'd better choose a milder evening practice.

Practicing yoga at night is also extremely pleasing. If you happen to wake up in the middle of the night and can't fall asleep, it's a good idea to do some yoga.

Of course, night practice shouldn't be too intensive. It's mainly Lying down postures. The body is relaxed and it allows you to do deeper stretching. Since the mind is still, you're likely to feel very subtle energies throughout your practice. Cooling Inversions, like variations on Viparita Karani, Shoulderstand and Plow pose, work well to bring you back to sleep.

## 8. MIND the WEATHER

Another thing you should consider is the weather, the temperature, the availability of sunlight in your region at different times of the year. If you live far in the North, it might be hard to wake up as early in winter as it was in summer.

So, be flexible. Don't make a rule to do yoga at 5 in the morning to later realize that it's a torture. Adjust the timing and the content of your practice according to the conditions you find yourself in.

Don't go for intensive training without a proper warm-up in winter. The body is stiff when it's cold.



*Pic. 34 Handstand*

Pushing yourself too much in Forward Folding or Hip Opening may be harmful, especially if you're a Pinocchio like me.



*Pic. 35 Syrya Bheda*

You may want to heat up your body performing exercises that work on core muscles, heating Inversions (like Headstand or Handstand), Twists, Backbends, Standing

postures, and heating Pranayamas (like Bhastrika, Kapalabhati or Surya Bheda, i.e., breathing through your right nostril).

In the same manner, when it's hot outside, make sure you don't get overheated.



*Pic. 36 Shitali*

You can go for more Seated or Lying down poses instead of Standing asanas. The body's more flexible, so it's an excellent time to work on Forward Folding and Hip Opening postures.

Choose the Inversions that provide cooling and calming effects like Shoulderstand and Viparita Karani (Legs-Up-the-Wall Pose).

You can also bring in some cooling Pranayamas. For example, Shitali pranayama, when you roll your tongue in a "U" shape, inhale through your mouth and exhale through your nose. Or, Shitkari Pranayama, when you

keep your tongue flat, your teeth slightly separated, inhale through your mouth and exhale through your nose) or Chandra Bheda, i.e., breathing through your left nostril.



*Pic. 37 Shitkari*

## **9. NEED a BREAK**

When I studied yoga in India, most schools had drop-in classes from Monday to Saturday, and Sunday was a day off. Some students used Sundays for self-practice, the others just rested, Sunday off was their reward for intensive yoga practice during the week.

First of all, I believe that making group classes the core of the practice isn't really wise. You become overdependent on the teacher and on the outer circumstances. If the class gets canceled or if you happen to travel, you're left without practice.

Yoga is a tool to keep your energy level high, so if you decided to go for it, you'd rather continue. Otherwise, you may feel unbalanced, ungrounded, and upset. It's much better to have a regular self-practice and use group classes as an extra bonus to your core practice.

The other thing is that **Sunday** isn't the best time for rest. According to Vedic Astrology, Sunday is the day ruled by the planet Sun which generously supplies us with active masculine energy.

It's a perfect day to start new things. Logically speaking, our working week should start on Sunday and not on Monday. Since we're full of energy, our bodies want to exercise.

It's a good idea to do a few rounds of Sun Salutation to connect with the energy of the Sun. We may also like to work on core muscles, for it's the belly area where our inner Sun abides.

If you want to have a rest from yoga, you'd better choose **Saturday**. In Israel, religious people don't even answer the phone on Saturdays. And it's not without a reason.



Saturday is ruled by Saturn. This day we have a lower level of energy than the rest of the week, and we should use this energy wisely. A mild practice is, of course, acceptable, but pushing ourselves too hard, we simply drain our energy.

In fact, all the days of the week are ruled by different planets. Each planet brings its own energy. So, if you want to be creative in your practice, you can make some adjustments to your core practice following the energies prevailing on a given day.

For example, **Monday** is the day of the Moon. Moon is associated with the water element and with feminine qualities. Mondays could be used for Flexibility asanas, Hip Openers, Forward Folding. We could bring in more Seated poses and, perhaps, finish with a seated meditation concentrating on the point between the eyebrows, i.e., the place where our inner Moon abides.

**Tuesday** is the day ruled by Mars, the God of wars. To calm down, reduce aggression, and eliminate the conflicts with those around, active practice is recommended. Standing asanas, Warrior poses, and Sun Salutations

work great on Tuesdays. If your knees are in good condition, you could also jump on transitions from one asana to another.



*Pic. 38 Warrior poses*

**Wednesday** is governed by Mercury, the planet which gives us intellectual abilities and communication skills. In our body, Mercury

works through the throat chakra and allows us to express ourselves.



*Pic. 39 Ear Pressure pose*

Wednesday's practice could incorporate such poses as Cat-Cow, Lion, Camel pose, supported Shoulderstand or



*Pic. 40 Lion pose*

or Ear Pressure pose), Fish, Cobra pose are also good. Make sure you do some warm-up exercises to stretch your neck before going for deeper asanas.

supported Viparita Karani (Legs-Up-the-Wall pose) with blankets under the shoulders and back. This way, we bring the head below the rest of the body and gently extend the neck.

Plow pose and its variations (Karnapidasana



*Pic. 41 Cobra pose*

To open your throat further, you could finish your practice with some mantra chanting.

As to **Thursday**, it's the day ruled by Jupiter, the planet of wisdom, teachers, knowledge of the Absolute. In our body, Jupiter is responsible for hips.



*Pic. 42 Triangle pose*



*Pic. 43 Side Plank pose*

Your practice could concentrate on Hip Stabilising asanas, such as Pyramid Pose (Parsvottanasana), Side Plank pose (Vasisthasana), or Triangle pose.

If you have teachers who inspire you, you might want to incorporate some knowledge gained from them into your Thursday practice.



*Pic. 44 Pyramid pose*

Since index finger is associated with Jupiter, you could also use Gyan Mudra during meditation and while performing some asanas (I use it during various Balancing postures, for example, Tree pose and Dancer pose).



*Pic. 45 Gyan Mudra*

**Friday** is ruled by Venus. It's the day for love and romance; it's the day to take care of yourself, dress up, visit a SPA, or do some shopping. Our yoga practice should be fairly mild. We may want to bring in some deeper Backbends and focus on heart-opening.

On top of that, our practice could also be modified by the Moon cycle. For example, in India, you could hear the mantra chanting all night until the Sun rises during the full Moon. All kinds of spiritual practices are seen as highly beneficial during this night.

As to me, I don't watch the astrological calendar so much, and many times I don't even know which day of the week it is. Instead, I stick to the same practice and trust that if there's something I need to add on a particular day, my body will let me know.

If you're a naturally lazy person and tend to lack discipline, perhaps, it's a good idea not to take any days off. Personally, I'm like that. I understand that one day may turn into two, three, a week, and so on.

I take a smaller challenge: 5 to 7 poses, 15- or 20-minute practice a day. If I feel tired, I

shorten the time in some poses and go for a longer Shavasana. Otherwise, I do the same asanas and the same sequence every day.

## **10. NO EXPECTATIONS**

You might have heard of an idea of non-attachment to the results of your actions. This topic is widely discussed in various ancient and modern teachings.

The essence of it is that you take steps with a good intention in your heart, but whatever comes out of your actions is not in your hands. It's up to the Universe or whatever you may call it to decide what will happen. In fact, life is quite unpredictable and full of surprises. We may plan to be at the office in 30 minutes, but there's an accident on the road, and we get stuck for an hour and a half. Or, a woman may work days and nights to get a promotion, but suddenly she meets the love of her life, gives up on her career to live together with him in his home country.

No matter how hard we try to achieve something, our efforts can't guarantee the desired outcome. And since we don't have

control over future events, expecting a certain outcome is useless.

Now, when we focus on results, we create a mental projection. Thinking of the goal, coming back to this mental projection over and over, pulls a lot of energy away from the present moment, the energy we need to be efficient in what we're doing right now. So, getting attached to the results of our actions is not only useless but also energy-draining.

Most of the yoga practitioners are familiar with the concept of non-attachment and theoretically understand it. But, somehow, they don't apply it to their yoga practice.

Let's say, one day, you have an extremely profound, meditative, and blissful practice. And the next day it's even better. And the third day again it's fantastic. But what do you feel on day four if you don't get that deep? You get disappointed, upset. Why? Because of expectations, comparison, and attachment to the beautiful meditative states.

How blissful the practice gets depends on many factors. Perhaps, you've taken some heavy food; it's still digesting and bringing in



some gross energies. Perhaps, your mind is too active after a conversation that has left a strong impression on you. Or, maybe you haven't had a good sleep, your mind is dull, and you can't properly concentrate.

Also, I've heard from many practitioners that the practice tends to be more pleasant in the beginning. And then as they reach a certain level of depth, more suppressed emotions start coming out. And many people get upset comparing their current experiences to their previous ones.

The whole point of practice is just practice. To stay there where you are, and do that what you're doing. If it happens to be amazing, enjoy it. If it happens to be nothing special, it's Okay. Don't overreach on either.

It's not due to your efforts and talents that the practice is great on a certain day. And, it's not because of your mistakes that the practice is just average on a different day.

You don't even need to step on the yoga mat to experience a moment of bliss, and you can't force such a moment performing yoga. When the Universe wants to give you a certain

experience, it gives without asking you for permission or verifying if the timing is suitable for you. By not providing you with something you expect, it also gives you a meaningful teaching. Gradually you learn to accept whatever comes.

When you step on your mat, do yoga for the sake of doing and being in the moment. Whether you get more advanced on asanas, improve your health condition, or get some transcendental experiences, treat it as a bonus. Don't create expectations, for they only cause pain.

## **11. UPS & DOWNS**

It's the nature of the mind to look for pleasures in life and avoid suffering. We try to hold the good things when they come, and we take efforts to eliminate the negative experiences.

But is it realistic to have only pleasurable moments? Absolutely not. No matter how much we try to stick to positive experiences, this life is cyclic. Everything comes, and everything goes. We live, and we die.

Summer turns into fall and winter, spring and summer again. From a positive swing, we fall into a negative one, then to come back to the positive swing again. We can't force the cycle to stop.

There's a myth that those who do yoga are always balanced and positive. But doing yoga can't guarantee that you have a good mood all the time. No. Our bodies accumulate lots of negative emotions, and it takes time to release them.

Sometimes we do the practice and feel great the whole day, sometimes we do the very same things and feel down. And it's normal. But what's important is not to intensify the negative emotions. And we do it often when we pay too much attention to our mood swings.

Remember, where the attention goes, the energy follows. So, when we let ourselves dive deep into something unpleasant, we empower the painful experience, we prolong it, and we risk to slip into a depressive state for days, weeks, and months.

In fact, the mind likes to ponder, especially over negative stuff. It likes to question why this has happened to me, how can I avoid it, what's the lesson, what's wrong with me...

Of course, we have to make conclusions out of our own experiences, but real insights never come from an intensive thinking process. They come as an immediate realization, fast as a flash of light. Suddenly you just see the whole picture.

When you overthink, you leave no empty space for a true insight to manifest. Your mind is overstuffed with thoughts and ideas.

The reason why the mind supports negative thoughts is that they help it survive. Thoughts are food for the mind. The more you think, the more it gains control over your life. The mind doesn't want to stop and let you live in the present moment, experience things as they arise and let them go when it's time for them to leave.

Focusing too much on the amazing experiences you get isn't really wise. Everything is temporary in this world. The higher you rise, the harder you fall. When the

pleasure finishes, you're likely to crave for it. The mind again gets super excited, chewing your grief and sorrows.

Now, there are a few tricks that help us deal with pleasures and pain. These aren't my own smart ideas. I've learned about these tricks from two different teachers of Advaita (non-duality teaching) and found them extremely useful.

The **first thing** we need to do is change our attitude. Since we're not in a position to choose only pleasures in life, it makes perfect sense to change the way we perceive our circumstances.

It starts with an intellectual understanding that nothing is permanent in this world. Both positive and negative experiences come and go, and it's not worth it to overemphasize the importance of either experience you get.

After you've got into the logic of this statement, the journey starts. You come across different situations in your life and have this statement in your memory as a reference point. You start to notice the impermanent nature of things.

At times you experience something enjoyable and then see it finishing. At times you fall into a negative swing and then see that this painful experience has also disappeared by itself.

As time passes, it becomes more and more obvious that it's not our efforts that control the circumstances. So, there's no point in worrying, blaming yourself, or expecting something.

Our detachment from the outer circumstances grows naturally as we continue observing. We experience fewer mood swings, for we no longer intensify our experience on either side of the cycle.

And at some point, it becomes crystal clear: it's the unbroken peace of mind that brings us happiness, and not the outer pleasures.

The **second trick** is based on the idea that we're born to experience a certain amount of pleasure and a certain amount of suffering.

Life keeps all in balance. If we constantly seek enjoyable and super enjoyable experiences, we'll have to suffer dramatic downturns to level it all out.

The concept of small pains is widely used by monks. They work hard and practice intensively daily. And this way, they avoid major falls in their lives.

When we say 'pain,' we mean anything that requires effort. Anything that doesn't appear as an immediate pleasure. Anything you'd like to avoid because of your laziness. In my case, it's cleaning the house and yoga practice. But, truly, it could be anything.

When I just wake up and think of how many things I need to put in order, first, I get scared. But as I get started, the mental process finishes, and all I do is cleaning.

So, it becomes a good practice in itself: it helps me to switch off the mind and overcome my fears.

When I finish, I get a reward for the little pain I took. My house is clean, and I like seeing it this way. And, gradually, I improve my cleaning patterns. I get more mindful of where I put things so that I don't have to leave too much work for the morning.

The same thing with yoga. Most of the days, I feel some sort of resistance to step on the

mat. But once I start, it's all gone. I enjoy both the time spent on the mat and the feeling of stability this little daily exercise gives me.

## **12. 'WORKOUT — RELAXATION' PRINCIPLE**

This rule applied both to our bodies, our psychology, and life in general. If you don't feel you've done some work, you can't fully relax.

Imagine you are looking for a job. Okay, you send your CV here and there a couple of times per day, but most of your time you're free. Your friends invite you to go out, but you can't enjoy it because you kind of don't feel you deserve to relax.

Some people dream of having a passive income and having the freedom to do things they truly enjoy. Well, this happened to me. And, it's not such a smooth and happy experience as it may seem.

For a few years, I was renting out my apartment and traveling, learning yoga, engaging in spirituality. Thank God India is so



cheap that you can have a fantastic lunch for less than a dollar without feeling that you limit yourselves on something.

I had plenty of time and seemingly no problems. Yet, I rarely felt at peace with myself. I didn't know what to do with all the time I had; I couldn't appreciate its value.

I'm not saying it was a useless period of my life. At all, not. Sometimes we do need to stop, take a pause, look at things from a distance to see where we're heading. But if the break becomes too long, we fall out of a natural cycle.

Active and passive states should change over again and again. If we stay active for too long without breaks, we get a burnout. If we remain passive too long, we slow down and may become lazy, inert, and even unconfident to act decisively. It gets hard to integrate again into regular human social interaction.

When I was eventually forced to go back to social life, I felt much more cheerful. After working hard the whole week, weekends became a real well-deserved pleasure.

Now, getting back to yoga. A good class is structured in such a way that you get a proper workout before laying down in Shavasana. If the practice isn't intensive enough for you, chances are you won't go deep inside once you get in Corpse pose.

The best Shavasana comes after active exercise.

Also worth mentioning is that dynamic practice heats up the body making it more flexible. So, it's logical to do some warm-up, perform active postures before trying to open your hips, especially when it's cold outside, and our body is stiff.

Physical activity relaxes not only our body but also our brains. Those of us who do an intellectual job, sit in the offices, but rarely engage in sports, often suffer from insomnia, nervous system disorders, and depression. Stress accumulates but never gets released.

To bring in more oxygen to our system and 'ventilate' our brains, we need to cycle, run, or do yoga. So, work out physically to relax mentally.

And remember that being totally absorbed in work, no matter which benefits you anticipate is a dead-end. Have a hobby, do something for yourself only, whatever pleases the inner child that sits inside each of us. Otherwise, one day, you will have an emotional burnout and collapse.

### **13. BEAUTIFUL EXPERIENCES DON'T MEAN ANYTHING**

I remember sitting at a Satsang and hearing people describing their profound inner adventures. Somewhere deep inside, I was getting jealous. It seemed to me that they'd managed to move further than me on their spiritual path. I couldn't understand what exactly they were talking about. So, apparently, I was somewhere ways behind.

I have to mention; they were following this particular teacher for a while. They used her instruments for self-exploration and could speak her language, use the terms she used to talk about their experiences.

Feeling some uncomfortableness inside, for a while, I was pondering what I should do. I

could either sharpen my brain and try to get into the logics of her methods or ignore the teaching at all, just sit and enjoy the energy she was radiating. Finally, I gave up and chose the second option.

The thing is, there're plenty of amazing teachers and teachings. Each of them managed to get in touch with their inner nature using their own unique way. And this is the only thing they can share verbally.

Some of the instruments they offer may perfectly suit us, and we can incorporate them into our own practice. Yet, there're thousands and thousands of tools. How long can we entertain ourselves, choosing the most appropriate one? After a period spent on shopping around, we need to understand: what we have is enough. We should use the instruments we already have and alter the practice only when there's a deep inner calling to do so.

If someone uses other tools and gets fantastic experiences, it's OK. These experiences aren't really indicative of where they are on their spiritual path.

In fact, when we just start, we're likely to get into more beautiful meditative states. As we continue, things start looking more ordinary. There isn't so much excitement. There aren't so many high and low peaks. There's a period of leveling out, which might feel a bit dry.

We might crave for the juices of life we used to get at high peak times. But the point is not to chase the fantastic experiences, but to make the mind stable. When there's a peace of mind, it's easier to accept whatever comes and appreciate the beauty of simple life pleasures, perceive them on a more subtle level.

If you practice and don't get some unbelievable profound experiences, don't panic. It's not that you're doing something wrong. Those who tell about their incredible spiritual adventures might be still at the very top of the iceberg.

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if you're a beginner or if you're more advanced. The final knowledge never comes through a human effort. But the Grace can descend upon us at any moment, regardless of the level we've reached by then.

# **NO RIGID RULES**

## **CLASSICAL ASANAS or VARIATIONS?**

The ancient texts mention that Lord Shiva taught 8.4 million yoga asanas, out of which 84 are described in detail in Hatha Yoga Pradipika and considered as classical yoga postures. You see these asanas on the group classes you attend. Even though the teachers usually give recommendations on adjustments required for beginners, the poses still look quite the same from one school to another.

The classical postures take into account the flows of energy inside our bodies. And that's why performing asanas in a standardized manner is considered highly beneficial. Yet, I tend to get bored in a yoga class where the teacher uses only the classical poses and doesn't bring in any variations.

From the age of 4 up to 13 years old, I attended a musical school. We focused on classical music and had to sing and play the instruments in a precise way. There were many rules to follow, but no space for creativity and self-expression. I gave up the studies as soon

as I was allowed to. And I had no desire even to come up to the piano.

15 years later, music came back into my life. I had to forget the rules to find ways to express myself with music. Before, my brain was too stuffed with things to keep in mind that I couldn't hear my own voice; I couldn't improvise.

Of course, musical education has changed a lot since the Soviet Union times. These days there're many studios where students get the freedom to do things they like, express themselves and learn the tools that help them do it.

But the point is: learn the rules, feel how they work for you. And then ignore the rules and let your spirit guide you.

As time passes, I do more and more variations on poses and perform only a few asanas precisely the way they're described in classical texts. I see traditional poses as pointers. They instruct us on what could be done. So, we try them out and see how it feels in our bodies.

They let us understand the basic principles of bodywork. But, of course, they can't take into

account everything. All of us are so different, our body types, the length of our limbs, the muscular tension we feel at a given moment.

It's good to be aware of the basic principles and use them as a reference point. Yet, often we have to adjust the poses to meet the unique needs of our body.

Let me give you a few examples to help you see how you can alter the classical postures.

When you perform, say, **Plow pose**, the traditional asana instructions would tell you to keep your legs straight. But do you really need to? Absolutely not. You shouldn't do anything that gives you a sense of discomfort. If this is the case, don't hesitate to bend your knees.

The classical instructions would tell you to keep your arms along the body. But you may prefer to bring your hands up above your head and hold your legs. This way, you keep your neck safe; you don't overstretch it.

And it's not that we adjust the asana only to simplify it. No. All variations of the pose give a different feeling.



Try to make a few Plow pose variations and see how it feels:

(a) Place your arms down alongside the body; you can interlock your fingers to help the shoulders rotate backward, or

(b) Open the fingers and bring your arms above the head;

(c) Keep your knees straight or

(d) Bend them and bring behind your head,

(e) Bring your knees to the forehead, or

(f) Place them near your ears.

You'll notice that the blood circulation increases in different regions of your body. It's only you who knows where there's more muscular tension at the moment. So, it's your own job to find the right adjustment.



*Pic. 46 Example of Plow pose variations*



*Pic. 47 Example of Plow pose variations*

Let's try a few more variations on Plow pose:

(a) Keep your legs closer to the head to work on the lower back and hamstrings or

(b) Move the legs further behind your head to work on the upper back regions and neck,

(c) Bend your legs, use your hands to hold them, and place the knees close to the shoulders. You might feel the blood circulation in the chest area.

And again, these aren't rigid rules. Your legs, arms, or spine might be longer or shorter than mine, so, your poses may look not the same.

It's natural that in the beginning, we don't feel how small variations change the energy flows. But it's good to bring a mindful attitude into

our practice. This way, we get more and more sensitive.

Another example concerns the Lying down Twists. If you listen to instructions for **Lying down Twists**, they'd usually say this, «Lie down. Spread your arms to the sides. Bend your knees to 90 degrees and bring them to the left. Move the right knee a bit forward to keep it in one line with the left knee. Otherwise, there isn't enough stretch in your lower back area. Now turn your head to the right...».

Again, Spinal Twist should be performed in a manner that serves your current needs. Let's try and make some adjustments:

- (a) Sometimes you feel the tension in the upper regions of your spine, so you may want to bring your knees more down;
- (b) Sometimes you may have pain in the sacrum area; then you can bring your knees closer to the chest;
- (c) Sometimes the Spinal Twist doesn't work unless you cross your legs or

(d) Unless you put pillows between your legs and maybe also one pillow under your lower leg.

There might be not enough time and props for this kind of experiments during the class, but certainly, you could try it while practicing at home.

There aren't rigid rules for **Seated Twists**, either. When you sit in a cross-legged position, you are typically instructed to keep your spine straight and perpendicular to the ground and then perform a Twist.

Again, the right pose for you should take into account your current muscular tension. So, try to experiment: change the angle of your bend and find a way to get the existing blockages out.

For example,

(a) Go down, closer to the mat and make a Twist to the right and to the left;

(b) Then slowly increase the angle and do a few Twists;

(c) Reach 90 degrees and again turn to the sides;

(d) Finally, try to lean back a bit, turn right, raise your left hand and stretch it in the direction of the Twist (to the right). Then turn left, raise your right hand, and pull it to the left. The arms help you to further extend the spine.

It's also worth finding objects around. You can grab them to intensify the Twist. It could be anything, a sofa, a table, a wall, etc.

I found it more useful to do yoga on wooden floors or on tatami mats, rather than on a regular yoga mat. Put 4 tatami mats together, and you won't be limited in space during the practice. Plus, tatami mats are thicker, more stable, and they don't get folded. You can hold the edges to go deeper into Twists.

When we do a **Wide-Legged Forward Bend** (Prasarita Padottanasa), we are generally told to keep our legs perpendicular to the ground, make sure our hips and knees are in one line, and not to lean back. However correct it may seem, sometimes I intentionally lean back to intensify the stretch on my inner thighs. Again, it's up to you to decide which part of your body needs more stretch.

Only you can feel how many blankets you need to put going for **Shoulderstand** to avoid pressure on your neck. Only you can decide if Shoulderstand doesn't feel comfortable at all, and you want to skip it and do Legs-Up-the-Wall pose instead.



*Pic. 48 Wide-Legged Forward Bend  
(Prasaritta Padottanasana)*

This list can go further, but the point is: use classes as a reference point that helps you learn the rules. Try to do things the books offer you. Understand the principles of bodywork. And when you step on the mat for

self-practice, be creative, modify the asanas to give your body what it really needs.

In essence, yoga means union. Your inner nature and your external expression are in alignment. You can do some running or skiing, or any other exercise that makes your spirit elevated, anything you truly enjoy, finish it off with Shavasana and call it yoga. But if you mechanically perform all the 84 classical asanas, this is definitely not yoga.

## **MULTITASKING & SEQUENCING**

In the past decade, multitasking has become a trendy word. Seen as a 'must-have' skill of an employee, it's mentioned in thousands of job descriptions. Yet, as time passes, the attitude towards multitasking starts to change.

More and more scientific research proves that our brain can only focus on one thing at a time. We never actually do multitasking, we just always switch from one activity to another one.

Such exercise damages our brains, weakens our mental abilities, drops our efficiency, and

results in underperformance. We lose lots of energy on adaptation, feel drained and stressed. Moreover, the brain gets addicted to switching the attention, and it becomes difficult to focus on one thing at a time and break the vicious circle.

It might seem that 20+ different asanas during a yoga class are incredibly beneficial, for it gives you a rounded workout. But remember that every asana, unless it comes automatically, is a separate task for your brain.

Our brain loves switching between activities. But this doesn't make us more focused in life. Instead, we get further and further from finishing things. Don't entertain your brain with constant changes. Use your yoga practice to train your concentration abilities. Focus on fewer things.

When it comes to sequencing, I never overthink about what's next. I fully let myself into the pose I'm performing. And then the body changes the position by itself.

It's a good idea to do some warmup before the actual asana practice. You can rotate your wrists, ankles, knees, shoulders, neck, or



stretch your spine, making circular movements with your upper body ('Seated Torso Circles' or 'Standing Torso Circles' exercise). This way, you prepare the most sensitive parts of your body for various types of asanas and avoid injuries.



*Pic. 49 Seated Torso Circles*

As you start doing the asanas, it makes sense to begin with milder poses and reach the deeper postures gradually. When you go to a few classes, you'll start noticing that they're designed in such a way that there's a progression in the dynamics, peak poses, and then periods of relaxation.

If you listen to your bodily needs during your personal practice, your sequencing will be

correct. If you've done a couple of Standing asanas, you might want to relax. So, you can go for Seated or Lying down postures.

After a deep Backbend, your spine will naturally want to stretch and release the pressure in the lower back. So, the body will move into a Spinal Twist, Plow pose, or Child pose.



*Pic. 50 Child pose*

Depending on which kind of Backward Bend you perform, the body will find the most comfortable compensation pose to form. Whether it's a Seated Backbend like Camel pose, a Supine Lying Backbend like Wheel pose (Chakrasana), or a Prone Lying Backbend like Bow pose (Dhanurasana), you will find out what should come next.

If you're in an Inverted posture, you shouldn't stand up straightaway; you need to let the



bloodstream go back to normal. So, the body will go in a compensative pose like a Child pose and stay there until you recover the breath.

*Pic. 51 Bow pose*

Alternatively, you could perform a sequence of Downward-Facing Dog, Uttanasana, and then Child pose. It's a delicate and smooth way of returning to an upright position. Or, you could do a Shoulderstand, Plow pose and then gently lie down for the final Shavasana.



*Pic. 52 Uttanasana*



*Pic. 53 Downward-Facing Dog*

This is Vinyasa. The flow. If the mind interferes too much, overthinking what's next, you'll never be able to appreciate the full benefits of the pose you're performing. Your attention won't be in the inner energy flows; it'll be in the mental process.

This is not yoga. Yoga is the union of the body and mind. Stay in the pose until the body tells you what's next. Exercise patience. Don't rush for things.

## **READY for PRANAYAMA?**

When you go for Prayanamas, know when to stop. Breathing is a powerful instrument. It can benefit us, or it can give us unnecessary stress. Mind your limits.

Don't go for the number of repetitions as prescribed by a book or a teacher. Stop before you get exhausted. Don't do breathing exercises to a number of counts far beyond your regular breathing patterns. If you're in a group class, nobody will notice and punish you for disobedience. Listen to yourself, and don't follow the instructions blindly.

Whether a beginner should incorporate Pranayamas at all into yoga practice isn't straight-forward. Many teachers say that we should explore breathing exercises slowly. In our daily life, our breath is abrupt, the exhalation is shorter than the inhalation, and we mainly breathe from the chest.

So, the first exercise recommended on our teacher training was Alternate Breathing, i.e., breathing in from the left nostril and breathing out from the right one, and then breathing in

from the right nostril and breathing out from the left one.

When we just start, there shouldn't be any breath retention, and the duration of inhalation should be the same as the duration of exhalation.

You can notice that in normal life we exhale very fast. When we go for Pranayamas, we try to make our breath longer. But what happens is: we first breathe out almost all the air we have inside and then just push ourselves to continue the exhalation until we reach a certain number of counts.

So, in the beginning, we need to focus on breathing from the belly and making our breath smooth, i.e., taking in and letting out the same amount of air throughout the inhalation and exhalation. Think of an air balloon with a hole in it. The air goes out slowly and gradually until the balloon becomes completely flat. Your breath should be like that. To master this skill, we need about three months.

Then we can move to the next step and try to make our exhalation a bit longer. And again at least 3 months of practice.

When our exhalation is twice as long as the inhalation, we can try breath retention between inhalation and exhalation. Then again, we need to take time to grow the length of breath retention.

And the final step is breath retention between exhalation and inhalation. As you can see, it's quite a long process. It trains not only your lungs, but also your nervous system, and it changes your breathing habits.

I've seen many times how Alternate Breathing is performed on group classes when students need to breathe out twice longer than they breathe in and when they need to make breath retention in between both inhalation/exhalation and exhalation/inhalation. Personally, I never repeat after the teacher once I see this approach.

Why? Because my body is not ready for this exercise. Instead of getting relaxed after practice, I get too much tension.

And this tension is especially harmful to us on breath retention. When we hold breath, we're like a sponge absorbing emotions that come up. It's important to be ready for breath retention, enjoy the practice, and absorb the positive vibes. If you shake your nervous system with intensive breathing exercises, all you do is accumulate the stress.

Whether you want to incorporate pranayamas in your daily practice or not is up to you. But remember: altering your breathing patterns is a powerful tool. If you choose to perform some breathing exercises, make sure that they don't create a sense of discomfort.

## **INVERSIONS during the CYCLE?**

This part mainly concerns my female readers. Yet, if you happened to be born in a male body that plans to share yogic knowledge at some point, these lines are also worth reading.

There're two main approaches to Inversion asanas during the cycle. The majority of schools say 'No' to Inversions, at least during the first three days of the period. Their



argument is: let the fluids flow in a natural way allowing the toxins to come out of the body.

The Tantric schools say the opposite. The menstrual blood contains many vital elements (including iron, calcium, and iodine) that we need for rejuvenation. So, to keep the vitamins and amino acids in, do as many Inversions as possible, unless they bring you a sense of discomfort.

A few years ago, I realized that continuing with Inversions during my cycle makes me more energetic. If I don't get overstressed during the month, and my body isn't in pain on the first day of the cycle, I do the same amount of Inversions as usually.

If the previous month was loaded with emotional experiences, I might alter my practice on the very first day. I can go for Restorative asanas, Seated, or Lying down postures; I include a lot of Hip Openers and Forward Folding asanas. On the second day of the cycle, my practice already comes back to normal, and I do Inversions.

But really I can't claim that this is the best practice for everyone. You need to see how it

feels for you and make a choice based on your direct experience, rather than someone else's authoritative opinion.



*Pic. 54 Restorative poses (2)*

## **ONION & COFFEE. ANYONE?**

Strict yogic rules go far beyond yoga postures. In particular, they attach great importance to the food we consume.

Strictly speaking, we should avoid onion, garlic, alcohol, and food kept overnight, as they cause mental dullness and physical numbness. We should also avoid caffeine, overly spicy, and salty foods, as they make us restless.

But our mind gets agitated, and our practice gets disturbed not only because we take incorrect physical food. It's also the strong impressions that we get talking to a neighbor, arguing in a shop, or spreading rumors at work. It's all sorts of people and things we deal with during the day and think of during yoga or meditation time.

The monks avoid getting too many impressions by sticking to the same daily routine. They perform the same tasks, take the same food, wake up, and go to bed at the same time.

Adaptation always brings some sense of discomfort. The body needs to tune in with the new things. There might be some inner resistance, and the mind might like to complain. To cut off the food for the mind, to reduce the thinking during the practice, the monks not only avoid spicy food or coffee but also have a fixed schedule and minimize their social engagement.

The question is, 'Should we do the same?' And the answer is 'Yes' and 'No.'

When we just start doing yoga or meditation, it's actually a good idea to eliminate some factors that disturb our practice, whether it's a noisy space for practice, watching the news before stepping on the mat or the food that agitates our mind.

So, a meditation on an Indian train isn't really the best way to start. We need a quiet and peaceful atmosphere to find the concentration. That's why retreats are so beneficial. We are surrounded by like-minded people, all our problems are far away, we take light food. All this helps to focus on our practice and go deeper inside.

As we continue, our concentration abilities improve. We can stay focused even in a noisy place or after having some onion rings.

Our detachment from external things is also likely to grow. We don't overreact about things that were freaking us out a few years ago. Rumors, arguments, and work issues don't leave such strong impressions any longer. So, in a way, the more we practice, the less we have to worry about external disturbances.

And again, we can do our little research. We can eliminate garlic, onion, caffeine, noise, news, and neighbors, and then bring them in one by one. This way, we see what really disturbs us and what doesn't.

I remember somebody telling me that taking some onion was not a problem for her, but having some cabbage was. The digestion would take too long, and all the energy during the practice would be still in the stomach area.

Our bodies and minds digest food differently. So, we need to stay mindful of what goes in, be it physical food, communication with other people, engaging in activities. This way, we can find out what exactly disturbs our peace of mind and, perhaps, eliminate it.

When it comes to me, I know that having some onion or caffeine is fine for me. I stopped eating garlic following the rigid yogi's rules and realized that I'm not missing out anything. So, I continue this way. I'd accept a meal with garlic in it at a restaurant, but I wouldn't add garlic when I cook at home.

I'm mindful of toxic people and activities that pull my attention in too much and reduce my

overall productivity. Therefore, I delicately minimize my contact with them.

I enjoy having a fixed schedule, but, again, I'm not rigid on that. I don't wind the clock to step on the mat at a particular time. I just keep a more or less fixed sequence of events: wake up, shower, breakfast, cleaning, yoga...

As to food, I've never liked trying new things, and it's natural for me to stick to the same meals when I'm at home. But I can't resist and forgive myself for buying some sweets and pastries when I go to the supermarket. I just make sure I don't go there too often and purchase small quantities of sweets so that they finish soon.

For some time, I tried to follow the rigid yogic rules. I was waking up at 5 a.m. and taking a cold shower, watching the full moon, new moon, and Ekadashi days to fast on. I was cooking my own food in order to avoid restless energies of public places, meditating 2 hours a day, going to pilgrimage trips, and so on.

It was a good experiment to find out which of these things worked for me and which didn't. But the main thing I realized was that the strict

rules were making me a hermit and isolating me from the rest of the world. I was getting proud and judgmental about other people's behavior.

Strict rules weren't bringing me closer to myself. On the contrary, I was ignoring things that were natural and enjoyable. And I was getting more and more disconnected from my body.

Yoga is not about being strict and dogmatic. It's about finding a connection with our own self. And for that, we need to experiment, forgive ourselves, and honor our needs, rather than follow any rules we read about. No matter how rational they sound.

## **BAD HABITS on the WAY**

If you want to start yoga, don't let your bad habits stop you. Many times, I've heard people saying, 'First I need to stop smoking,' or 'First I need to start eating healthy food and lose some weight,' or 'First I need to get in the habit of waking up early.' And I have to say; it's all nonsense.

I was sitting at a gathering of one teacher of wisdom when a question about smoking weed came up. The person clearly understood that this habit was a burden for him: his attention was scattered, and he wasn't able to finish things. But he enjoyed the process and couldn't find a way to quit. The teacher gave a short answer, 'Whatever is inefficient will fall off by itself. So, don't worry'.

I remembered this phrase and started testing whether this was true for me or not. And that's what I realized. When we fight against something, we overemphasize it; we empower it, we give it importance. The harder we try to overcome a bad habit, the stronger it becomes, the longer we get stuck in it. Aggression always creates aggression, and peace always creates peace.

The first thing we need to do is to accept the way things are now. Whether we like it or not, we're not perfect. The more we blame ourselves on doing something wrong, the more we stuff ourselves with negative emotions. These emotions accumulate in our body and potentially could cause a prolonged depressive state or a disease.



We should intentionally cut off the blame, saying, 'It's Okay. Let it be. I won't fight it'. Accepting ourselves as we are, forgiving ourselves for not being perfect is a big step forward.

The second thing we need to do is ignore the habit. We can shift our attention somewhere else: it could be a project we're working on, or it could be our yoga practice. We need something to give us the enjoyment, the juices of life that we are craving for.

Let the habit run on its own, but don't sponsor it. The less you think about the habit, the less powerful it becomes, for it is where the attention goes, the energy follows.

So, if you want to step on your yoga mat, don't wait for your bad habits to disappear. Focus on the practice, and you'll see that whatever is inefficient will gradually fade away as your awareness expands. Your willpower will grow with practice, and you'll get the juices of life you're craving for out of a healthier source. Don't worry. Practice.

# **PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS of YOGA**

There's plenty of yoga-related information on the net. Whether you have a headache, you feel depressed or lazy, you can do a Google search, and within seconds you'll get some suggestions on what yoga tools could work in your situation. Then you can try them out and choose the instruments that suit you best.

What I'll talk about in this chapter is those practical applications of body knowledge that I actively use in my life. Most of them require almost no effort but give excellent results.

## **NOSTRILS are the POWER**

Whether we're born as men or women, all of us have both masculine and feminine energies inside.

The masculine energy flows through the right side of the body and connects to the left hemisphere of the brain through the nostril passage. This energy is associated with the Sun, logical thinking; it gives makes us

energetic, fosters our digestion, and generates internal heat.

The feminine energy flows through the left side of the body and connects to the right hemisphere of the brain through the nostril passage. This energy is associated with the Moon; it makes us more relaxed, more creative and artistic; it cools down the body.

We may think that we always breathe equally through both nostrils, but it's not true. Most of the times it's either the right nostril and the left side of the brain that is more active, or the left nostril and the right side of the brain that is more active.

Nostril dominance shifts periodically throughout the day, and each nostril is active for about one hour. We can examine and see which nostril is more active by exhaling through the nose onto a mirror, and then checking which of the two puffs evaporates longer. That one comes from the dominant nostril.

We could use this information and try to match the activity to the dominating nostril, i.e., do physical exercise, study or eat at times when

the right nostril is more active, listen to music, do hobbies and relax when the left nostril is dominant. It could be done to a certain extent, but in most cases, we're driven by the circumstances to do things differently.

So, it makes much more sense to do the opposite and alter the dominant nostril to match the activity we need to perform. See a few examples below.

## LET IT DIGEST

If we happen to overeat or feel heavy in the stomach, or our digestion is, in general, a bit slow, it's a good idea to activate the right nostril before and even after the food. To do this, we can either we lie down on your left side for about 10 minutes to let our right nostril open, or we can stay seated, block the left nostril and breath through the right one.



*Pic. 55 Diamond pose*

Sitting in Vajrasana (Diamond pose) is also highly recommended after a meal. This pose increases the blood flow in the digestive organs and speeds up the digestion.

## **AFTER SHAVASANA**

When I attended the group classes of various yoga teachers, I noticed that after Shavasana, they instruct you to turn either to the left or to the right side. It may seem a small thing, but to me, it, honestly, makes a big difference.

I'm usually very relaxed after Shavasana and don't want to disturb this feeling of serenity by rolling to my left side. I prefer to stay a little bit longer on the right side to prolong the meditative state and then sit down, rub my palms, and slowly open my eyes first into the palms and then release them.

Instead, I'd roll to my left side and energize myself in the morning when I need to get up after night sleep.

## **INSOMNIA**

Many times, when we go to bed, we're still overwhelmed with impressions we got throughout the day. The active mind wanders and doesn't let us fall asleep.

If we lie down on the right side for at least 10 minutes, the left nostril will open. Thus, we'll activate the passive feminine energy, get more relaxed, there'll be little thinking process, and we will eventually fall asleep.

Sometimes I wake up during the night. This is my creative time, so I don't mind it. But ultimately, I still need to get back to bed. If the sleep doesn't come right away, I go to my yoga mat and do some cooling Inversions. It could be Shoulderstand, Legs-Up-the-Wall pose or Plow pose variations. These poses could also be used in the evening to calm down before night sleep.

## **LOWER BACK PAIN**

If you lift heavy things or have a small kid, you must be familiar with lower back pain. To release the muscular tension, we can bend our

knees and bring them to the chest (Wind Relieving Pose), stretch forward in Child pose, or do Lying Twists and Plow pose variations. I talk more about how we modify poses to release a specific muscular tension in the 'Rigid Rules' chapter. But here I want to share two tips that I keep on coming back to.



*Pic. 56 Wind Relieving pose*

One tip I learned from professional basketball players. Every day they have to run for 5 to 6 hours, and their back gets extremely tired. They wouldn't be able to play consistently for years if they didn't make proper sleeping

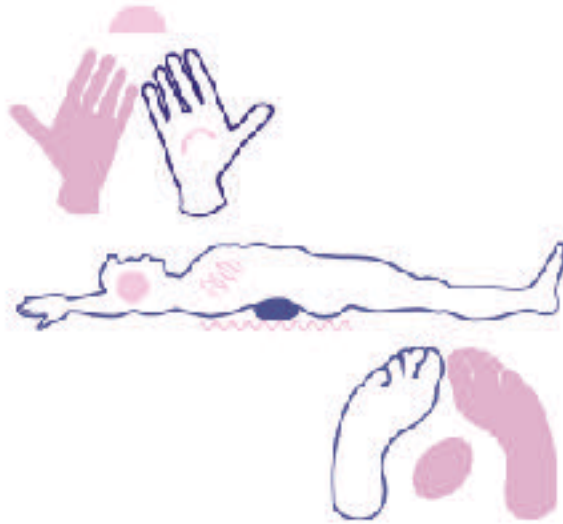
arrangements. So, when they go to sleep, they roll to one side and put a pillow in between their legs. This way, they create space in the sacrum area and restore over the night.

I tried this method when I injured my sacrum. Sometimes I'd use two pillows between my legs and one under the lower leg. It all depends on the body. You have to experiment to find your optimal position. But this thing definitely works.

The second tip comes from a Japanese physician Mr. Toshiba Fukutsudzi who suggests lying down on your back with a rolled towel right underneath the belly button. He claims that this simple exercise not only helps to cure your back pain but also helps you lose weight.

The extra layer of fat around the belly tends to accumulate because of the displacement of the pelvis. The exercise corrects the pelvis placement, strengthens the abdomen, and is believed to result in a smaller waistline. Whether it works for fat reduction or not, I can't tell from personal experience. But one thing I know is that doing it for just 10 minutes, I feel a great relief on my lower back.





*Pic. 57 Fukutsudzi exercise*

## **SLEEPING PATTERNS**

I remember that during my school and university years, I used to go to sleep after 1 or 2 a.m., I used to go partying, drink, wear high heels, and my body would never complain. No hangovers, no back pain, no broken sleep. But the vital energy we get at the time of birth isn't endless.

We use it up excessively when we're young, and as we turn 30 (this is a rough figure), we start to notice that things have changed. Now we have to pay for our naughtiness and mistakes. And it's not something to weep for. It's more of a learning tool. Childhood is over; now we have to take responsibility for our actions. If we aren't mindful enough of our bodies, we'll have to pay.

Our organism is designed to restore itself while we're sleeping. But this happens only if we sleep during the hours from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. Ayurvedic science suggests that sleeping during this period is vitally important, for it gives us a chance to restore both physically and emotionally.

This time our liver and gallbladder get activated. Apart from digesting food, these organs are also responsible for detoxifying the body, balancing the hormones, and processing the accumulated emotions. If we eat heavy meals late at night, these functions get disturbed, and all the energy goes for digestion. Not releasing the emotions during the night, we build up stress in our life.

The night is a creative time for me. I like writing or making music; some great ideas come up during the night. So, what I try to do is pull myself to bed early, and then if I wake up after 4 and start doing things, it's okay.

Sometimes I go back to bed after a while and sleep until 7, sometimes I wake up at 5 and stay awake for the whole day. But since I've slept from 10 to 2 (and a bit more)), I don't feel broken in the morning.

## **ESTABLISHING a PATTERN**

When the question concerns sleep, people often say that they're too old and no longer flexible to change something in their lifestyle. They can stick to a prescribed timing when they take sleeping pills, but can't change the time they go to bed.

Well, luckily, I learned about the healthy sleeping patterns young enough and don't have to invent excuses for not doing the right thing. And, since I was in India at that time, establishing a new regime went smoothly for me.

The Indians live more in alignment with the natural cycles, and they use the daylight to their benefit as much as possible. Here I'm not talking about the big cities like Mumbai or Delhi, where people get so crazy to be like the Westerners that often lose their own identity. I'm referring to villages and smaller cities like Rishikesh, where I studied yoga.

If you leave your room after 10 p.m., you won't see people outside, most of the restaurants will be closed, there won't be any sort of entertainment. You won't have any other option but to go back to your cave and sleep.

Early morning you'll wake up from the sound of broomsticks sweeping on the streets. They use old-fashioned brooms made out of straw. So, the noise is always quite loud. Thus, whether you like it or not, you'll be pulled into their schedule.

When you want to manifest something in your life, be it writing music, making money, or a healthy habit, it's always good to surround yourself with people who already have that what you aim to have. If everyone in your family goes to bed late, you risk adopting their

unhealthy habits. And it's always easier to slip down than to rise up. Yet, it is possible.

The more you do yoga, the less dependent on others you become, both in thinking and personal patterns. The more you practice, the stronger your concentration power gets, the better you can put yourself to sleep regardless of the circumstances you encounter.

Gradually you learn to appreciate the calmness of your mind more than chatting with your relatives after midnight. But if currently you are a night owl and getting to bed before 10 sounds like a mission to you, just keep on doing yoga. It takes time for the consciousness to expand. Don't force yourself. Let the changes come from inside, from your own wisdom.

# YOGA TRICKS

Here I want to mention a few things I discovered through personal practice and found extremely useful. If some of them make sense to you, I'm more than pleased to share.

## CLOSE YOUR EYES & SEE

Once I was practicing at night, it was dark in the room, so it didn't make any sense to open my eyes. Since the eyes were shut, I could only perform the most basic asanas. And what I realized was that simplicity brings so much pleasure.

When we are relaxed, the energy runs smoothly throughout the body. We don't need to put effort into getting in the desired posture. Therefore, if we choose the asanas that we can perform effortlessly, we have a better chance to gain profound meditative experiences.

Later I started doing yoga with my eyes closed regularly, not just at nighttime. And that's what I noticed. When the energy doesn't get dissipated through the eyes but stays in the

body, you can accumulate much more energy during your practice.

The whole practice becomes meditative, not just the final Shavasana. You feel subtler energies in each pose you perform. And, of course, by the time you reach Shavasana, your mind is very calm and quiet. So, Shavasana also becomes much more profound.

If you want to try and practice with your eyes closed, you have to choose very simple asanas. It's not easy to keep the balance when your eyes are shut, and falling down may feel disturbing. You'll see that once you start performing asanas with your eyes closed, your concentration will increase. And with proper attention, you'll benefit from the most accessible poses you do.

This discovery totally changed my attitude toward yoga. Before, there was a lot of emphasis on learning new things, on finding teachers that would speed up my knowledge curve, on getting into more sophisticated asanas. Now I kind of lost my impatience. I can enjoy simple things and stay in the present moment observing the flows of energy.

## FINDING BALANCE

Quite often listening to instructions on Balancing poses, I heard the phrase 'Find a spot in front of you and watch it to balance yourself.' I used this tip for a while, and then I found a way that helps me to keep balance more efficiently.

So, what I do is keep my eyes half-open, and the gaze is not focused. I look down a bit and can gently see the tip of my nose.

The external things get blurry, and there's a feeling that I'm looking inside rather than outside. If I stay longer in a pose, I also like concentrating on my breath.



*Pic. 58 Tree pose*



Now, as I've said, I try to keep my eyes shut during the whole practice. Yet, I'm not so advanced to close my eyes, stand on one leg and perform various balancing exercises. For this reason, I do the Balancing poses last.

When I finish with all the asanas, get relaxed and recharged in Shavasana, my mind becomes still. That's a good time to open my eyes and do the Balancing postures. And, in fact, now I can manage these poses much better than at the beginning of my practice.

I don't insist that this is the best way to do a Balancing posture. It works for me, and you can try it out for yourself.

## **LONGER SHAVASANA**

On group classes, the length of Shavasana varies from one teacher to another. Even though it looks effortless, Corpse pose is considered one of the most advanced asanas in yoga. It teaches us to take control of the mind and use it to achieve deep relaxation.

Finding peace and enjoying the state of just being could be a challenging task for a

modern person. We are overwhelmed with workload and tons of information coming from social media. We struggle to make the right decisions and find some meaning in life. We want to feel accepted and loved by others. We try hard to please those around, sacrifice on our own beliefs, and then wonder why satisfaction is not coming.

We consume too much sweet, salty, and spicy food and experience intense mood swings as a result. All this stress accumulates in our body and sits there in the form of energy blocks, which, if not duly released, may cause certain illnesses.

Bad habits, extreme sports, sex, and other entertaining activities merely switch our attention. We forget about our worries and pains for a little while. But we don't deal with the blockages. The energy won't start running smoothly through the body unless we take effort to clean up our system.

The first goal of Shavasana is the so-called 'energy shower.' We move our attention from one part of the body to another part, and where the attention goes, the energy follows. This way, scanning through the whole body,

we intentionally create the energy flow that pushes the blockages out.

A block locks up a lot of energy. So, when this stagnant energy gets released, we feel energized and uplifted.

The second goal of Shavasana is to stop our thinking process. In ordinary life, our brain is always on. It thinks all the time, switching from one thought to another, and ultimately wandering in circles.

You may compare it with a computer. If you open 50 different pages, eventually, it will freeze. It won't be able to process the data. Then you have to shut down the computer or reload the system.

Likewise, our brain can't work at its full potential if you load it with tasks and information, but never shut it down. The mind becomes dull; it lacks freshness. It goes through the same thought patterns, but it's not capable of finding the right solution.

That's why ancient texts in various traditions claim that meditation is vitally important. When we are in a deep meditative state, the ever-wandering mind is still. There's no

thinking process, and the system can get reloaded.

It can happen in seated meditation, or it can happen in Shavasana. After you've taken a proper 'energy shower,' you're likely to fall into a 'no mind' state and enjoy its benefits.

The Buddhist monks used to sleep for just half an hour. It was enough for them to refresh, for they could fall into a state of deep sleep right away. Our concentration power isn't so sharp these days. So, we need to keep our Shavasanas longer to get fully relaxed and energized.

It's really wise that many teachers in India use a longer Shavasana after intensive practice. They know that some students may get stressed performing challenging asanas or asanas they don't particularly like. But the long final Shavasana will wash away their pains and let them feel light and tension-free.

## **EFFICIENT SHAVASANA**

In my daily practice, I can't afford to have long Shavasana, but I try to use my time wisely. I

don't name the body parts I go through, thereby shortening the 'energy shower' phase. I direct the energy along the same routes that are used in a standard yoga class: arms, legs, front, back, neck, face, head... But I just don't make stops going through different parts of the body.

The energy moves in milliseconds. So, this exercise can be done quite fast, say, two minutes for the whole body. And, in fact, scanning through the body without verbal instructions also helps to keep the mind quiet.

The rest of the time I use for meditation. Since I'm a mum of a 2-year-old, I don't have a luxury to do a separate seated meditation. That's why I bring my favorite techniques right into Shavasana.

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Whatever techniques you know and love, would work great after the 'energy shower.' You could concentrate on various energy centers (chest, belly, sacrum, etc.) to further clean up your system.

You could work on stimulating your pituitary gland and developing your intuitive skills. For this, you can concentrate on 4 different points. One is in between the eyebrows. Another is its projection in the middle of the skull. One more is its projection on the back of the head. And, finally, the point on the top of the skull, which was soft when we were babies.

You could do affirmations to structure your life in a certain way.

You could apply hands on various parts of your body where you feel energy blockages. It's our natural habit to put our hands on the points of pain. Our hands work great, even without any initiations in Reiki healing.

Applying hands gives a feeling of warmth and relaxation. It also helps to bring focus to the spot. Where the attention goes, the energy flows, i.e., we improve the blood circulation and let the energy flow more smoothly.

And after you've finished with all your techniques, just let yourself dissolve into being, the presence or whatever you may call it.

# TEACHER TRAINING BUSINESS

## CRITICISM

Yoga has become a real business these days. Especially in India. Almost every yoga school offers a Teacher Training Course (TTC). Students come to do their training at various levels and for multiple purposes.

When I took my training, in one class there were beginners and intermediate level students, advanced students, and even teachers who wanted to grasp some authentic knowledge and experience only India can give.

Some students wanted to become teachers in the long run; others had no desire to teach. They came to understand the asanas, philosophy, and improve their personal practice.

Yoga schools are often criticized for admitting all students regardless of their level. There aren't any entry barriers. You just come and start the course. And in the end, you get a

certificate, an official proof that you're qualified to teach. Indeed, certificates are also given to everyone irrespective of the performance during the course.

In the beginning, I was a bit skeptical about this system. But as time passed, I totally changed my opinion. And you'll understand why as you read through this chapter.

## **COURSE STRUCTURE**

The course is split between practical and theoretical classes. You usually get a yoga practice class in the morning, followed by one or two theoretical sessions, then a lunch break. After that, there's a teaching class and some more theoretical classes until 6 or 7 in the evening.

The curriculum is quite flexible and varies from school to school. Yoga Philosophy is always included, and so is the Yoga Anatomy. In my school, we also had Foundations of Ayurveda and a Mantra Chanting class. But really it depends on the school: what kind of teachers they invite, who's available, etc.



The curriculum is made for all sorts of students. So, don't get discouraged if you happen to know many things already.

For example, I'd spend about two years in India before taking the course. I knew most things taught in Philosophy, Ayurveda, and Mantra Chanting classes. But many students came to India for the first time, and for them, it was totally new information. In a way, that's how the course teaches you to be patient.

Also, if you have decided to take a TTC in India, don't expect it to be super structured. It's India, and people do it 'Indian way.' They have a really different mentality: they can't be that strict and rigid as our University teachers.

Indian teachers are more likely to go with the flow, rather than stick to a pre-written plan.

After the first week of the course, I remember, some of us were complaining. We argued that we came to learn this and that. We felt the course wasn't intensive enough, and the course lacked structure.

Then the principal teacher sat down with us and told us, 'You'll get only what you're able to digest. There's no point to stuff yourself

with information that you aren't able to process'. And these words of wisdom popped up from my memory bank in various life situations after the course.

'Shanti, Shanti,' as they say in India. It's the Western mind that tells you, 'the more, the better.' But it's not true. The greedy mind may not appreciate the course straightaway. But let some time pass to see whether it was worth it or not.

We need a certain degree of maturity to appreciate simplicity. We all think that we know what we came for: we came to learn Anatomy, and Philosophy, and the Teaching techniques. But in truth, we don't know what we'll get.

It's not the information that will transform our lives after the course. It's the authentic experience we get while taking the course, it's when we learn not to speed up things, but really observe and feel.

One more thing you should know is that frankly speaking, Anatomy isn't the strongest subject on yoga teacher training courses in India. They pay a lot of attention to the system

of chakras, to the seed mantras related to each chakra, to the connection of chakras with specific organs in our body, but not to Anatomy. It exists in the curriculum because it has to be there, but most likely, you won't get much out of it.

Indians rely more on their bodily sensations than on rational explanations. So, if you want to learn more about Anatomy in your free time, just read a book. For example, «Yoga Anatomy» by Leslie Kaminoff and Amy Matthews. It's very detailed, and it was recommended by our teachers as extra reading on Anatomy.

As I've mentioned, the yoga classes are split between yoga-practicing sessions in the morning and yoga teaching classes in the afternoon.

In the morning you just do the warm-up exercises, do the asanas, pranayamas, Shavasana. It's like a regular yoga drop-in class. What I particularly liked about my school is that the teacher would include a bit of a talk in the morning class and introduce us to a concept we could think over during the day.

The teaching class is a combination of practice and theory. You actually get to do the asanas. But you also learn about the types of asanas, the health benefits of each, preparation for deeper postures, compensations required after deeper asanas.

You learn about the chakras and which asanas work on each chakra. You study hands-off and hands-on assists and have a lot of pair work to try it out. Finally, you need to apply all this knowledge in a small class that you lead as a teacher.

## **DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES**

As I've said, students come to take their TTC at a variety of levels. So, everybody gets a different experience.

Advanced students pay more attention to the way instructions can be presented, hands-on assists, philosophy bits they could include in their own classes when they go and teach.

Typically, the more experienced students start teaching right after the course. They came ripe; they just need some guidance, some

practical tools. They came to resolve the questions they had and get the certificate, of course.

But what happens to the less experienced students?

First of all, they get to learn the mechanics of postures in detail. They learn how to prepare for a pose, and they learn the compensations required after deeper postures. They learn about the benefits of each asana they perform; they learn how to design a class smoothly and avoid injuries.

Is this too early for beginners to get all this knowledge?

Of course, not. It's not too early. And the information they get is not excessive. But it's just enough to transform you from a dog on a leash blindly following the instructions on drop-in yoga classes into an individual who can critically assess the quality of teaching.

Before, you could only say if you enjoyed the session or not, whether it was too hard or too boring. Now you can get much more out of each class you attend. The technicalities

you've learned actually allow you to catch many things you wouldn't notice otherwise.

You're able to see if the sequencing is adequate, whether there are exercises you particularly enjoy and want to incorporate in your own practice. You can understand if the teacher's approach is too radical and may potentially lead to injuries. You become more mindful of things other teachers do, which sharpens your knowledge curve.

## **ARE YOU READY to TEACH?**

Many people take a TTC because they're bored with their daily jobs. They think that teaching yoga will make them happier. Most students actually plan to teach. But the course is structured in such a way that everybody benefits, everybody finds areas for improvement, and everybody understands whether they're ready to lead a class or not.

At the end of the course, you need to prepare and lead a class. And this exercise wipes out all your confusions. You see what you can give to students at this stage of your development and what you lack as a teacher.

In my school, we first had to think of a topic and draw a sequence of asanas for it. The teacher would check if it made sense and hand it over to us. Then we had a few days to prepare. Finally, we stepped to the front of the room and led a 30-minute class.

And all of us sensed one thing: you cannot explain anything you haven't yet experienced and clearly felt in your body.

After the course, most of the beginners in my class didn't start teaching straight away. They started seeing what areas they needed to focus on and began to look for the answers. They started visiting various teachers and classes, experimenting on yoga styles.

There were a few beginner students who actually started teaching right after the course. But they were absolutely clear as to which things they could bring in their classes and who they could teach.

They weren't trying to jump above their heads. They taught simple things to beginner students without serious health issues. And, of course, they continued their learning process to assist a wider public.

## **KNOWLEDGE is PAIN. EXPERIENCE is PLEASURE**

If I were to name what I liked most about my course, I'd say, 'After the TTC, you won't be able to stay at peace unless you practice.'

Like all spiritual practices, yoga is an energy practice. It increases your energy level, your willpower, your ability to walk through life circumstances and stay calm.

But once you stop practicing, things go back to where they were before, or even worse. The higher you rise, the harder you fall.

After the TTC, you'll never be able to forget about yoga. When you understand its benefits, when you have experienced the lightness in your mind and body, and when you have tools to do it independently, you won't be able to ignore it.

Discipline is an issue for many of us. We start doing yoga, we enjoy the uplifted states after the practice, but then some circumstances break into our routine. For days, weeks, or months we can't get back on the mat.



Very soon, we start craving for what they've lost, both on a physical and emotional level. We feel down and experience prolonged periods of sadness, low energy, and depressive states. We promise ourselves to come back to our practice tomorrow. And tomorrow never comes.

Then, one day, out of the blue, it happens. Long periods off the mat show us that we are much more content with life when we practice than when we don't. Yet, many of us will stop and start numerous times and experience a lot of pain and downturns.

But at one point, it will become crystal clear that it makes no sense to stop practicing. Devoting 15–20 minutes to yourself a small price to pay for a quality life.

Forcing yourself to step on the mat when you don't feel like, is useless. There's too much resistance inside you. We all need time to ripen. Maturity comes when it comes, inspiration comes when it comes.

In fact, time spent with yourself on the mat and periods without any practice both lead to maturity and discipline. We ripen either

through the pleasure of experience and through the pain of unutilized knowledge.



*Pic. 58 Lotus pose*

# FINAL NOTES

## SPINAL HEALTH

'You are only as old as your spine. If your spine is inflexibly stiff at 30, you are old; if it is completely flexible at 60, you are young!!!'

*Joseph Pilates*

Our spinal cord acts as a highway for communication between the body and the mind. It transfers information from the brain to our internal organs through the system of nerves.

So, when we experience a muscular contraction around the cord, it also affects the functioning of the organs.

If the pain is felt in the lower spine, we may have constipation problems, colitis, diarrheas, gas pain, irritable bowel, bladder problems, menstruation problems, and numbness in legs.

If it hurts in the middle region of the spine, it may also result in congestion, breathing difficulty, high blood pressure, heart conditions, pneumonia, stomach problems,

gallbladder and liver conditions, gastritis, ulcers, kidney problems.

If the pain is around the neck, we may get headaches, migraines, dizziness, sinus problems, allergies, fatigue, vision problems.

To keep our inner organs nourished, healthy, and functioning, it's crucial to resolve the spine issues as they arise. Do Twists, round your back and roll up, back and to the sides, sit down cross-legged and make circular movements with your upper body ('Seated Torso Circles' exercise), use acupuncture mat, or go for a massage. Just don't ignore the pain.

Treating your organs for certain illnesses won't help if the problem starts from the spine.

## **ONLY YOU**

It's been a few months since I finished writing this book. And now I see that many times I was judgemental.

As I've said, I spent a few years in India immersed in spirituality. I saw a few dozens of

self-realized Masters, and each of them was talking about the instruments they had used to attain the Ultimate Truth.

Many spiritual seekers came to these Masters, spent years blindly following the methods shown, and didn't progress much on their way.

It feels bitter to recognize that no-one can tell you what exactly you need to do to get in alignment with yourself. It's much more comforting to depend on someone's reputable advice.

Whether you're trying to reach peace with yourself through meditation, philosophy or yoga, it's all the same. You can read scriptures, try techniques, learn from various teachers, but all they can tell you is what worked for them. None of them can guarantee that the same things would work for you.

So, when you read through this book or other books, visit a yoga class or watch a video, listen to yourself only. Try the tools offered, keep the ones that resonate with you and use them, modify them, neglect them, or break them in your own journey of self-exploration.

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# FOREWORD

My dear reader,

I thank you for supporting my creative efforts and taking the time to go through this book. It's my first finished piece of writing, I will genuinely appreciate your feedback, thoughts, or whatever comes up on my Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/yumasheva](http://www.facebook.com/yumasheva)) or Instagram (yuma131).

To finish off, I'd like to quote one of my favorite yoga teachers:

'I'm not a teacher. I'm a student of yoga. We're all here to learn'.

*Surinder Singh, Rishikesh*

## TRUE YOGA IS SIMPLE

Is your practice on and off? Dependent on group classes? Question instructions or blindly follow them? Scared of injuries or concentrated on results?

The author has experienced all these issues typical for beginners in yoga. She went to a Teacher Training Course as a newbie in yoga, got injured, had to admit the responsibility for fixing herself, didn't lose interest and motivation to continue her path.

Olga's story, tips, tricks, pieces of advice from enlightened Masters she met on her way cannot help but inspire to change your attitude towards yoga practice and embrace the beauty of simple asanas performed with genuine concentration.

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### READER QUOTES

Never thought that easy poses could lead to truly meditative states

*Kate*

The essence of yoga philosophy explained in simple words

*Steve*

Great tips applicable not just to yoga practice but to ordinary life

*María*

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Olga Yumasheva is a certified yoga teacher, linguist, musician. She sees herself as a facilitator, a channel, a bridge through which knowledge, information, energy is passed rather than a teacher.

«The mind will always look for complexity. Don't let it trick you. Relax, enjoy, and dive deep».



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