

YIN YOGA

Asanas, Pranayama & Mantras



Yin Yoga, a derivative of Taoist Yoga, combines Western scientific thought with ancient Indian and Chinese energy maps of the body (meridian or nadi system) to gain deeper understanding of how and why yoga works. Yin Yoga brings the practitioner into a deep and mindful state, stretching the connective tissue of the muscular system and bringing increased energy flow through the meridians.

The Tao of Yoga

Through deep meditation, the ancient gurus and spiritual practitioners gained insight into the energy system of the body. In India, yogis called this energy *prana* and its pathways *nadis*; in China, the Taoists called it *qi* (pronounced chee) and founded the science of acupuncture, which describes the flow of qi through pathways called meridians (please refer to the level 1 teacher training notes on meridians). The exercises of Tai Chi and Qi Gong were developed to

harmonize this qi flow; the Indian yogis developed their system of bodily postures to do the same – yoga.

Through the study of meridians, we know that Yin is the stable, passive, unmoving, inward motion of things; yang is the changing, moving, revealing, outward motion aspect. Other yin-yang polarities include cold-hot, down-up, calm-excited, sun-moon, feminine-masculine, night-day.

“Analyzing various yoga techniques from the perspective of yin and yang, the most relevant aspect is the elasticity of the tissues involved. Yang tissues like muscles are more fluid-filled, soft, and elastic; yin tissues like connective tissue (ligaments, tendons, and fascia) and bones are drier, harder, and stiffer. By extension, exercise that focuses on muscle tissue is yang; exercise that focuses on connective tissue is yin.” (Paul Grilley)

There is a movement in Western forms of yoga towards a more ‘yang’ practice such as Vinyasa, Power, and Ashtanga yoga. These styles of yoga infuse the muscles with blood, as do standing poses, Sun Salutations, or inversions. Once the muscles fill with blood, they become much easier to stretch. Yang-style yoga is wonderful for detoxing the body and emotions, conditioning the cardiovascular system and strengthening the muscles and mind. It could be debated that deep flexibility and stillness of mind, however, is generally not achieved through yang-style asanas to the degree to which yin yoga practice can. The Yin-style yoga of holding poses for at least 3-5 minutes brings greater flexibility to the body through the release of the connective tissue. Yin poses also develop the ability to meditate within the asana, giving rise to a greater ability to sit for longer periods of time in seated meditation (one of the ultimate goals of asana practice).

The Joint Stretch

“Why would Yin Yoga advocate stretching connective tissue? We must remember that connective tissue is different from muscle and needs to be exercised differently. Instead of the rhythmic contraction and release that best stretches muscle, connective tissue

responds best to a slow, steady load. If you gently stretch connective tissue by holding a yin pose for a long time, the body will respond by making them a little longer and stronger—which is exactly what you want. “ (Paul Grilley)

Yin tissues that we are targeting are the denser, deeper, less elastic tissues, such as the ligaments, joint capsules, cartilage, bones, and fascial networks of the body. Whilst connective tissue is found in every bone, muscle, and organ, for Yin yoga we are most concerned more with the connective tissue in the joints. If you don't use your full range of joint flexibility, the connective tissue will slowly shorten to the minimum length needed for your everyday activities. Prolonged shortening of connective tissue will bring rigidity and inflexibility into the joints, minimizing physical activity, and making the body more susceptible to injury. We must remember when practicing Yin yoga that we need to completely relax our muscles to allow the prana to fully penetrate the connective tissue. This may be counter-intuitive for some people who associate yoga with a 'workout' and feel there has to be some kind of strain felt within the muscles. Yin yoga reminds us to soften not just the muscular system of the body but also our attitude, so we may learn that 'less is more'.

The Yin Yoga Asanas

We can assign any creative name to our Yin yoga asanas. There's no right or wrong and like any standard yoga pose, there are variations of the pose names from school to school. The idea is to take traditional Hatha yoga *seated* postures (no standing poses in yin yoga as it is not comfortable to hold for long periods of time) and adapt them. Each student will look different within the pose based on their intuitive and healing needs. Props are often essential to bring deep comfortability, yet are not mandatory. Yin Yoga is a cooling practice and as such, only a light warm-up of a few sun salutes is needed. Be sure to have blankets on hand for students as the body cools within the asana. Cooling is a natural response when a person experiences a healing release. Shivering is actually encouraged as it creates a release of tension – this is the nervous system's primary reflex to unlock subconscious blocks in the body/mind. The prana literally shakes through the blocks, releasing what no longer serves our higher good. This phenomenon also happens within yang style yoga practice and an unaware teacher or

practitioner may seek to control these involuntary movements, incorrectly believing they are fatigued. The shaking or pulsing must be encouraged for deep cellular healing. It is not uncommon for an orgasmic feeling to be experienced if the shaking is allowed to continue as all nadis (meridians) and chakras will ultimately explode with light and prana (specifically Shakti energy – the feminine principle).

It is important in Yin yoga stretches to be very physically comfortable. Observe your facial expressions – the face needs to be relaxed – any tightening of the face is a sign to ease off. Proceed cautiously, gradually extending the depth of poses and the length of time you spend in them (very gentle poses can be held up to 20 minutes, however, we may term this 'Restorative Yoga').

The Three Tattvas of Yin Yoga Practice

A *tattva* is the reality of a thing, or its category or principal nature. Sarah Powers offers us three very simple and very effective principles for the yin practice.

1. Come into the pose to an appropriate depth ;
2. Resolve to remain still ;
3. Hold the pose for time.

To give a deeper understanding of the Three Tattvas on Yin Yoga Practice, we can expand on each point:

1. Bring your student into the pose to their full extension initially so they are aware of where the point of resistance is within the pose. If we were to hold the asana at full extension for five minutes, we would injure ourselves – therefore, ask your student to ease back from the full extension to a place where they are simultaneously comfortable but still feeling energy (prana) in their meridians (i.e. still feeling a gentle release). Yin Yoga encourages the practitioner to find their own natural, organic shape within the pose. If your intuition wants you to turn your head to the side; bend your knee/elbow; round your

spine etc, you must do so. The body has its own divine intelligence and will move to a place within the pose that will conduct the best throughput of energy, providing the highest form of healing. Each body is different and if there has been repetitive movement and injury within the body, it may be appropriate to find a shape within the body that best 'unravels' the blockage. This can be counter-intuitive to the strict alignment techniques within other styles of yoga and can challenge many experienced 'yang' style yoga practitioners. Be prepared to break all the rules and listen to the inner guidance!

2. If you cannot remain still within the pose, you need to keep modifying the asana until you can. Meditation is the goal here. Small movement is allowed to deepen into a pose as the mind/body relaxes. Exploring deeper states of consciousness within, facilitated by this powerful internal practice, can mean the body will suddenly 'unlock' long-held blockages. As such, the practitioner is allowed to move to deepen the pose as feels appropriate. Fidgeting, scratching, looking around etc is distracting and not encouraged. No darting gaze is allowed either and it is recommended that there is no drishti; rather, the eyes are closed.
3. 5 minutes is recommended in a Yin yoga pose due to the fact that it takes 2.5minutes to activate the connective tissue; hence the remaining 2.5minutes is where the release and healing occurs. If you the Yin pose is fairly dynamic, a 3 or 4 minute hold is suitable. Ensure that if the pose requires left and right sides of the body, the time is held equally on both sides of the body.

The Flow of Qi

“Even if you only spend a few minutes a couple times a week practicing several of these poses, you'll be pleasantly surprised at how different you feel when you sit to meditate. But that improved ease may not be the only or even the most important benefit of Yin Yoga. If Hiroshi Motoyama and other researchers are right—if the network of connective tissue does correspond with the meridians of acupuncture and the nadis of yoga—strengthening and stretching connective tissue may be critical for your long-term health.

Chinese medical practitioners and yogis have insisted that blocks to the flow of vital energy throughout our body eventually manifest in physical problems that would seem, on the surface, to have nothing to do with weak knees or a stiff back. Much research is still needed to explore the possibility that science can confirm the insights of yoga and Traditional Chinese Medicine. But if yoga postures really do help us reach down into the body and gently stimulate the flow of qi and prana through the connective tissue, Yin Yoga serves as a unique tool for helping you get the greatest possible benefit from yoga practice.” (Paul Grilley)

Pranayama

Maharaja Pranayama is the most appropriate breathwork technique to use in a Yin yoga pose. Also known as the ‘Royal Breath’, Maharaja Pranayama involves 3-part nostril breathing on the inhalation and 3-part breathing on the exhalation. Whilst there is no pause between the 3 parts, or chambers, of the torso, there is a definite order to fill the lower belly, then ribcage, then chest on the inhalation and a reversal of the 3 chambers on the exhalation. There is also a strong focus on creating an even-ness of breath so that the rhythm of the in-breath is even to the rhythm of the out-breath. For beginners, it may be useful to count on the inhalation and match the exhalation with the same count – eg. Inhale, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; Exhale 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (or whatever count matches the length of breath).

3-Part Breathing

Yogis use 3-part breathing (Maharaja Pranayama) in every yoga practice with the intention to use 3-part breathing in every moment of life. There is a traditional belief that we are only assigned a certain number of breaths per lifetime and we will have longevity if we learn to slow down our breathing. People who run around busy all the time will weaken their energy and their heart and are likely to either have illness or shorten their life expectancy.

The nature of our breath tells many stories. If our inhale is longer than our exhale, we become over-excited and jittery as we increase adrenaline production. Many people believe this sounds

appealing, yet we cannot sustain this space; ultimately it will lead to anxiety and panic attacks as well as adrenal fatigue. If our exhale is longer than our inhale we become depressed and feel the world is a dark place. Be mindful of people when you ask, 'How are you?' and they sigh first before answering: "(long sigh)...I'm ok". You know they're not ok. Long, slow, deep, EVEN breaths are the key to mental and emotional stability, giving rise to Higher Connection, creativity, health, wellbeing and joyous contentment. It's a place of feeling comfort in both the fullness of the in-breath and the emptiness of the out-breath. When observed acutely, the pause and interchange between each breath can lead to ecstasy. Your Universal Self exists in this space - a place without the usual unbalanced controlling, "if only...", "what if..." mind chatter. Enter into heightened awareness of that delicious throbbing pulsation that is your Pure Divinity.

How to do 3-part breathing:

Sit up straight or lay on your back. When doing a healing session, talk your client through these steps and repeat until you can see the rise and fall of the breath from lower belly to collarbones and back down again.

Inhaling Air is inhaled through the nose – the lower belly blossoms open, drawing the breath into the ribs. The ribs expand upwards and sideways, drawing the breath to the chest. The chest fills to the collarbones. It is said we have three chambers in the torso to fill as we inhale.

Exhaling Air is exhaled through the nose – decreasing the volume of the chest – the lungs contract, squeezing out stale air and physical/emotional toxins, the rib cage inwards and down and the lower belly naturally empties (the navel automatically draws towards the spine without effort). Remember to empty all three chambers on the exhalation.

To get the most out of the breathing exercises, good respiration begins with a slow, long exhalation and the lungs should not completely empty during exhalation, nor do they fill completely during inhalation. About 10% of stale air stays in to keep the lungs inflated. It is important to practice natural breathing every day until effective breathing has become natural.

Testing your Breathing

You can either sit in a chair or lay down on the floor.

- Lie on your back and place each hand lightly on the lower belly, parallel with the bottom ribs, fingertips touching. Become mindful of your body.
- Breathe in slowly, deeply and silently. Feel the lower belly move outward and notice your hands also moving outward, fingertips moving apart, as the belly expands.
- Breathe out slowly, smoothly, and silently. Concentrate on the feeling in the lower belly. Notice the lower belly contracting and fingertips touching again.
- Move one of your hands to rest lightly on your chest, breathe. Concentrate on detecting any differences in the movements of your chest.
- Repeat steps 1-3, squeezing the lower belly on out-breaths and releasing on in-breaths, for up to five minutes. Relax for a few minutes before getting up.

Slow breathing

A truly wonderful phenomenon occurs when we hold our Yin poses for 3-5 minutes. We surrender to a deeper internal state, reaching an alpha and ultimately a theta brainwave. We generally function in beta brainwave in our normal everyday reality – planning, problem-solving, analysing, making ‘to-do’ lists, regretting the past and creating anxiety for the future. With yoga breath work, we can immediately enter a reduction of the mental oscillations, reaching alpha brainwave. This creates a feeling of internal space, as we literally slow down the number of thoughts we have. Our organs can repair more easily in this state. When we become masters of slowing our breathing even further, we can enter theta brainwave, also known as God or Universal Consciousness. In this space all things become known and possible. In this space, miraculous healing can occur. We can also manifest easily through prayer, plus we receive divine inspiration through revelation (opposite to analysis, where revelation is a spontaneous knowing rather than a logical deduction). In this space, we can talk to spirit guides, angels,

loved ones who have crossed over, pets who have crossed over and ascended masters. Messages come through hearing, internal seeing, knowing and feeling – all aspects of intuition.

Yin Yoga is a perfect opportunity to enter alpha and theta brainwaves and creates inspired motivation to practice regularly. When you have the experience of 'being breathed', you have entered theta brainwave. Often when this first occurs, we immediately start thinking again, in an attempt to label this deep peaceful bliss we are experiencing. Of course, this rapidly takes us out of the theta brainwave. When we practice regularly, we become comfortable in a state of non-thinking or non-mind and can rejuvenate deeply in these long held meditative states.

Kriyas

Yin Yoga is exceptional to bring stored physical and emotional blockages to the surface. When we feel a pain or perhaps a feeling of anger or despair come to the conscious level, we need to incorporate a cleansing breath (kriya). We take 3 full inhalations through the nose and 3 exhalations out of the mouth. Each exhalation gradually builds strength and the final exhalation is a prolonged sigh accompanied by making an audible sound that may reflect the feeling. There are also specific sounds for the meridians that can further release tensions or anguish (please refer to our Yin Yoga Meridians module for more information).

Alternate Nostril Breathing – Nadi Shodhana

Yin Yoga is gentle and if we are to use a specific pranayama technique, Alternate Nostril Breathing (Nadi Shodhana) would be a wonderful soothing accompaniment to our Yin practice. Nadi Shodhana is best performed either at the beginning or end of the class to open the nadis (meridians) and assist the rising of Kundalini energy. It is also a perfect technique to incorporate just before Savasana or final seated meditation.



Nadi Shodhana brings prana to the *sushumna* or central meridian (the energy line of the spine). As we know, the spinal column is the central lifeline of the physical body and also of the spiritual body (known as the 'sushumna' or the body's great river).

Spiralling around the sushumna are two nerve channels known as Ida (activated by left nostril breathing) and Pingala (activated by right nostril breathing). With nadi shodhana, we stimulate Ida and Pingala channels, therefore creating pranic flow to the sushumna (spinal column). Prana interweaves both the physical and the astral at the same time. In subtle body terms, the sushumna nadi is the path to enlightenment. Physically, alternate nostril breathing enlivens the spine, whilst metaphysically, kundalini (potential spiritual energy, symbolised by the cosmic or rainbow serpent) rises and opens the chakras, starting from the base of the spine; it rises up from its origin at the *muladhara* (base) chakra to its true home at the *sahasrara* (thousand-fold) chakra at the crown of the head (see our Yin Yoga Philosophy & Chakras module for more information).

The ida and pingala nadis spiral around the sushumna nadi like the double helix of our DNA, crossing each other at every chakra. If you visualise the Caduceus, the Western medical symbol, it shows the ultimate picture of healing, the rising of the ida, pingala, and sushumna pathways. The ida nadi begins and ends on the left side of sushumna. Ida is regarded as the feminine or moon nadi. Please write down a description of feminine energy:

Pingala, represents masculine or sun energy nadi, begins and ends to the right of sushumna.

Please write down a description of masculine energy:

In your opinion, why is it so important for physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health to keep an equal balance between our feminine and masculine nature:

Yoga creates Equilibrium

In order to truly experience enlightenment, we must have a balance between our feminine and masculine internal forces (which will be displayed in our outer reality). Even the term 'Hatha' speaks of this vital balance; 'Ha', meaning sun or solar, and 'tha', meaning moon or lunar. Yoga points repeatedly towards this balance, for without it as we are shown by Ida and Pingala nadis, we are unable to reach our highest potential as energy will stagnate in the lower spine. We need to move (Shakti) the energy through the sushumna in equal balance to experience bliss (Ananda).

The most powerful method of balancing Ida and Pingala is Nadi Shodhana (Sanskrit for "nadi or meridian cleansing"). A few rounds of this classical pranayama technique at the end of an asana practice restores equilibrium between the two nadis and compensates for any imbalance you may have inadvertently caused during your daily life.

To employ alternate nostril breathing or nadi shodhana, adopt Vishnu Mudra or the index and middle fingers of the right hand on the third eye center.

The following sequence outlines the steps to alternate nostril breathing:

1. Place the index and middle fingers of the right hand on the third eye centre;
2. Place the thumb beside the right nostril and the ring and little fingers beside the left nostril;
3. Breathe in through the left nostril for five counts, closing the right nostril with your thumb;
4. Close the left nostril;
5. Breathe out through the right nostril for five counts, keeping the left nostril closed with ring and little fingers;
6. Breathe in through the right nostril for five counts, keeping the left nostril closed;
7. Breathe out through the left nostril for five counts, keeping the right nostril closed.

The above sequence is one round. Try to do at least three rounds, building up to twenty. Nadi Shodhana is best done before meditation, however, for a yin yoga class it is a lovely practice to commence a class, ensuring the rise and balance of feminine energy.

Retention of Breath (Kumbhaka – meaning *pot*; retaining of breath in the pot of the belly)

When guiding students who have been attending your yin yoga classes for a few months, the breath can be retained after the inhalation in nadi shodhana. If inhaling and exhaling for five counts, the breath should be retained for five counts. Retention of breath on the inhale is called 'antara kumbhaka'. Tri-bandha (mula, uddiyana and jalandhara bandhas) is employed on antara kumbhaka whilst the internal drishti goes to the third eye chakra. Retention of breath on the exhale (bahya kumbhaka) is only for advanced students, and should be done under the guidance of a teacher.

Mantras for Transformation

Mantras are united as powerful forces in relation to healing, clearing and transcending old energy, and ultimately transforming into wholeness and balance. A mantra is an affirmation or a positive and concise statement that draws higher energy into the present moment. Mantras are most powerful when articulated internally (or said aloud or written down), commencing with “I

am...” “I...” or “I have...” not “I am going to...”. “I am going to...” is referring to a future event. Mantras are most effective when harnessing Universal energy into the ‘now’ for manifestation.

Mantras for Meridians

Meridian	Related Organ Function	Metaphysical Function/Dysfunction	Mantra
Stomach	Digestion	Digesting new ideas, new belief systems. Eg. Accepting that perhaps veganism/vegetarianism is a better way to live for the majority of the time. This could be in stark contrast to how you were raised.	<i>“I digest new ideas and ways with ease.”</i>
Spleen	Transforms & transports blood and fluids in the body	Obsession and worry. Going over and over an event whether it be for the future or something that has passed. Fixated on outcomes or what ‘should have been’. Attached to a certain person (e.g. love interest) to the detriment of oneself.	<i>“I am relaxed in my thoughts and trust in life.”</i>
Heart	Circulation of blood	Blood is red and represents Love. If we are not circulating efficeintly in self-love, we can be obsessing over others and	<i>“I love and accept ALL of myself.”</i>

		external events in order to feel ok and in control (spleen meridian dysfunction). Heart meridian healing, therefore, is about loving oneself unconditionally and resting in the knowing that you are enough.	
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Each meridian has a corresponding feeling or emotion. When we understand the metaphysical aspects of each meridian, deeper healing can occur. Often at the times emotions come to the surface, we are unsure how to release them. Observing an emotion with the ‘Light of your Awareness’ *without resistance* provides a tremendous ability to transcend (rise above) the emotion. It is in a sense ‘half way there’ in terms of healing. Often we need to release the emotion to complete the healing cycle. If we continue to bury emotions and don’t allow them to move (E-Motions: Energy in Motion) they will become buried again in our consciousness and create a pain body both emotionally and physically, which will result in the same unwanted patterns being carried out in our lives. Repeating a mantra by allowing it to reverberate in the mind over and over can create a change in the mind’s habitual neural pathway (like a loop of same repetitive thinking and belief systems). In a sense we create an ‘exit ramp’ from the mental loop for a new thinking/belief to be created. The meridians energetically speak to us about our emotions which are like archetypal energies common to all human beings. When we can identify the physical and metaphysical function on the meridian, we can then create a healing mantra for transformation.

Small Intestine	Absorbs nutrients and assists in digestion & elimination	The ‘small’ intestine takes care of the finer details of digestion and elimination, and as such metaphysically reminds us to look after the smaller details of our lives. When we care for the small aspects of life, the larger projects will be achieved effortlessly. Cleaning out your cupboards and doing all the seemingly inconsequential, menial tasks at home and at work clear the energy for your big dreams to manifest.	<i>“I care for the small details in my life effortlessly.”</i>
Bladder	Stores and eliminates urine	The bladder is a ‘letting go’ organ, so our soul lessons relate to acceptance of what is/has been and the ability to surrender with trust that events need to be as they have been for our highest good/growth.	<i>“I let go of my past with loving acceptance.”</i>
Kidney	Filters blood and add water to urine for release	If you are ‘pissed off’ at life or someone for extended periods of time the kidneys can be affected. Bitter emotions are toxic and can physically add a toxic load to your urine. The water element is key here – pure thoughts, pure	<i>“I accept others’ differences and flow peacefully through life.”</i>

		water, clean urine – it’s all about the flow.	
Pericardium	Muscle wall surrounding the heart (protects the heart)	The pericardium can energetically open or close, allowing love in or ‘walling’ off the experience of love. Many people need to open the pericardium and allow the heart to be vulnerable to being loved and possibly hurt in the process. To not open to love cripples the soul. The other side is there are people who constantly ‘give their heart away’ and need to learn how to protect their heart (protection is different to closing off the heart altogether).	<i>“I open the gateway to my heart and feel comfortable in my vulnerability”; also “I protect my personal energy.”</i>

Triple-Warmer/Burner	3 'burners', located in thorax, abdomen, and pelvis. The Upper Burner controls our intake, the Middle Burner governs transformation, the Lower Burner supports elimination	Triple-warmer or Triple-burner energy involves our ability to take in life's experiences without resistance, to process our emotions related to these experiences with a sense of joy and to let go of any stuck, hurtful or resentful emotions. A perfect balance is required to live a harmonious life.	<i>"I am balanced."</i>
Gall-bladder	Stores and excretes bile (strong relationship with the liver)	Gall-bladder and Liver work in tandem to process and release toxins. Dark, angry thoughts can get clogged in our system, leading to violence in our words and actions. We need to accept that we have to find a way to heal our pain and not use destructive force to control life.	<i>"I purge what no longer serves my higher good with calmness."</i>
Liver	The liver filters and processes blood, metabolises nutrients, and detoxifies harmful substances	Processing our feelings and understanding that without challenges we could not grow spiritually gives us gratitude for all life's experiences and eliminates anger and resistance from our life.	<i>"I process experiences and emotions with peace and gratitude."</i>

Lung	Takes in breath and life-force energy (prana) – without this we would die quickly	Lungs metaphysically govern our worthiness to breathe in the magnificence of life.	<i>“Knowing I am worthy, I breathe in life’s goodness.”</i>
Large Intestine:	Elimination of solid wastes	Holding on to old ways can keep our souls stuck in patterns where we may feel safe, yet are failing to grow in consciousness. Leaving our job, partner, hometown, country etc can sometimes be what is required to take a quantum leap in healing, transformation and consciousness	<i>“I trust in elimination to stay in harmony with life’s cycles.”</i>

Yin Yoga Asanas Activity

Yin Yoga postures focus on releasing the major joints of the body. See if you can create your own yin pose (or a variation of the poses listed). Write down appropriate YIN poses (comfortable to hold for 5 minutes) plus your own visualisation *and* mantra (affirmation) for:

SHOULDER JOINT:

HIP JOINT:

KNEE JOINT:

ANKLE JOINT:

ELBOW & WRIST JOINT:

NECK:
