

THE SIVANANDA FIVE POINTS OF YOGA

The following five points constitute the essential physical, mental and spiritual practices of yoga:

1) Proper Exercise—*Asana* (Steady Pose)

Yoga regards the body as a vehicle for the soul in its journey towards perfection. Asanas are designed to develop not only the body, but to also broaden the mental faculties and spiritual capacities. Health is a state wherein all organs function perfectly under the intelligent control of the mind. Yoga asanas are meant to be held for some time. Initially our concern is simply to increase flexibility. Your body is as young as it is flexible.

Yoga postures focus first on the health of the spine, its strength and flexibility. The spinal column houses the all-important nervous system. By maintaining the spine's flexibility and strength through exercise, circulation is increased and the nerves are ensured their supply of nutrients and oxygen. Asanas work on the internal machinery of the body, the glands and organs, as well as the muscles. They affect the deeper and subtler parts of the body. The internal organs receive massage and stimulation through the various movements of the asanas and are toned into more efficient functioning. The endocrine system (glands and hormones) is rejuvenated, helping to balance the emotions and improve the mental outlook on life.

Hand in hand with the practice of yoga postures, we practice deep breathing and concentration of the mind. One hour of practice will give one hour of exercise, one hour of deep relaxation and one hour of meditation once one learns to meditate in each pose. The yoga system of exercise can be compared to no other in its complete overhaul of the entire being. Performed slowly and consciously, the asanas go far beyond mere physical benefits, becoming mental exercises in concentration and meditation.

The purpose of yoga is to stop the thinking mind so that one can enter into self-realization. We do this by learning to control our minds. Asanas are the first step on this path. The resultant mental power is used to delve into and directly study the hidden mysteries of life. Yogis know that the mind is by nature unsteady and at every moment, it is being affected and stimulated by sight, sound, taste, touch and smell. Therefore, the yogi attempts to detach the mind from the objects of the sense and draw it inward, freed from all distractions and kept under control. By practicing the yoga postures, not as mere calisthenics, but

with awareness of the muscles used, of the breathing and of the relaxation, the mind is detached from the senses little by little.

2) Proper Breathing—*Pranayama*

Control of the *prana*—or subtle energy—leads to control of the mind. Yogic breathing exercises are called *pranayama*, which means breath restraint. The grossest manifestation of prana in the human body is the motion of the lungs. This motion acts like the spark that sets the other forces of the body in motion. Pranayama begins by controlling the motion of the lungs, by which the prana is controlled. When the subtle prana is controlled, all gross manifestations of prana in the physical body will slowly come under control. When we are able to do this, the whole body will be under our control. All diseases of the body can be destroyed at the root by controlling and regulating the prana. In ordinary breathing, we extract very little prana. When we concentrate and consciously regulate the breathing, we are able to store a greater amount. The person who has abundant pranic energy radiates vitality and strength. This can be felt by all who come into contact with them.

Most people use only a fraction of their potential lung capacity when breathing. They breathe shallowly, barely expanding the rib cage. They suffer from lack of oxygen and therefore become tired easily and don't know why. The **Full Yogic Breath** is the proper type of breath.

3) Proper Relaxation—*Savasana*

In order to achieve perfect relaxation, three methods are used by yogis:

Physical Relaxation: We know that every action is the result of a thought. Thoughts take form in action. Just as the mind may send a message to the muscles ordering them to contract, the mind may also send another message to bring relaxation. The practice of auto-suggestion during final relaxation uses this technique.

Mental Relaxation: When experiencing mental tension, one should breathe slowly and rhythmically for a few minutes. The mind should follow the breath. If at any point, the mind becomes distracted, it should gently be brought back to the flow of breath. Soon the mind will become calm and you may experience a floating sensation.

Spiritual Relaxation: However much one may try to relax the mind, all tensions and worries cannot be completely removed until one reaches spiritual relaxation. As long as a person identifies with the body and mind, there will be worries, sorrows, anxieties, fear and anger. These emotions, in turn bring tension. Yogis know that unless a person can withdraw from the body/ mind idea and separate him/herself from the ego-consciousness, there is no way of obtaining

complete relaxation. The yogi identifies him/herself with the all-pervading, all-powerful, all-peaceful and joyful Self, or Pure Consciousness within. This ability comes with the knowledge that the source of all power, peace and strength is in the Self, not in the body. We tune to this by asserting the real nature, which is “I am that pure Consciousness or Self.” This identification with the Self completes the process of relaxation.

4) Proper Diet—Vegetarian

The yogic diet is a lacto-vegetarian one, consisting of pure, simple, natural foods, which are easily digested and promote health. Simple meals aid the digestion and assimilation of food. Nutritional requirements fall into five categories: protein, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals, fats and fiber. One should have certain knowledge of dietetics in order to balance the diet. Eating foods from nature, grown in fertile soil (preferably organic, free from chemicals and pesticides, and not genetically modified) will help ensure a better supply of these nutritional needs. Processing, refining and over-cooking destroys much food value. The food at the top of the food chain, being directly nourished by the sun, has the greatest life-promoting properties. The food value of animal flesh is termed a “second-hand” source of nutrition and is inferior in nature. All natural foods (fruits, vegetables, seeds, nuts and grains) have, in varying quantities, different proportions of these essential nutrients. As a source of protein, these are easily assimilated by the body. However, second-hand sources are often more difficult to digest and are of less value to the body’s metabolism. Dairy products, legumes, nuts and seeds provide the vegetarian with an adequate supply of protein. A healthy motto is “eat to live, not live to eat.” The purpose of eating is to supply our being with the life-force or prana, the vital life energy. Concerned with the subtle effect that food has on the mind and astral body, the yogi avoids foods that are overly stimulating. Foods that leave the mind calm and the intellect sharp are preferred. One who seriously takes to the path of yoga would avoid ingesting meats, fish, eggs, onions, garlic, coffee, tea (except herbal), alcohol and drugs. The yogic diet will help you attain a high standard of health, keen intellect and serenity of mind.

5. Positive Thinking and Meditation—Vedanta & Dhyana

When the surface of a lake is still, one can see the bottom very clearly. This is impossible when the surface is agitated by waves. In the same way, when the mind is still with no thoughts or desires, you can see the Self. This is called “yoga.” We can control the mental agitation by concentrating the mind either internally or externally. Internally, we focus on the ‘Self’ or the consciousness of “I am.” Externally, we may use other points of focus. When the mind is fully concentrated, time passes unnoticed, as if it did not exist. To achieve a state of

lasting happiness and absolute peace, we must first know how to calm the mind, to concentrate and go beyond the mind. By turning the mind's concentration inward upon the Self we can deepen that experience of perfect concentration. This is the state of meditation.