

Developing Your Own Practice

part one

How long have you been going to your yoga class?

Do you ever do any practice at home? For many students of yoga, making the leap from yoga class to home practice is not an easy one. To start with, many of us do not understand how to create a sequence that makes sense, and has a beneficial effect. There is the well-founded concern that, without our teacher to guide us, we may create a sequence, or perform individual postures in such a way as to produce a deleterious result.

Then there is the (main!) problem of self-discipline.

When we go to class, all we have to do is make sure we get there, and the rest is taken care of. We are there for the duration of the class, and we do all of the practices asked of us.

Making time, and sticking to, a sequence at home is quite another thing.

The benefits of creating a regular home practice, however, are legend, and in some ways far out-weigh those gained from attending classes alone. When we create a time to do our own practice, we enter another dimension on our journey with yoga, and the ultimate journey of self-discovery. Without the distractions of comparing ourselves (either adversely or favourably) to other students, and without any encouragement or inspiration from our teacher, our true relationship to the practice and to ourselves begins to emerge more clearly. A home practice can be a sacred time which we give to ourselves, creating a buffer between the demands and responsibilities of our lives and what we know, on a deeper level, our true goals and values are. Beyond all of these benefits are those which cannot be expressed in words, but which need to be experienced.

Over the next three articles, it is my aim to provide you with some sequences that you can use to begin to create a home practice. Each sequence is a practice in itself, and can also be used in conjunction with successive sequences to build a longer

practice. These sequences are designed to suit practitioners of an average level of health and fitness, and who have been attending regular classes for at least a year. They are not to be substituted for guidance from your teacher, but are intended to be an addition to your regular classes. Please don't attempt to do any of the postures unless you have been taught them first in class. If you have any queries, please ask your teacher's advice.

So, how do we begin developing and implementing a home practice of our own? Some of the fundamental considerations are contained in the 'Who, Why What' model.

Who is the sequence for?

This is where you need to be objective and realistic about your level of health, energy and ability, and also your age. If you have had a long illness, or are approaching middle age, or are a relative beginner, you will not wisely undertake the same kind of practice as someone who is fit, healthy, experienced and in their twenties. Also here you need to consider your lifestyle and profession. The aim of any good yoga

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practice is to create a balance between the active and the passive. If you have a sedentary job, you will benefit from a more dynamic practice. If your job is very physically demanding, or perhaps stressful, a more restful, recuperative style of practice may be more appropriate. As you get to know yourself a little better over time, you may also wish to modify the style of your practice to counter any dominant personality, mental or emotional tendencies. For example, if you are a competitive, over-achieving type in other areas of your life, you would be wise to try to introduce an attitude of self-acceptance and humility into your practice, rather than use your practice as just another avenue in which to compete or over-achieve. If you are, on the other hand, a little complacent or 'fixed' in other areas of your life, you might like to try to use your practice as a forum in which you can challenge yourself and create change.

Why are you doing it, what is the aim of the practice?

In this section, you need to consider your goals for your practice. These may be general goals such as moving towards greater health and vitality, or perhaps greater strength or flexibility. Or you may have specific goals such as working towards a particular asana, or creating a particular mental or physical effect. With regard to the latter, the time of day that you choose to do your practice, and what is to take place directly afterwards, is vital. If you are doing a morning practice, you may feel the need to build energy and stamina for the day ahead. If you are doing your practice after a stressful day at work, and are going to be eating and sleeping afterwards, you will want to create a more calming practice.

What will be included in the practice?

Even though I am providing you with sequences, you will still need to consider this. What you can do will depend on the amount of space and time you have, availability of props, and as already mentioned, you may choose to omit certain postures if they are not familiar to you, or if you have a pre-existing injury for which they are contraindicated. Also here you should consider how often you are going to be practising and what else you are going to be doing with your day, so that you can pace yourself wisely.

Most important is to understand that what really matters is not so much *what* we do as *how* we do it. Any sequence can be performed in a way that is energising and stimulating, or grounding and calming.

Although certain postures lend themselves more easily to either inward looking/calming (such as forward bends) or outward looking/energising (such as backward bends) the single most important thing that will define the effect that any practice has is our intention. Therefore, even if you have identified that you will be doing your practice in the evening and after a hard day, you can still practice standing poses and backbends. The main thing is to practise them with the idea that you are intending to promote grounding and calmness in your mind. The breath is integral to this, as both an ingredient to create our intention, and as a gauge to how our intention is unfolding. If our intention is to wind down, for example, a long, slow, soft breath will assist us in our endeavours to relax and let go. If we notice that the breath has become

short, forced, or ragged, we are alerted to the fact that we have somehow overexerted ourselves, and momentarily lost our focus. If our intention is to build energy and stamina, we can choose a slightly stronger breath; however, it should still remain even and unhurried. If in doubt, always rest between postures in Child Pose or Savasana, and only resume practice when the breath has returned to a soft and natural rate and rhythm.

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focus category: standing & balancing

All of the major asana groups possess unique benefits. Their physical benefits are echoed on the subtler planes of our being. The standing asanas help to build physical strength, stability and balance to the musculo-skeletal system. On a subtler level, they build the attributes of emotional stamina and inner strength (the ability to 'stand on our own two feet'), and the ability to focus. The balance postures improve co-ordination and sense of balance on a physical level, and on subtler layers help to attain a still and balanced mind.

<1. Supta Baddha Konasana (Reclining Bound Cobblers Pose)>



Try to lengthen the lower back, and let it soften downwards towards the floor. Observe the natural breath as it manifests in the abdomen. Notice the rising of the belly on the inhalation, and the sinking on the exhalation, for five minutes or longer.

<2. Forward Simhasana (Knees wide forward stretch)>



Keep the big toes together, and try to sit the tail back between the heels. Feel the front of the spine become long on the inhalation, and shorten a little on the exhalation.

<3. Open Cross-Legged Hip Stretch Stage One>



Cross the legs with the right leg in front. Let the feet stick out in front rather than tucking them in, and cross the shins over so that the heels and the knees are the same distance apart. Inhale, lengthen the front of the waist. As you exhale try to walk the hands forwards. Avoid 'folding' in the front of the waist. If there is any strain, especially in the knees, walk the hands back to a place that is comfortable.

Take five to ten long, slow breaths here.

<4. Open Cross-Legged Hip Stretch Stage Two>



Take one hand either side of the left knee. Inhale, and lengthen the front of the waist. As you exhale slowly walk the hands away so that the centre-line of the torso follows the centre line of the left knee. Make sure that your right sitting bone doesn't leave the floor.

Take five to ten long, slow breaths here, and then repeat the hip stretches with the left leg in front.

<5. Tadasana (Mountain pose)>



Feel the weight evenly balanced on the two feet. Try to feel the length that is possible in the spine, without becoming stiff. Feel the crown of the head parallel to the ceiling. Start to feel the breath rising into the ribcage on the inhale, and leaving on the exhale.

Start to consciously lengthen, slow down and even out the rhythm of your breath to a comfortable, sustainable length for you.

<6. Adho Mukha Svanasana (Down face dog)> [Sun Salutes can be placed here in the sequence.]



Try to expand the gap between the shoulder blades at the back, by rolling the armpits towards the front of the chest. Five slow, even breaths in the pose.

Sun salutes can be placed here in the sequence. Go to www.ayl.com.au for this sequence.

<7. Trikonasana (Triangle pose) right side>



Standing at the front of the mat in Tadasana, turn to your right, and then step your right foot out to the right, so that you are facing the long edge of the mat, in a wide stance. Turn the left foot in so that the big toe is turned towards the centre of the mat, and turn the right foot so that the big toe points straight ahead. Extend the arms out to shoulder height as you inhale, and as you exhale stretch out to the right and lengthen the right waist, parallel to the floor. Take the right hand down onto the shin or ankle only as far as you can without bending forwards from the waist.

Feel the breath moving in the spine. Five slow, even breaths, then inhale up to standing, and swivel the feet the other way to do the left side.

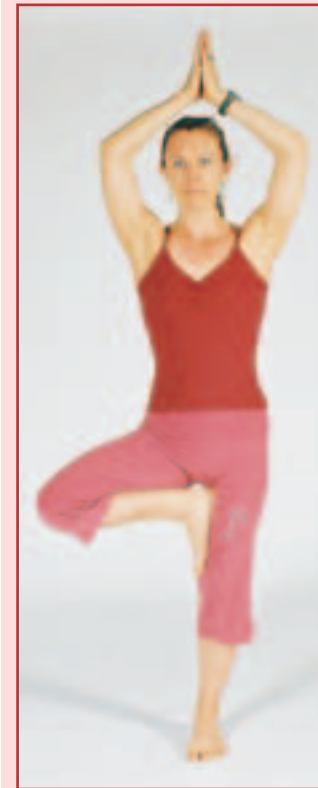
<8. Virabhadrasana 2 (Warrior 2) right side>



Between all of the standing postures, step back to standing at the front of your mat in Tadasana, until the breath is soft and easy. Step your right foot out to the right side. Take the feet a little wider apart than for Trikonasana. Turn the right foot out to the right and the left foot in towards the centre of the mat. Try to keep the front of the pelvis parallel to the long edge of the mat. Inhale, and raise the arms up to shoulder height. As you exhale bend the right knee to a right angle. The spine should remain upright, with the lower back neutral, tailbone hanging down. Try to bring the inside edge of the right knee back in line with the inside edge of the right ankle.

Five slow even breaths. Then on an exhalation, straighten the right knee. Take the hands to the hips, and swivel the feet the other way to come into Virabhadrasana 2 left side.

<11. Vrksasana (Tree pose)>



From Tadasana, find an eye focus straight ahead of you. Reach down and take your right ankle. Bring the right foot up to the inside edge of the left knee or thigh. If you are steady, inhale and bring the arms up beside the ears with the palms together. As you exhale bend the elbows.

Stay for five to ten long, slow, even breaths, then repeat for the left side.

<12. Pascimottanasana (Seated forward bend)>



Sit on a folded blanket, with the folded edge right under the sitting bones. With the hands behind you, come up onto the fingertips and try to sit up on the highest point of the sitting bones. Then take the fingertips to the floor just in front of the hips, inhale and stretch the arms up over the head. As you exhale try to hinge forwards from the hips. Do this a few times to warm up. Finally let the hands rest on the floor, somewhere that you are still able to support some of the weight of your body, and soften the shoulders. Try to lengthen the front of the waist. Keep working the legs, and pulling the feet to an upright. If there is any strain on the lower back, please bend the knees and rest the chest along the thighs instead.

Stay in the pose for at least ten long, slow, even breaths.

<9. Parsvakonasana (Side angle pose)>



From Tadasana again come in to Virabhadrasana 2 right side as before. Inhale then as you exhale take the right hand down to the mat on the inside edge of the foot, so that the right arm is assisting the right inner knee to draw back. Take the chin in to the chest, turn the head, and look up, and extend up through the left middle finger. Then turn the palm around so that you can see it, and on an exhale take the arm all the way over the head. Try not to lose the depth of the lunge in the right knee. Try to rotate the left ribs up and back, and the right buttock forwards and under. Take five breaths in the pose, inhale as you come up to standing, swivel the feet the other way, and repeat for the left side.

<10. Padottanasana (Standing wide legged forward stretch)>



From Tadasana step the right foot out to the right, and align the little toe sides of the feet to the short edges of your mat. Take your hands onto your hips, inhale, and as you exhale bend forwards, trying to hinge from the hips rather than round the back. Take the hands to the floor between the feet, shoulder width apart. If they won't reach without bending the knees, take the hands onto the shins wherever they do reach. Tuck the chin in. If the elbows bend, try to lift the shoulders up away from the ears. Allow the torso to hang with gravity. Don't bounce!

13. Supine Twist



Lie on your back and bend the knees, with the feet on the floor. Try to shift the hips to the left of the centre line. Stretch your arms out to shoulder height, palms down. Then stretch your right leg straight along the floor, and tuck your left foot behind your right knee. Inhale, and as you exhale take the left knee over to the right, and turn the head to the left.

Ten long, slow even breaths here, and then come back to the centre, bend the knees, and shift the hips to the right before repeating for the left side.

<14. Viparita Karani (Legs up the wall)>



Fold a blanket, then sitting beside your folded blanket next to a wall roll your buttocks on to it. Extend your legs up the wall. Try to keep the buttocks as close to the wall as you comfortably can. Have the feet together, knees together, and try not to let the feet flop apart. Take the arms over the head, or place the hands on the belly, and close the eyes.

Rest here with natural breathing for five to ten minutes.