

Overcoming Obstacles

by Flo Fenton

If you have been attempting to create and stick to a regular home practice since the last issue (or before) then you will know by now that it is not easy. You may also have noticed that it seems that to be hardest of all to get on your mat when you really need to do your yoga!

Comparatively speaking, it is much easier to get on your mat and do your practice when everything in your life is running smoothly, and you are feeling fairly content. When things are not going as you would like them to, and you are feeling frustrated, angry or depressed, you make every excuse in the world not to do it. In this, the second article in our series on creating a consistent home practice, I thought it might be pertinent to acknowledge this phenomenon, and offer some words of encouragement.

To begin with, let me say that this phenomenon exists for all practitioners of yoga, not just beginners. Often when beginners to yoga see longer term practitioners who look fairly adept in the postures, they get the impression – which is a misconception – that the postures, and indeed the whole practice of yoga, have become ‘easy’ for those people. There is even an implication that they are just ‘different’ somehow, and that it is just easier for them. Not so! Just as long-term practitioners find ‘another place’ in the asanas themselves, so that there is always physical challenge, so too in the practice of yoga as a whole. Like the peeling of an onion’s many skins, there is always another layer; there is always more ‘stuff’ to look at! What changes is not that we become free from discomfort, but that we become used to, or comfortable with, our discomfort. It is a bit like the old adage of what makes the difference between a failure and a success. The difference is not in the number of times they each failed, but in the number of times they tried again.

But why is it that it is just so difficult to

get on our mat when we are not feeling good? Well, it is important to remember that the very nature of a yoga practice is self-reflection. By doing a committed, regular practice, we are brought face to face with ourselves and the workings of our own mind. It is not an accident that underlying emotions or tensions are brought to the surface and become conscious when we practise yoga - it is an intended and expected part of the process. However, it is the nature of the mind to avoid this self-scrutiny – after all, it is uncomfortable! Especially when the mind is disturbed, and there is already a high level of discomfort with oneself, it is very hard to get on the mat and look deeper within.

Thus we may find that though our intention was firm in the beginning, it gradually becomes less so, and we create more difficulties so as to have reasons to avoid our practice. We feel ‘guilty’ that we haven’t met the challenge that we set ourselves, which only adds to the level of discomfort around the issue; and before we know where we are, we have lost our practice.

In his *Yoga Sutras* (1.30), the sage Patanjali enumerates nine obstacles in the path of yoga. There are many rather different translations, but I understand them to be: illness, mental dullness, doubt, procrastination, tiredness, craving for enjoyment, delusions/misconceptions (about oneself, or the nature of the practice), impatience (in achieving desired results) and instability (lack of mental firmness/will-power).

How can we overcome these obstacles,

and maintain our regular practice?

At the end it is down to the level of your commitment to self-knowledge and inner harmony, but here are a few ideas that may help.

1. Regularity in other areas of your life will greatly enhance your ability to maintain regularity in a yoga practice. That means regular, balanced meals at the same time each day, regular sleep and enough of it, and moderation in all stimulating influences. These include not just the obvious sugar, caffeine and other drugs, but also social stimulation – for example, time with friends and in large groups should be balanced by quiet time with family, or alone. Even watching too much TV can have an unbalancing effect.
2. Have a regular practice time and stick to it no matter what, just as you would if it were a class you had committed to.
3. Set yourself realistic goals. Rather than committing to an hour every day and then giving up, set yourself the goal of half an hour three times a week, or less if necessary. The main thing is just to develop a routine of getting on your mat. If you really don’t have time, or feel really agitated, just roll out your mat, lie down and practice five deep, conscious breaths. You will often find that you then feel like doing a little bit more...and if you don’t, those five conscious breaths may well be the best part of your day anyway.
4. Be in the moment. Try not to be goal oriented – not aiming to get somewhere or achieve anything. Instead, think of your practice as ‘check-in’ time. If you have any goal, make it to observe yourself as you are today, knowing that tomorrow will almost certainly be different. Let yourself just be – and enjoy!
5. Expand your view of your practice. Rather than seeing it as the time you spend on your mat, think of that time as just the time when you cleanse your body and mind to sharpen your focus in order to better complete your whole practice. See your practice as including the way that you relate to yourself and others, the respect that you show to the planet and to all beings on it. In other words, practise the *yamas* and *niyamas*; if you are not familiar with these, read the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. Start to see even your daily activities as opportunities to practise your yoga. Set yourself an

approach for the week that is a challenge for you (e.g. 'patience', 'gratitude', 'humility' or 'consistency') and bring it to every interaction or task that you do.

6. Go beyond asana. Include more than just postures in your practice. Make time whilst on your mat for some breathing practices (*pranayama*), chanting of mantra, and meditation. A good pranayama, which is suitable for most people, is Nadhi Shodhana. Start with 5-10 rounds after asana practice, and then try to sit for 5 minutes just observing the natural breath in the nostrils. If you are new to mantra, start by just chanting 'om' eight times, observing the vibrations in the body.

7. Take inspiration from the ancient sages by reading the classic texts on yoga, such as the *Yoga Sutras* or the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, or avail yourself of the wisdom of more contemporary masters such as BKS Iyengar, Swami Satyananda, Desikachar and many others.

8. Find a teacher who inspires you and, if you have difficulties, ask questions.

9. Keep a journal of your experiences in yoga and in life. See your life as a connected thread that unfolds like a story, and your path as a continual learning and growing.

<Some notes on Forward Bends>

To bend forward sustainably and safely, please modify by bending the knees as much as necessary to prevent any sense of strain in the lower back. In seated forward bends, those who are stiff must use enough height (two to three folded blankets, or a bolster) beneath the sitting bones to tilt the pelvis forward, and thus create a hinge-movement from the hips, and not some part of the lower back. Try to prevent rounding in the lower back; think of lengthening the belly/front of the spine. If you are not sure, or have not practised these postures before, please do them with your teacher first.

Focus Category– Forward Bends

All of the asana groups possess unique benefits. Their physical benefits are echoed on the subtler planes of our being. In the forward bends, we go with gravity; these are generally passive, recuperative postures. In these poses we fold in upon ourselves; our face is often hidden. These postures increase our ability to look within, to view ourselves objectively, and to retreat from the external world. There is an association with bowing, and thus with an attitude of humility and acceptance. They provide a balance for the dynamism and weight bearing of the standing postures and backbends.

1. Supta Baddha Konasana (Reclining bound cobblers pose)



Sit in front of the bolster, leaving a gap between the buttocks and the edge of the bolster. Take the soles of the feet together with the heels a few inches in front of the groin lie back over the bolster slowly, with the hands behind you, fingers pointing forwards. 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. Anjaneyasana (Lunge pose)



Come to kneeling upright on a blanket with your hands on your hips. Inhale and as you exhale, step the right foot forwards. Clasp the hands over the knee for balance. Make sure that the heel is a few centimetres further forwards than the knee so that the shinbone slopes forwards and away from you. Inhale and lift the chest. As you exhale, lunge forward. Draw the right buttock closer towards your right heel. Keep the spine upright. Repeat to other side. Hold for five to ten breaths each side.

4. Dwikonasana (Double angle pose)



Stand with the feet about hip width apart or a little wider. Take the arms behind the back and interlock the fingers lightly with the palms open and facing upwards. Inhale and as you exhale, bend forwards from the hips, simultaneously lifting the arms upwards. The torso should be parallel with the floor, or as close to this as is comfortable. As you inhale, slowly come back up to the starting position. Repeat five times.

5. Adho Mukha Svanasana (Down facing dog)



(Instead of just doing this pose; Sun Salutes can be placed here in the sequence. Go to www.ayl.com.au for Flo's Sun Salutes.)

From child's pose, stretch the arms forwards, at the same time as reaching the tail-bone back between the heels. Come onto hands and knees and tuck the toes under. Inhale and as you exhale lift the tail-bone into the air. 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.

6. Dandasana (Staff pose)



Sit on a folded blanket with the sitting bones right at the edge of the fold. Pull the flesh of the buttocks back, and sit on the forward most point of the sitting bones with the spine upright. Place the palms on the floor beside the hips with the fingers pointing forward. Work the muscles of the thighs and flex the feet, so that the toe tips point straight upwards. Don't let the inside edges of the big toes come apart. If you feel that your tailbone is curving under, and your lower back is rounding, sit on a second, (third or fourth) blanket. Elevate the back of the pelvis as much as is necessary to create a flat lower back in this pose before you begin to bend forwards.

7a. Paschimottanasana Vinyasa (Intense back stretch)



Sit in Dandasana (Staff pose). Consciously slow down, lengthen and even out the rhythm of your breath to a comfortable, sustainable range for you. As you inhale, slowly lift the arms in front until they are vertical. As you exhale, slowly lower them again. As you inhale and lift the arms, feel what happens to the upper back, and try to consciously lengthen the spine in that area. As you exhale, soften. Keep the arms soft, not rigid.

7b. Paschimottanasana Vinyasa (Intense back stretch continued)



When you have completed three cycles, inhale lift the arms up, lengthening the spine to your maximum and as you exhale, reach forwards towards the wall in front. Try not to let the spine round as you hinge forwards from the hips. Move into the forward bend as far as you can without letting the spine collapse. Hold the breath out for a second, and then inhale, come up, raising the arms. Repeat five times. On the fifth forward bend, let the hands find the floor so that they can support some of the body's weight. Stay in the pose, breathing slowly and evenly for five to ten breaths. Lengthen the front of the waist, so that there is a large gap between the lower front ribs and the crown of the pelvis. Try to stretch the belly skin. (This Vinyasa can be done with the knees bent if you are very restricted in a forward bending movement.)

8. Janu Sirsasana (Head to knee pose), using a belt



Start in Dandasana (Staff pose). Bend the right knee out to the right, leaving a gap between the heel and the groin and between the sole of the right foot and the left inner thigh. Loop the belt around the sole of the right foot. With the spine still upright, walk the hands down the belt so that the elbows are completely straight. Inhale as you lengthen the waist. As you exhale, pull on the belt so that the shoulder blades move in together at the back and the chest moves in front of the line of the shoulders. Inhale, and as you exhale, hinge forwards at the hips, simultaneously walking the hands down the belt so that the elbows are always straight. For this variation, bring the torso down between the legs just as for Paschimottanasana (Intense back stretch), rather than twisting it over the straight leg. Stay in the pose for a minimum of five slow, conscious breaths. Then repeat on the other side.

9. Parivrtta Janu Sirsasana (Revolved head to knee pose).



From Dandasana (Staff pose), take the right knee into position as for Janu Sirsasana (Head to knee pose). Then take the left leg out further to the left. Work the left leg and foot throughout. Inhale, and as you exhale, take hold of the left big toe with the first two fingers of the left hand. Tuck the chin into the chest, inhale, and rotate the right chest and shoulder up and back, looking up at the ceiling over the right shoulder. Lengthen the left waist on the exhale. Extend the right arm straight up to the ceiling on an inhale, and as you exhale bend the right elbow over the line of the right ear. Don't allow the right chest to drop forwards. Stay for five to ten breaths. Then inhale, lift up from the right arm and repeat on the other side.

10. Upavista Konasana (Wide angle forward bend)



Sit right on the edge of a couple of folded blankets, with the flesh of the buttocks pulled back and legs out in a comfortable 'V' shape. Start with your hands on the floor behind you and lift the base of the rib cage away from the crown of the pelvis. Keep the lower spine in and the thighs active, with the knee caps facing straight upwards and the feet flexed. Take the hands onto the floor in front and moving from the hips, gradually walk them forwards, taking care to prevent the lower back from rounding and the knees from rolling inwards. Hold for five to ten breaths, softening into the stretch. Inhale back to the starting position.

11. Single Leg Reclining Lunge



Lie on your back with a blanket beneath your hips and back. Bend your knees so that the soles of the feet are on the floor, about hip width apart. Inhale, and as you exhale lift your right foot from the floor, with the knee still bent. Clasp your hands around the back of the right ankle. Bring the knee to a perfect right angle, so that the sole of the foot is directly above the knee pointing straight upwards, and the thigh is coming down towards the right ribs. If you are flexible, you can clasp the hands over the sole of the right foot, making sure the head is still comfortably resting on the floor. Stay in the pose for a minute or more.

12. Supta Ikapadaparivrttasana (Supine twist)



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

13. Nadi Shodhana (Alternate nostril breathing)



Sit in a comfortable seated posture. Consciously slow, lengthen and even out the rhythm of your breath, keeping it fine and subtle. Take your right hand into Nasikagra Mudra (Deer mudra). Inhale through both nostrils. Block off the right nostril and exhale through the left. Inhale through the left. Block off the left nostril and exhale through the right. Inhale through the right. This is one round. Repeat for five rounds, finishing with an exhalation through the left nostril.

14. Sitting



Become aware of the breath in the nostrils. Don't try to change the breath, just become aware of the inhalation moving upwards and the exhalation downwards, on the insides of the nostrils. When the mind wanders off into thought and you become aware of this, bring it gently back to the breath. When discomfort in the body presents itself, become aware of this and bring the mind back to the breath. In this way give the mind an anchor, to keep it still and free from its eternal wandering. Sit for five minutes, or longer if possible.

15. Shavasana (Relaxation pose)

Support the back of the head with a folded blanket to keep back of neck in line with the upper spine, and place a bolster beneath the backs of the thighs. Have the palms facing upwards, arms a little away from the sides of the body, legs a little apart. Lie back with closed eyes for 10 minutes.

Flo Fenton is currently teaching regular yoga classes and teaching one on one in Byron Bay. She also conducts regular workshops and retreats around the country.

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