

Restorative Yoga

Savor the deep relaxation of restorative postures by preparing for them carefully.

By Claudia Cummins

Let's face it: Some yoga poses taste a little bit sweeter than others. And if yoga were a smorgasbord, restorative postures would most definitely be at the dessert table. These soothing and well-supported poses offer us the opportunity to linger quietly for a few moments and savor the simple sweetness of life.

In an ideal world every asana would feel restorative. But those that fall into the special category of restorative poses have a particular ability to leave us nourished and well rested. These postures are usually deeply supported by blankets, blocks, or other props and are held for several minutes at a time.

Restorative practice can be intimidating to beginners--all those props! But just a few guiding tips will help you start a regular restorative practice of your own.

Start out with a few minutes of gentle movement before settling into a restorative pose or practice. A little stretching will warm the muscles and create space in the body to prepare it for relaxation. Movement will also give your body a chance to shed its restlessness and busy-ness before settling into a place of stillness.

Don't skimp on the props. Blocks, straps, blankets, balls, towels, chairs, walls, sandbags, eye bags, and pillows are all considered fair game when supporting yourself in these poses. The more fully your body is supported, the deeper your sense of relaxation and surrender will be. So go ahead: Raid the linen closet--your body will thank you with profound sighs of relief.

Take the time to get comfortable on your props and make any necessary adjustments before you settle in. In restoratives the distance between heaven and hell can be as little as half an inch. A small

adjustment to a blanket or a minor shift in the body's position can transform a moment of exasperated agony into pure rapture. Be creative and use your inner wisdom to guide you toward greater comfort, making any modifications you need.

Incorporate restoratives into your yoga practice in a balanced way. Peruse several yoga books--Judith Lasater's *Relax and Renew: Restful Yoga for Stressful Times* is a great place to start. You might be inspired to include just one or two restorative postures in your daily practice. Or you may choose to devote one entire practice each week to restoratives.

Although they look peaceful, restoratives can be challenging for beginners. Just because the body rests quietly doesn't mean the mind will settle into stillness too. Be patient, and be prepared for days when every inch of you rebels.

In time and with practice, you will be rewarded with the ability to drop with ease into a place of deep contentment. This is what yoga is all about, after all: stilling our fidgety bodies and calming our rambling minds so that we may rest quietly in the present moment and see clearly the peace that resides within.

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Surrendering to Silence

Rather than straining to quiet the mind in meditation, simply relax into the quiet that contains the mind.

By Catherine Ingram

Years ago I was in India when the Shankaracharya, one of the country's greatest spiritual leaders, passed away. *The Times of India* published a number of eulogies about the renowned master, one of which was written by a well-known journalist who was a friend of India's former prime minister, Indira Gandhi. It seems that Mrs. Gandhi would occasionally consult with the Shankaracharya in moments of turmoil during her administration as prime minister.

On one visit to the holy man, she invited her journalist friend to accompany her. They flew by private plane, and upon arrival Mrs. Gandhi was immediately taken to see the Shankaracharya alone. After a few hours she returned to the plane, and she and the journalist headed back home to New Delhi. The journalist noticed that a deep serenity had come over the prime minister, and after some time he could not help but ask, "Mrs. Gandhi, what happened in there?"

"It was wonderful," the prime minister replied. "I put all my questions to him, and he answered every one of them, but neither of us spoke a word."

The power of the Shankaracharya's presence was so strong it awakened the prime minister's remembrance of her own. She found herself in the quiet understanding wherein questions are either answered or fade away. "The still small voice within" turns out to be silent. It perceives with an intelligence that hasn't been learned, an intelligence that is innate.

Speech of the Heart

William Butler Yeats once said, "We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us to see their own images and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even a fiercer life because of our silence." Just being in present awareness, at

ease in our own quiet hearts, can make us a reflecting pool, and those who gather around will tend to see their own images. Many times I have had profound life realizations while sitting in the company of teachers, friends, or loved ones without their speaking a word. There is a presence that transmits itself loud and clear, if we attune to it. In awakened awareness we use language to communicate while knowing that another, more powerful communication is taking place in deeper awareness.

Over the course of nearly 30 years, I have attended countless silent retreats and shared stories with literally thousands of people during that span of time. I once found myself in a remote part of the world where I ran into someone I had known from several retreats. As I started walking toward him with a smile on my face, I thought to myself, Oh, there is my good friend, at which point I realized that because we had always been silent together, I had never actually known his name—nor did I know his nationality or his occupation. I knew nothing of his biography at all.

Yet I did know his being. I had seen him watching birds at sunset in the same spot each day. I had noticed the care with which he quietly removed his shoes before entering the meditation hall. I had been the recipient of his kindness when he had helped me carry some of my belongings out of the rain. We'd shared silent presence throughout the days and nights. However we had never once heard each other's stories. Our only communication had occurred in what singer-songwriter Van Morrison calls "the inarticulate speech of the heart."

In awakened awareness we don't need to pretend that we are only a conglomeration of stories, an aggregate of accomplishments, or a survivor of miseries. We are willing to gaze into the eyes of another person without fear or desire—without stories about who I am or who she is—and sense only the light of existence shining in a particular pair of eyes.

In retreats we also notice the power of words to condition perception. By naming things we invoke a preconceived picture of the object or event and therefore have a conditioned response to it, if only momentarily. Now, of course, language is a fantastic communication tool, necessary and useful.

But it is helpful to know its place in our awareness and the limits of its usefulness. I frequently say, paraphrasing Shakespeare, "A rose by *no name at all* would smell as sweet."

There's an awareness that exists beyond words and allows our direct experience to be completely fresh. The more attuned we are to this awareness, the more quickly language and thought are analyzed for their usefulness and released. This occurs via a process which I call "steeping in silence," whereby the attention rests in quiet awareness and thus remains there more and more consistently, as it becomes stronger in its habit.

I always bring along a thermos of tea to my public dharma dialogues, and I sip the tea throughout the evening. Sometimes I forget to rinse out the thermos until the next morning, and if there is any tea left, it is much stronger than it was the night before. There was no tea bag in the thermos overnight—only the liquid. The tea became stronger by steeping in *itself*. Similarly, our awareness in quiet becomes stronger by steeping in itself.

This quiet does not suggest that one no longer speaks, cries, laughs, or shouts. It's a quietness of heart rather than an imposed cessation of speech or activity. It is the recognition of a depth in each of us that has never spoken, a quiet that simply allows anything to arise and pass through the mental landscape. Rather than straining to try to silence our minds (a practically hopeless task), we can simply relax into the quiet that contains the mind; then we become more accustomed to noticing the quiet rather than fixating on the noise of mostly useless thoughts. The habit of relaxing into the still center of pure presence, no matter what the mind may be doing, becomes an effortless living meditation, rather than an effort to meditate and still the mind.

Beyond Words

The adaptation to silence also dissolves barriers between ourselves and others. Although words are mainly intended to form bridges of communication, they often have the opposite effect. Many people use words simply to fill the void that they feel inside themselves. They are uncomfortable with silence, and so they chatter. They hope to connect with others, but often the chatter prevents any real communication. As they sense that they are not

experiencing the intimate connection they hope for, they may even increase their chatter, going off into tangents of no relevance whatsoever in the hope that more words will somehow convey their feelings.

In awakened awareness, one recognizes in the chatter an attempt for contact. Underneath the babble is someone who wants to be accepted, understood, or loved. What is seen by clear awareness in such cases is the simplicity of being, the human warmth beneath the torrent of words. The words then become nothing more than a little static in an otherwise clear transmission. However, if both minds are full of static, there is little possibility for knowing each other in the place where two are one.

On the other hand, when two minds are well steeped in silence, a fantastic communication ensues. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh once said of his friendship with Martin Luther King Jr., "You could tell him just a few things, and he understood the things you did not say."

I have been privileged several times to be in the company of great teachers meeting each other for the very first time. When I was younger, I remember hoping that I would be privy to esoteric dharma discussions among the great ones or that they would dissect their philosophical differences and provoke a general debate among their students. But what usually happened was that they would just twinkle at each other. They would politely exchange pleasantries or discuss the weather, but mostly they were quiet, just twinkling away.

Somebody once asked the great Indian teacher Nisargadatta Maharaj—whose dialogues in the classic book *I Am That* are some of the most powerful words on unbounded presence in print—what he thought might happen if he met Ramana Maharshi, another of the great saints of India. "Oh, we would probably be very happy," responded Nisargadatta Maharaj. "We may even exchange a few words."

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One for the Ages

How much and what type of yoga should a septuagenarian practice?

By YJ Staff

Older students who have the discipline to practice on their own and/or attend a class three times a week for an hour to one and one-half hours generally make the most noticeable progress, according to Suza Francina, a certified Iyengar Yoga instructor and author of *The New Yoga for People over 50* (Health Communications Inc., 1997).

"Daily practices, even for 10 to 15 minutes, are more beneficial than occasional long ones," she says.

However, it's not only how long or how often that's important, but also the quality of the practice. "If you only have a short amount of time, it's better to do a few poses carefully than to rush through several. As you learn to practice in a balanced way, so that you are not overly sore the next day, you can gradually increase the length of your practice to an hour or longer," says Francina.

Older yogis can benefit from the same vital weight-bearing poses taught in regular classes, if they approach it with a gentler, slower pace.

As far as which ones are the most beneficial, Francina suggests beginning with various standing poses, such as Trikonasana (Triangle Pose), Utthita Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle Pose), and Vrksasana (Tree Pose), to help develop a sense of rootedness, stability, and balance—qualities vital for older practitioners who may be feeling wobbly on their feet.

Another key pose to practice every day is Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog), which strengthens the hands, wrists, arms and shoulders, lengthens the spine, and helps prevent and decrease the roundness of the upper back so common among older people.

Francina says older yogis can and should work toward inversions, which help counteract the aging

process by reversing the gravitational pull on the internal organs and improving venous return to the heart. But this doesn't necessarily mean Headstands and Handstands.

"I always advise older beginners, who are not able to safely practice the more challenging upside-down positions, to relax in Legs up the Wall Pose for at least five to 10 minutes every day," says Francina. "But make sure to place two or three folded blankets or a bolster under your buttocks for better support."

Almost every pose, though, can be modified and practiced by older beginners with the help of yoga props. "The more health-related problems an older student has, the more useful are yoga props," says Francina. "Props allow older students, who often tire more easily, to hold poses longer, so their bodies can reap the postures' healing effects." She suggests using wall ropes, bolsters, straps, blocks, and backbenders.

"I especially encourage my older students with balance problems to practice standing poses with the help of nontraditional props like a kitchen counter, table, wall, or railing."

As yogis age, it's even more important to balance active yoga poses with restful poses. Allow at least 10 minutes for relaxing in Savasana (Corpse Pose) or another restorative pose at the end of a practice.

To Prop or Not to Prop

Are props a helpful supplement to your practice, or do they just get in the way? Here's how to decide when to use--and not use--these tools.

By Claudia Cummins

The original yogis didn't practice with foam blocks, D-ring straps, or purple sticky mats. But as yoga evolved, many practitioners discovered that props could help deepen their explorations.

Among modern yogis, attitudes toward props range from the Zen-like minimalism of those who shun all but a sticky mat to the abundance of those who travel with an extra suitcase filled with yoga accessories. Regardless of where you fall in this spectrum, a few guidelines can help you make the most of your props.

Be clear about why you're using them. Mindlessly using a block to support your hand in a standing pose just because your teacher told you to won't deepen your practice. Ask yourself what purpose the extra support is serving and let that answer guide the way you use it. Are you using the block to move into a posture you aren't yet supple enough to manage on your own? If so, consider ways to lessen your reliance on that aid over time.

Be your own teacher. Use your body's signals to devise new and effective ways of using props to enhance your practice. When you sense a certain part of your body crying out for extra support in a resting pose, for example, wedge a towel or shirt beneath that area and observe what happens. Or if you're struggling to master a new pose, ask yourself whether any props within arm's reach might help. You might be surprised by the ingenious solutions you unearth.

Explore new territory. If a rolled-up blanket is supporting your back during a restorative pose, you might like to explore how varying the size and position of it alters your experience. Or if you're using a strap to help you understand a particular action or direction in a posture you know well, you

may choose to repeat that same pose without props from time to time to explore the differences.

Be creative. Yoga basics include mats, blankets, straps, and blocks. But if you consider a prop to be any aid that helps you access a posture more fully, your world will widen considerably. Walls, tables, balls, books, socks, neckties, even the helping hands of a friend can all be used to deepen your exploration.

Practice nonattachment. Ideally, yoga leads us toward greater flexibility and adaptability. So don't grow so attached to your chest of yoga toys that you can't practice without them. If you use props regularly, challenge yourself every once in a while to stow them away and practice without any aids at all (that's right, not even a sticky mat). On the other hand, if you're a yoga minimalist, incorporate a few props into your practice every now and then just to explore how they might be helpful. You might be surprised by what you learn. Remember, the best yoga prop is always an open mind.

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Finding a Comfortable Seated Cross-Legged Position

What areas do I need to work on to be able to sit in simple cross-legged position while maintaining an erect spine?

—Nancy Nuccio

Esther Myers' reply:

Sitting cross-legged is an important part of yoga practice and is commonly used for breathing and meditation practices. It requires flexibility in the back thighs, back of the pelvis, and inner thighs, as well as external rotation of the hip joints. These are all very strong muscles that can take a long time to stretch. Whether you sit in a simple cross-legged posture like Sukhasana or a more difficult pose like Padmasana (Lotus Pose), developing the flexibility to sit easily is a gradual process.

And it's important to note that everyone has a different anatomical structure in their hips, which may potentially inhibit this kind of movement. If this is the case for you, then trying to work up to Padmasana (Lotus Pose) is an inappropriate goal. I encourage you to try other poses that may be more comfortable, like Vajrasana (Thunderbolt Pose), sitting on your heels, Virasana (Hero Pose), sitting between your heels, or Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose). You can also meditate sitting on a chair. The chair should be firm, your back straight, and your feet on the floor or supported on a book or cushion.

If you choose to sit cross-legged, it is important to have your knees level with or below your hips. If you are having difficulty maintaining an erect spine while sitting cross-legged, begin by sitting on the edge of a cushion, bolster, or rolled blanket. For additional support, place rolled blankets or bolsters under your knees. (You may find that with the knees supported, the inner groins relax and that when you take the supports away, your knees drop further easily.)

Tightness in the inner thighs and hips is often connected to tension in the deep muscles of the

abdomen (like the psoas). You can begin to release your pelvis by practicing breathing deeply into your abdomen. Focus on the rise and fall of your belly as you inhale and exhale. In all of the poses that follow, imagine the exhalation releasing out of your pelvis and through your legs, helping the thighs to relax and let go.

Standing poses, especially Virabhadrasana II (Warrior II Pose), and Parsvakonasana (Side Angle Pose), will help open the hips. Leg stretches lying on your back, Supta Pandangustasana (Reclining Big Toe Pose), taking the lifted leg both up and to the side will also stretch your legs.

Raja Kapotasana (King Pigeon Pose) forward bend is also an excellent hip opener. Supta Baddha Konasana (Reclined Bound Angle Pose), lying on your back with your feet together and knees apart is a good resting pose that will allow your hips to gradually open. Put a folded blanket or a bolster under your feet, so that your back is resting on the floor. In both of these poses, allow yourself to relax into the stretch, letting gravity help you to sink into the floor as you exhale.

Sitting poses that will help are: Janu Sirsasana (Head-to-Knee Forward Bend), Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose), and Upavistha Konasana (Open Angle Pose). Learning to stay longer in these poses will help the flexibility in your hips; however, you need to be careful not to overstretch your lower back. Setu Bhandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose) and Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose) are good counter-poses.

Esther Myers' 10 years as a student of Vanda Scaravelli inspired her to find her own unique, organic approach to yoga. Esther has taught classes across Canada, Europe, and the United States, and has extensive experience training teachers. She is coauthor of a practice manual for beginners and author of Yoga & You. She has produced two videos, Vanda Scaravelli on Yoga and Gentle Yoga for Breast Cancer Survivors, both of which are available through Shop YJ.