

FIVE MINUTES

TO

yogga



by

OLIVER BENJAMIN

introduction

Years ago I studied yoga under the tutelage of Sharat Arora, of the Himalyan Yoga Center just outside the town of Dharamsala in India.

Together with a bunch of foreign backpackers we learned a simple and effective way to do a yoga routine that began to work its physical, emotional and mental wonders almost instantly.

It's long been a cliché in both the West and the East that westerners are impatient, overambitious, and that they need to get what they want as quickly as possible.

Conversely, the east is perceived as a place where history unfolds over eons and progress moves at the speed of a silkworm, often through a series of lifetimes.

Sharat helped to dispel at least one of those myths by attacking yoga with the fervor of a rock and roll swami. He yelled at us, cajoled us, implored us and genuinely helped us all achieve a great deal in a very short time.

I, for one, felt that the routine (at its essence) was so logical and easy to remember that it was no trouble

for me to go on practicing Sharat's style of Iyengar yoga on a daily basis, throughout my travels in India and other parts of Asia. I even kept it going once I arrived back to the States.

Today I'm not practicing much, but I still remember most of what Sharat taught me. I understand he's still grinding away under those looming Himalayan foothills. And as I write these words I suddenly realize how much I need to return to my yoga practice! Perhaps I will fly there soon to visit the man a friend of mine called "The Jim Morrison of Yoga."

Recently I found these few pages I had written and laid out shortly after studying with Sharat. It is surely the world's slenderest book on yoga ever written, and I am one of the least qualified authors ever to have written one.

As Sharat once told me, "An inch on the body is like a mile on earth." In that case, though this book when printed would only constitute the tiniest fraction of an inch, its teachings might take you a few steps further on your journey. They did for me. Thanks, Sharat!

OLIVER BENJAMIN
Chiang Mai, Thailand 2004

B r e a t h i n g

The most important thing to remember in all yoga positions is to breathe slowly and deeply. Without the right breath, yoga is nothing more than glorified stretching. The idea is that, if you can maintain your awareness and stay calm in the most awkward positions, then you can remain level-headed and aware at all times, even in the most potentially stressful or difficult situations--the times when it is most important to be calm, but which we are usually unable to maintain perspective. The aim of yoga is to keep the inner world still, even if the outer world seems to be out of our control.

After practicing yoga for a while, you may start to notice in your everyday life that you are more aware of your breath. Sometimes you may realize that you are breathing

shallow, tight breaths due to stress or anger. I usually notice this the most when I'm driving, especially when I'm caught in traffic. As soon as you realize this, take some deep, slow breaths, and you will find that the energy you kept bottled up will flow more easily through you. This can prevent sickness and headaches, and allow you to work around problems more easily. And the more yoga you do, the better you will be able to breathe. Then, instead of feeling discombobulated, you will feel unified. Remember that "yoga" comes from the same sanskrit root as the english word "yoke" and also means "to bring together," or "to unify." The Indians felt that it unified you with God. But if you don't feel God right away, don't give up! It's enough just to feel good.

The stillness in stillness is not the real stillness.

Only when there is stillness in movement
can the spiritual rhythm appear
which pervades heaven and earth.

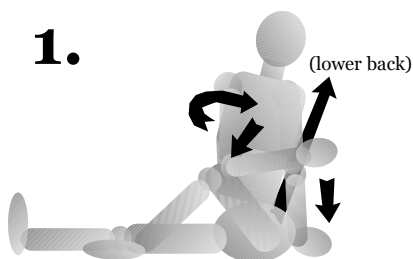
TS'AI-KEN TAN

B e n d s

Bends are primarily a way of loosening up the spine—the place where most of our energy is stored, and where blockages can do the most damage to health and peace of mind. Also, according to Indian mythology, the seven chakras (energy centers) are located in the spine, and bends are the best way to activate them. Generally, twists are best for loosening up the lower spine, forward bends are best for developing inward-awareness, and back bends are best for developing outward-awareness. As with all yoga, the more you put into it (the farther you bend) the more you get out of it. But be careful not to overdo it, especially at the beginning stages.

TIPS FOR BENDS:

- 1) Since bends are very meditative, it is important to keep your mind focused on what you are doing. Pay attention to your mind, and when you find it wandering, gently bring it back to concentration on how you feel, and what you are doing. This may be exceedingly difficult at first, but gets easier with diligent practice. And don't let yourself get frustrated: ego is the main thing that gets in the way of concentration. Not only does it distract you, saying "hey what about me?" but then it makes you feel frustrated when you break your concentration to pay attention to it. Just like a spoiled child, if you ignore its whining, it will leave you alone.
- 2) On forward bends and twists, you must keep your back as straight as possible.
- 3) On backbends, make sure your buttocks are tensed, or you could hurt your lower back.

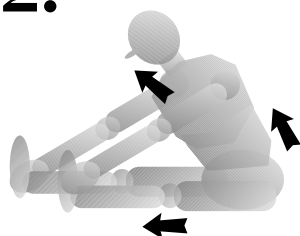


Twist

Sitting on a thick pillow on the floor, bend one knee, and place heel against butt. Extend other leg. Then, bend opposite arm from the leg you bent, and place the area just above the elbow to the area on the leg just above the knee. Then, place your open hand on the ground directly behind your tailbone. Make sure your back is straight. Then use your bent arm to push down and away on your knee, while pushing directly up on the floor with your straight arm. Pull in your stomach, as you feel your spine twisting from your lower back up through to your neck. You should also turn your head as far as it will go for maximum twist. If you don't feel it in your lower back, use a thicker pillow, or push up harder to elongate your abdomen. Repeat other side.

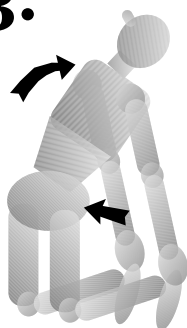
Forward Bend

2.



This is just like a hurdler's stretch, except that you keep your back totally straight, leading forward with your chest. Use a belt or a scarf to pull you if you can't hold your feet. First, bend one leg and rest it on the floor, with your foot flat on the opposite thigh. Then pull forward with your arms, keeping your chest puffed out. You should feel a stretch in your lower back because of this. When you feel pain, try not to recoil from it, but concentrate on it instead. As you do, you will find it not so unpleasant, and instead of recoiling you will relax, allowing you to bend down further. Keep concentrating on the feelings you are having. Many emotions that have been suppressed may be released. Repeat with other leg, then do it with both legs extended.

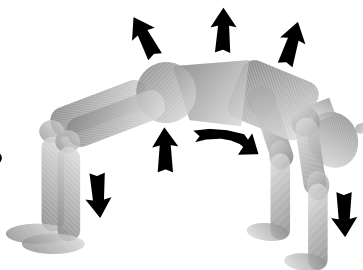
3.



Back Bend — Camel

Kneel down on the floor and reach back to touch your heels. Make sure your legs are parallel with each other. Bend your back slowly and get deeper into the position. Make sure to keep your buttocks firm. When you are ready to come out of the position, make sure to tense your stomach muscles first. Do this 3 times.

4.



Back Bend — The Wheel

Laying down on the floor, bend your legs and place your heels against your butt. Then bend your arms and place the heels of your palms on the ground as close to your shoulders as possible. Then, slowly push yourself up so that the top of your head is resting on the floor. Next, when you are ready, push yourself completely off the ground. It is very important that your buttocks are tight the entire time. If you are having trouble, lift your heels off the floor and use only the balls of your feet. Also, make sure that your hands are close to the floor space directly under your head. Hold for as long as is comfortable, then gently let yourself down. Don't stretch your legs, but rest a bit. Then, push yourself up again. Do this 3-5 times, or as much as you feel comfortable.

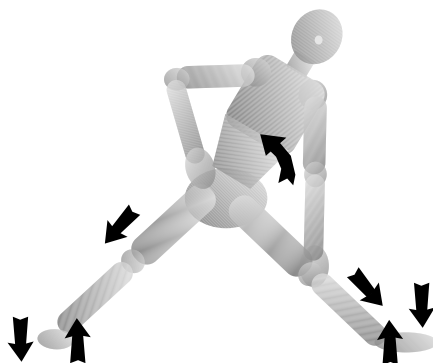
Standing Poses

Standing poses are meant to teach us balance, stability, and strength, both physically and mentally. Therefore it is crucial that our feet are placed correctly in all poses. Your main awareness should be in your feet, even if the pain is in your legs and butt. Make sure to press down with the balls of your feet, not the toes. The toes should not be pressing at all; you may even want to lift them up to prevent this. To keep your feet flat on the ground, make sure that your inner ankle (the instep) is moving upwards toward the sky, and your outer ankle (the blade of your foot) pushing hard onto the floor. If you feel yourself losing balance, it is probably because your feet are not placed ideally.

TIPS FOR STANDING POSES:

- 1) Keep butt tucked in and firm, not sticking out and loose.
- 2) Legs indicated to be straight should be totally straight.
- 3) Legs indicated to be bent should be at a 90-degree angle.
- 4) Inner ankles should be moving up, outer ankles should be pressing down.
- 5) Feet should be five-feet (your feet, not 12 inches) distance apart.
- 6) Triangle created by your legs and the floor should be an equilateral one.
- 7) Centerline of forward foot should point directly at the arch of rear foot.
- 8) Knee caps should be in line with feet, not rotated.
- 9) Always extend the abdomen and relax the face.

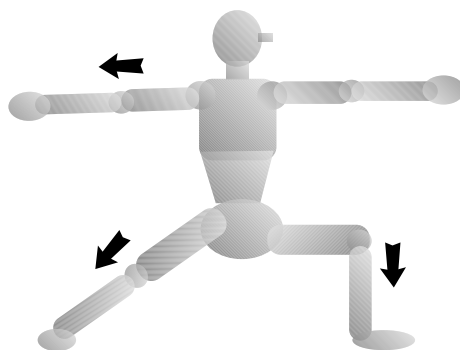
1.



Triangle Pose

Facing front and leaning sideways, rest hand just above the knee. Push on the back of the hip with the other hand to help rotate the trunk forward. Look forward. Make sure to keep spine totally straight. Breathe normally. Repeat other side

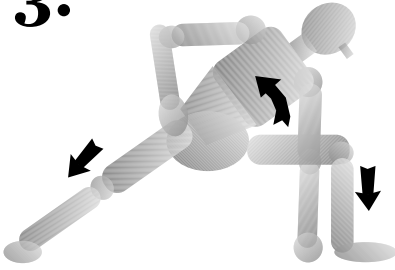
2.



Warrior Pose 1

Bend front leg to a 90 degree angle. Press down hard with rear leg. Rear foot should be perpendicular to front foot. Turn head in direction of front foot, but keep torso facing perpendicular to that., in line with rear foot. Proceed to next pose without switching sides, then repeat this on other side.

3.

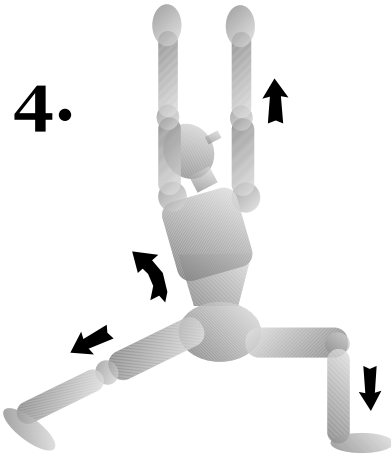


Warrior Pose 2

Reach hand down and place it beside the front foot. Use other hand to help rotate the trunk forward. Make sure to push down hard with rear foot as well. Keep trunk parallel to rear leg. Look at front hand. Make sure front leg is in line with hips and not coming inward.

Return to previous pose and do other side, then come back to this pose and do other side as well.

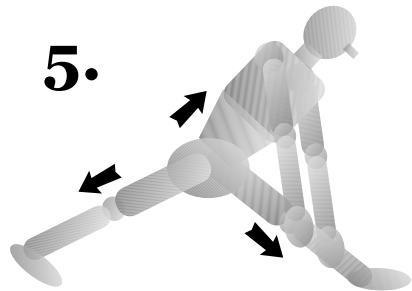
4.



Warrior Pose 3

Reach hands straight up, turning the rear foot to a 45 degree angle for support as you turn your torso in the direction of your front foot. Look up at your hands. Push down hard with both feet and breathe deeply. Bend your back backwards a little. Repeat other side.

5.



Standing Forward Bend

Bend forward, and hold front leg as low as you can, while keeping legs totally straight. Repeat other side.