

It Doesn't Have To Be Yoga

By Kathy Duncan

Yoga is a wonderful practice. I want to begin this article with nothing but praise for the people fortunate enough to be daily practicing Yogis. I aspire to be like you! However, for the sake of researchers, seekers, and stiff people out there, I'd like to offer them a personal training session merely focused on their stiffness, and pre-exercise-begin-exercising-at-all, assisted flexibility program.

The purpose of yoga practice is to prepare the body and mind for meditation. This requires complete silence and stillness. There are various traditions, beliefs, postures, hand postures, breathing techniques, and words from Sanskrit that pass before you in your journey, and if you happen to drop in to a beginner yoga class, it appears that all of the other "beginners" already know the *Vinyasa* flow that goes with the *Sun Salutation* sequence, AND can already touch their toes.

After 30 years in the fitness business, I've read the Bhagavad-Gita, and all of the traditional required reading yoga books. I've attended the various styles of yoga presentations, and I have just recently come to a new awareness about me and flexibility. I have discovered that for me and many of my clients, becoming proficient in gentle stretching, while maintaining good posture, breath, and taking time to completely relax is a task of its own.

The trend in clubs and studios the world over is Yoga and Pilates. Everybody is doing it! That still doesn't mean that it is the right program for all of us. My solution to those that have been embarrassed in a beginning yoga class, but still have the desire to be relaxed and meditative like Yoga People is to follow a basic plan as your starter.

It's true that yoga postures or *Asanas* are designed to cleanse the body while bringing energy to certain centers. These concepts can begin with the following guidelines;

Breathe in slowly, expand the abdomen, then the ribcage, and finally the upper portion of the lungs. Then, breathe out in the same manner, letting the abdomen cave in as you exhale. I prefer to breathe in and out through my nose, although there are no specific rules about it, nasal breathing is considered better for several reasons. The health benefits include filtering the air from the external environment through the sinuses to the lungs. The sinuses do their natural job of filtering the air as it enters the lungs while the smaller diameter of the sinuses create pressure in the lungs during exhalation. This allows the lungs to have more time to extract oxygen from them. When there is proper oxygen-carbon dioxide exchange, the blood will maintain a balanced pH. If carbon dioxide is lost too quickly, as in exhaling through the mouth, oxygen absorption is decreased. Also, by breathing through the nose as opposed to the mouth, thirst and dehydration are decreased.

There's no need to breathe so deeply (in the beginning) that you feel like passing out, but if you are just beginning to incorporate a breathing routine into your day, pay attention to how often you are holding your breath. Your normal breathing should include an even inhalation of 1 count, hold for 3-4 counts, exhale for 2 counts. This should be a constant, even cadence all during your day.

When exercising, whether it be stretching, or picking up a package, always exhale on exertion. Inhale, then lift, and exhale. Or, if you are stretching, breathe evenly, and perform your stretch on the exhale, then keep breathing evenly. You will build your breath and movements into a rhythmic sequence. There will be no Sanskrit words to memorize, no postures that hurt your knees, just breathing and stretching being sure to include the four basic movements. They are, forward bending, back bending, side bending, and twisting.

Once you have developed a comfortable breath, it doesn't matter if you are standing, kneeling, or sitting in a chair, you will begin by lengthening your spine. This is done by expanding the rib cage through breathing, reaching up over your head to become taller, or on your hands and knees, pulling back or raising like a cat. However you go, the spine should be safely warm and long before you begin side bending or twisting.

Once the spine is lengthened and warmed, forward bending is an easy move. Again, this can be done while standing, sitting, or kneeling. You will advance this move as you become more flexible, but don't push it if you're not.

The next natural move would be backward bending. As a beginner, simply leaning backward while standing will be good enough. Place your hands at the back of your rib cage, inhale, then exhale as you lean back.

Now, you are ready for some bending at the waist. This shouldn't be anything too aggressive, just enough of a stretch that you can comfortably breathe with and hold for at least 30 seconds. Save the twisting for last, and again, begin with enough of a twist to feel a stretch, but not to torque your back.

Now that you have begun to breathe properly into the exertion, you are ready to design a full routine including all of the basic moves holding each for 30 seconds, while breathing properly throughout.

For the first several sessions, you should go through this routine which includes each of the directional stretches that are included in the Yoga Asanas. Become comfortable with the stretches, as well as your breathing. End with breathing only and sitting quietly for 5 minutes.

Once you have perfected this basic stretch sequence and become comfortable with your breath, sitting quietly, and moving slowly, you will be ready to move forward to learn more about Yoga. If Yoga is not what you're looking for, you might find a Personal Trainer to lead you into

a more aggressive flexibility program. Once you have perfected this preliminary program, you will be ready for more!