

WHAT TO EXPECT IN A YOGA CLASS

BREATHWORK

Yoga practice suggests a constant mindful attention to the breath. This brings us in to the present moment (a time place where the breath is actually occurring in the now), provides mental focus, and gives us feedback about our efficiency of respiration and techniques to improve the way we breathe. Breathing practice doesn't just stop at awareness of the breath, but extends into learning various breathing patterns and techniques called Pranayama.

RELAXATION

Learning to relax is what draws many people to yoga. Relaxation starts with the release of tension in the physical body, then extends to relaxation of the mind and eventually relaxation of the entire being such that the student is free of all physical, mental and emotional tension and in a state absent of any arousal associated with turbulence.

Given that yoga is executed without force (force implying excessive effort), and is instead practiced with an 'easy' effort, it is crucial for students to know when they are with tension and when they are not. The practice of relaxation helps students become familiar with a tension that would otherwise not have been recognised or noticed.

MEDITATION

Yoga is the practice of being present in your body and present to your breath, not only while you are performing yoga poses (asana), but also while resting or sitting quietly in your own stillness. This is often a challenge for many people who are outwardly focused and constantly on the go. The ability to be at ease without stimulation of the outer world brings an inner calm that carries us in our engagement with the world. Meditation in yoga helps bridge this gap between inner and outward contentment, and is offered in a vast array of techniques – all of which will turn attention back inward, in the opposite direction of outward grappling.

POSTURES

The physical practice of yoga is based on traditional yoga poses (asana) and usually constitutes the bulk of a modern yoga class. There are very many traditional asana - each of which can be executed with multiple variations and modifications depending on the intention of the pose and the ability of the student. Today, (depending on the class, teacher, yoga school and yoga style) traditional poses are frequently delivered alongside contemporary moves (for example, pilates moves or isolated physio exercises) that can provide, for many, greater creativity in a sequence of poses as well as a greater variety of options in attending to the physical well-being of the body. While traditional yoga poses provide an extremely thorough practice in their own right, and the benefits of which are what attracted the attention of modern society in the first place and are praised in the modern medical world, for some, contemporary poses enhance the practice, while others prefer the discipline of traditional practice. It is entirely up to the student to find a discipline that suits their own needs at any given time.

TOUCH

The teaching of asana comes with oral directives by the teacher to, as much as possible, deliver poses in a specific and safe manner. When it is obvious to the teacher that this oral delivery hasn't been received or understood by the student, the teacher may decide to physically assist, adjust or correct the student's positioning in a pose to give palpable feedback of what is being conveyed. Some teachers will ask students' permission to apply physical 'adjustments' while others will nonchalantly go ahead and adjust students' positioning in poses at the same time as they make their way around the room giving the audible instruction. Physical guidance is usually gentle, and can be so subtle it just hints at a change of positioning.

Students who are not comfortable with a teacher coming into their space and making any physical contact should advise the teacher prior to the class. This will be appreciated by the teacher who can then be sure to respect the desires of the student.

PROPS

Props are pieces of equipment used in yoga to aid or enhance practice. You can expect to use them in dedicated yoga studios, and usually less likely to use them in yoga offered at gyms. Particular styles of yoga such as Iyengar Yoga and Restorative Yoga, rely more on the use of props than other styles.

YOGA AT A WALL

In the same way props can support students in poses, so too can a wall! There are many poses that are executed at a wall that cannot otherwise not be experienced in the same way. Some studios will always have mats situated at the wall as a part of regular practice, while others may never make use of the wall. Just don't be surprised if you start your class on in the middle of the room, only to have your yoga teacher instruct you to pick up your mat and re-position it against a wall half way through your class. It may even be an instruction at the start of class before you even begin.

VARIETY

Within the world of yoga there is great diversity in practice. Not only is there variety in the vast array of techniques and exercises within each component of practice (that is, within breathing, asana and meditation practice), but also variety in *what* is delivered, *how* it is delivered, the tools (if any), that are used to present them, and the environment in which it is delivered. This variety is endless, as teachers pull from their own values, experience, training and intentions.

From one class to the next, the focus may be more physical, metaphysical, philosophical, practical, meditative, spiritual, or therapeutic etc. depending on the class style, the teacher themselves, the yoga school, the phase of the moon, and time of the year! It is important to understand that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' practice, but instead a plethora of experiences from which each student has the opportunity to learn something about themselves.

NEW TERMINOLOGIES & IDEAS

In embarking on a yoga journey, get ready to hear some new weird and wonderful words and ideas. Not only are you very likely to hear the original language of yoga, Sanskrit, during a class, but woven into this new dialogue there are sure to be unfamiliar concepts for contemplation. Perhaps it will be the talk of chakras (energy centres), mudras (hand positions), prana (life force energy), drishtis, bandhas, mantras or chanting that raises an eyebrow. (Don't worry, we'll take a look at these later). One thing is for sure, no matter where or with whom you practice, you are guaranteed to be pried open with at least one new idea that is at the very least, good chewable food for thought!

DISCOMFORT

Trying out new ways to move your body is pretty likely to leave a trail of discomfort in muscles and joints that perhaps haven't been moved in that way ever before! Not to mention trying out new ways of doing things (like breathing for example!) and new ways of thinking. While establishing new yoga practices can be uncomfortable, if you remain open and approach your practice gently, the benefits of yoga will prevail and a new you will gradually unfold.

RESISTANCE

With discomfort usually comes resistance. Don't be at all surprised if you find yourself in class saying something internally like, "I don't like this pose", "This breathing technique is silly", or "I don't want to try that". In these instances, it's helpful to consider why yoga works, and how it so successfully can change students' lives in such a positive way. Growth comes when we make change and change for many is challenging. As yoga invites you to move into new shapes in your body and explore new ways of thinking and existing, it begins to challenge your body, mind and emotions. In any given pose you might find your tender emotions working hard to tuck themselves away in a façade of bravado rather than erupting to the surface where they'll be exposed to the world and where you'll have to attend to them. It could show up in a way whereby your body is just seeming to refuse to surrender and settle into the pose, where you then find your mind talking you out of staying in that pose for a second longer... and right there is where you are likely to hear the dialogue that opposes your practice.

Resistance is natural and is actually part of the process. It points out to us where we have room for growth. As we learn to surrender, our bodies and minds begin to change in positive ways, and along the way, we ourselves also change.

RELEASE

Releasing 'pent-up energy' in the body is synonymous with releasing 'tension' in the body. All organisms have various mechanisms for releasing excessive or trapped energy. Coughing, sneezing, shaking, yawning, laughing, crying, burping, and farting are all simply mechanisms of energy release in the process of being human. In yoga, the process of 'letting go' of tensions opens the door for contained energy to be freed. If you find yourself becoming suddenly hot, sneezy, itchy or giggly in class, rest assured knowing it's just a shift of energy – energy finding an outlet for release in exactly the way your body was designed to operate!

SOUND

Humans are wired to follow sound. This is because in nature sound offers either an opportunity or a threat. With this unique wiring, sound provides an accessible point of focus that can be used therapeutically to quieten a turbulent mind. Sound can easily lure an individual out of a thinking mind. How many times have you stopped what you were thinking or doing in a day to be swept up in a song that has come on the radio? This is the power of music! It can change ones mental and emotional state and help release tensions.

In yoga, music, environmental sound scapes (such as birdsong or the sound of a babbling brook) and even enchanting instruments played live by the teacher or as a recording (such as chimes and gongs), might be used to provide a back drop to class, or just at certain times in a class. More traditionally however, the sound of silence itself holds the space of practice, offering no distraction for the student from the experiences as they arise on their mat. Whether it's quietude, traditional Indian music or modern-day hits that lace the moments together on your mat, it's important to find a delivery of class that supports your own needs and desires.

DISTRACTION & A WONDERING MIND

Chances are, your mind is a real busy body, jumping from one thought to the next, or otherwise constantly looking for entertainment. As you begin to train the mind to focus on the job at hand in yoga, much to your dismay, it is going to be on the constant hunt for distraction. As you ask your mind to settle into contentment with the moment as it is, it's going to be looking for something *more* than what is! You can find yourself becoming distracted by sounds, smells, thoughts, sensations, emotions, self-talk, events going on outside of you, and even other students! Your mind is just holding on to its familiar restlessness. Don't worry, your mind is learning a new skill. Be patient.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

By now it's probably very clear that yoga today is far from a narrow offering. It would be safe to expect anything and everything from a random class. One teacher might use aroma therapy while another insists on a scent-free zone; one might be chanting ancient mantras while another will never have Sanskrit touch your ears. Most teachers will use whatever tools they feel comfortable with and that they believe will bring the student in to a deeper connection with self. It's up to you to find the teacher who resonates with you!

When searching for your first class it can be helpful to ask the relevant questions. It can be as simple or as in-depth as you like. You Maybe you just want to focus on the physical poses. Maybe you want more relaxation than anything else. Maybe you want to try chanting 'om'... or maybe you just don't.

And if your first class doesn't ring your bell, try a whole lot of other classes with different teachers at different studios. Amidst all the yoga out there, will be the perfect class just waiting for you to find it!