

## YOGA FOR HSPS: PART I. GETTING STARTED

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The author notes that this series of articles is based on his exploration of yoga styles and teachers for about fifteen years, and on wide reading of scientific information on yoga, meditation, and spirituality as background for several research projects on the topics.

The editor notes that yoga is a topic on which opinions and experiences differ widely, of course, but it seems that HSPs could really benefit from the experiences of another HSP.

### Yoga Connection to HSP

Traditional yoga was probably developed by highly sensitive people. Gentle yoga is very effective for soothing and regenerating the mind and body, and is specifically intended to reduce the tendency to become distressed. In addition, Yoga can be practiced in a way that creates sacred space and enhances spiritual awareness, which are central parts of life for many HSPs.

However, many current yoga styles are designed for less sensitive persons. Increasingly, yoga classes are intense, arousing workouts that emphasize building physical strength. (Perhaps this is inevitable as yoga expands beyond its original, mainly HSP audience.) This article is intended to help HSPs find information and classes that are appropriate for them.

### Blending Aspects of Yoga to Suit Your Needs

Traditional yoga has several aspects, applicable to lifestyles ranging from monastic pursuit of spiritual insights to a busy work and family life. Many HSPs find themselves in the middle of this range, working "in the world" but resonating strongly with a more reclusive life. Fortunately, how you combine the aspects of yoga can be changed to suit yourself as you mature and shift along this continuum. However, it is important to match yoga practices to one's lifestyle, a point not always made clear in books and programs on yoga.

This article focuses on hatha yoga, which consists of postures and related physical practices that are intended to develop physical health, well-being, unity of mind

and body, inner calm, and self understanding. These effects are beneficial for any lifestyle a person follows. Hatha yoga is the most common introduction to yoga. Other aspects of yoga will be discussed in later articles.

Information on specific hatha yoga practices is readily available from classes, videos and books, and will not be presented here, although some videos and books will be recommended at the end. My main goal is to describe the differences in activity and attitude among common styles of hatha yoga, and offers some suggestions for selecting yoga classes.

### **Yoga for Warriors**

Yoga classes that emphasize physical exertion and perfection of the external appearance of postures often become competitive and have much higher risks of physical injury than more gentle, internal styles of yoga. For example, "Power Yoga" is explicitly described as "hard" yoga from a warrior tradition. The classes are active, sweaty, workouts that resemble gymnastics. "Ashtanga Yoga" in the style of K. Pattabhi Jois and Richard Freeman are very similar to Power Yoga, although the term ashtanga yoga may also refer to other forms of yoga.

Another harder style of yoga is that taught in the tradition of B.K.S. Iyengar. One of the most widespread styles of yoga, it emphasizes developing physical strength and doing the postures a certain way down to the most minute details. The frequent corrections to the students can put the instructors in a superior role and make it difficult to avoid a self-conscious, competitive atmosphere. HSPs may find the frequent corrections distracting and ultimately counterproductive. Iyengar instructors, like most yoga instructors, advise students to not go beyond their capacity, but the classes maintain a higher level of exertion and physical stimulation than many other styles of yoga.

### **Gentle, Internal Yoga**

The majority of HSPs will probably prefer a softer style of yoga that emphasizes tension release, self awareness, and peaceful feelings. This approach is also more conducive to creating sacred space. Integral Yoga as taught by Swami Satchidananda and the style of yoga taught by the Himalayan Institute may be particularly appropriate for HSPs. These initially focus on releasing tension, regeneration, and feeling calm. More challenging practices are gradually incorporated, but the instructors try to be unintrusive so that students can focus on self awareness during the practices. The philosophy is that the details of the postures will evolve naturally as a person practices with self awareness, an expectation which seems particularly appropriate for those who are highly sensitive to their body.

HSPs may also appreciate how this type of approach usually encourages self-exploration and recognition of individuality. At a workshop at the Himalayan Institute about ten years ago, a participant asked about the right way to do a certain detail of a posture. The workshop leader replied, "There is not a right way and wrong way. There

are just different ways with different effects. Try the different ways, observe the effects, and see which is best for you at this time."

This no-one-right-way philosophy is safe for gentle yoga, but explicit cautions are required for postures or yoga styles that put the body under greater exertion and stress.

The widely publicized research by Dr. Dean Ornish on a program that reverses heart disease includes gentle hatha yoga based on Swami Satchidananda's Integral Yoga.

## **Other Yoga Styles**

Several other styles of yoga are in between, placing an intermediate emphasis to building physical strength and "correct" details of the postures. These include yoga as taught at Sivananda Yoga Centers and the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, which have teachers in many areas of the U.S. and widely distribute videos and books. Shambhava yoga taught in the Denver area of Colorado is also an intermediate style. And many individual hatha yoga teachers have blended yoga schools. These tend to be intermediate styles of yoga.

## **Guidelines for Selecting Yoga Classes**

Most yoga teachers allow a person to come as a drop in to certain classes. This is a good way to see if the yoga style and instructor will match your needs. Even if you don't continue, you may learn something valuable. HSPs may find that classes are useful for obtaining information, but the core of their yoga practice occurs in a private, sacred space. Here are some guidelines that may be useful in exploring yoga classes.

1. Come out of any posture or practice that causes pain or significant discomfort or strain. Do not hesitate. Do not try to keep up with others.
2. After the class, notice if you feel relaxed, peaceful, and invigorated. If not, another class may suit you better. Because the effects of the class depend on both the style of yoga and the personality of the instructor, it may be valuable to explore different instructors as well as different styles of yoga.
3. Beforehand, ask the teacher how he or she handles corrections during the class. Some make frequent corrections and even manipulate the student's body. Other instructors rarely touch the participants and ask permission first, which is intended to minimize your being distracted from awareness of the internal effects of the practices. People who become very focused internally during yoga may find the instructor's manipulations disorienting. In general, asking permission before touching is a good indication that the instructor is aware that some people are highly sensitive and is willing to work with sensitive people. It is also appropriate for an HSP to request that the instructor ask permission before touching him or her.
4. Become familiar enough with different styles of yoga to adapt your practice to your current level of arousal. A very gentle practice may be optimal when you

are over aroused, and more strenuous practices may be appropriate when you are calm. Because HSPs may have wider fluctuations in their state of arousal than others, they may benefit from a wider range of yoga practices.

### **Sources of Information**

The only videos on beginning yoga that I can recommend without qualification for HSPs are by Liliias Folan: "Alive with Yoga, I" and "Yoga Workout Series for Beginners." Many public libraries have these videos. "Ananda Yoga for Higher Awareness" with Adam Bernstein provides a good description of basic gentle yoga postures. However, the instructions include repeating affirmations during the yoga postures, which are, for me, distracting and out of place.

The *The American Yoga Association Beginner's Manual* by Alice Christensen (Simon and Schuster, 1987) provides a good introduction to yoga postures and other aspects of yoga. *Hatha Yoga Manual I* by Samskrti and Veda (Himalayan International Institute, 1985) and *Hatha Yoga Manual II* by Samskrti and Judith Franks (Himalayan International Institute, 1982) also provide good introductions to hatha yoga postures. Unfortunately, the books and tapes on Satchidananda-style hatha yoga do not provide the type of information and options that I think are needed for general use by beginners without an instructor.

The second article in this series, will describe some specific hatha yoga practices and strategies that HSPs may want to explore. The third article discusses aspects of yoga beyond hatha yoga.

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