

YOGA FOR HSPS: PART II. EXPLORING HATHA

Jim Kennedy

Originally published in *Comfort Zone: The HSP Newsletter*,
2000, Volume 5, Issue 3 (August), pp. 12-13.

In the last issue, I offered information and suggestions for HSPs who may be interested in starting to practice yoga, because I believe the recent proliferation of yoga styles appropriate for the less sensitive majority can make it difficult to find information and classes on yoga suitable for HSPs.

This second of a three-part series offers some ideas for adapting yoga practices to meet your needs as an HSP. (I will not describe basic yoga postures here; that information is readily available from classes, videos, and books, and the first article suggested some sources for these.) But I want to emphasize, as I did in the first article, that the best approach is to explore different practices and observe the effects for yourself. So the following ideas are presented in this spirit -- just suggestions for exploration. I begin with how an HSP (or anyone) can approach yoga.

Doing Yoga, HSP Style

1. Freeing Energy.

When doing stretching postures, stretch or bend slowly, paying close attention to the first slight resistance or tension. When this first edge of tension is identified (long before the point of strain), hold the stretch, or perhaps release it slightly, and bring the awareness to the point of slight tension. Let the tension relax, which will usually happen during an exhalation. If the tension does not release, back off slightly. After the tension is freed, slowly continue the stretch to the next point of slight tension and repeat this process.

Gentle stretching like this can be more effective than forceful stretches because the body has reflexes that automatically tighten opposing muscles to protect them from over stretching. Forceful stretches can activate these reflexes. Sometimes it may seem like the muscles have a will of their own, and gentle stretches build trust that allows the muscles to stretch further without damage.

The location of the sequential points of tension may vary widely. For example, with forward bending stretches, the first tension could be the upper legs, then the lower legs, then the lower back, and finally the internal organs in the abdomen. When the tension relaxes, it may feel like the energy that was involved in the tension is free and available for other uses, which contributes to the sense of increased energy from yoga.

When a point of strong resistance is reached, staying at the first edge may feel like energy is continuously flowing out from the point. For a given posture, you may spend weeks or months releasing the energy or resistance in one part of the body.

HSPs may find that the energy flow becomes the focus of the postures, and developing flexibility and muscle tone happen as incidental side effects. Further, some of you may find that if you simply explore moving in a slow, unstructured manner, paying attention to and following the inner sense of energy flow, the movements naturally evolve into the standard yoga postures.

2. Extend into Energy.

When doing the postures, explore maintaining a mild sense of extension or energy flow along the back and limbs of the body. For example, with a forward bend, maintain a sense of extension along the legs, and another extension along the back and neck. This does not mean the legs are forced to be perfectly straight -- rather, whatever position is comfortable has a mild extension. You may notice that the extension along the back is associated with relaxed and slightly withdrawn abdominal muscles and internal organs, and that this feels beneficial.

You may find that these extensions enhance the effects of the postures and your awareness of energy, and that sometimes more strenuous postures seem to happen almost effortlessly with internal energy.

After completing a posture, bringing the hands together in prayer position with the back of the thumbs lightly touching the breast bone may seem like a natural way to consolidate and center the energy that has emerged during the posture.

3. Smile Awareness.

While sitting, bring the awareness to the face. Turn the corners of the mouth down and feel the effects. Slowly, with awareness, raise the corners of the mouth into a smile and increase this until the teeth show and then slowly open the mouth wide. Hold this briefly and feel the effects in the head and throughout the body. Slowly reverse this process to bring the corners of the mouth down. Repeat this cycle a couple of times.

Then focus on the forehead and scrunch the eyebrows and forehead down into a frown. Slowly raise the eyebrows and forehead as high as possible, observe the effects, and then slowly scrunch them down again. Repeat this cycle a couple of times.

Combine the mouth and forehead movements slowly with awareness for a couple of cycles. Finish with the forehead up and mouth open and then slowly let both the mouth and forehead settle into the position that seems most natural.

Yoga versus Exercise.

For optimum health, more physical exercise is needed than gentle yoga alone provides. Trying to adapt yoga postures for aerobic and/or strenuous strength-building exercise can cause significant risks of strain or injury for many postures. Most yoga postures stretch the body to the outer limit of the range of motion for certain muscles and joints. Repetitive aerobic exercises and strenuous strength-building exercises are

normally done in the middle of the range of motion and can be risky if attempted at the outer limits. Doing yoga with the primary goal of exercise can also compromise or negate its more subtle effects. Do other types of activities for aerobic and strenuous strength-building exercise.

Healthy Lifestyle Changes

Regular practice of hatha yoga can make you very aware of changes in your state of body and mind and of the causes of these changes. For example, you might discover that diet is a major cause of discomfort and limitations for yoga practice. This situation becomes increasingly conspicuous as muscles become flexible and the state of the internal organs becomes the limiting factor. The usual result is a shift in diet away from meat and other slow-digesting, high fat, high protein foods. However, this generality, like the statistical averages from nutrition research, should not obscure that fact that optimal diet varies greatly among people. HSPs in particular may have to discover their own unique dietary needs.

Traditional yoga also describes attitudes toward oneself and others that enhance yoga practice and reduce distress. For example, "karma yoga" focuses on the attitude a person has toward work and duty. The basic principle is that work should be done primarily with an attitude of service to others and not for personal gain or recognition. HSPs may find this attitude very natural. Other aspects of yoga and attitude toward life are described in the books suggested below.

In general, hatha yoga and changes in attitude and lifestyle are mutually reinforcing iterative processes. Hatha yoga facilitates healthy changes in attitude and lifestyle that in turn enhance yoga practice. The net result is increasing health and self understanding.

Sources of Information

The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice by T. K. V. Desikachar (Inner Traditions International, 1995) may be a particularly valuable resource for those continuing with hatha yoga practice.

The American Yoga Association Beginner's Manual by Alice Christensen (Simon and Schuster, 1987) was suggested in the previous article and includes discussion of how hatha yoga relates to other aspects of a person's life.

Return to: [Yoga Articles](#)