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Understanding Yoga

By Ashley Cleveland, MA, DC

When it comes to fitness, Americans like to sweat. We seem to believe that the more challenging the workout, the bigger and better the effect on our bodies will be. We want washboard abs, rock-hard buns, and biceps worthy of being called “guns.” Yoga has found its way into the fitness culture of the United States—acting sometimes as a respite from the hectic pace of life, others as a pulsing workout, and even, occasionally, as a therapeutic regimen to heal without drugs or surgery.

How can one discipline, yoga, be all of these things at the same time? The yoga with which most people in the United States are familiar is commonly referred to as *hatha yoga*. The Sanskrit term *hatha* can be divided into two parts, *ha* and *tha*, the former indicating sun and the latter indicating moon. Other translations suggest an interpretation of these words as the hard and the soft, the masculine and the feminine. Thus, *hatha yoga* is a physical practice that has hard and soft elements to it—postures that stretch and challenge alongside postures that relax and restore.

When Americans hear the word *yoga*, they generally think first of a series of contorted physical postures that require tremendous flexibility. But physical postures are only one element of the eight-limbed path of yoga that was developed by ancient sages to maximize human potential. The foundation of yoga practice is *yama* and *niyama*. *Yama* means restraint, and according to yogic philosophy the practitioner must learn to restrain his/her thought and behavior if s/he is to progress along the path. In addition to restraining certain thoughts and behaviors, the yogic practitioner is also encouraged to cultivate a set of positive observances, the *niyamas*.

In very traditional approaches to yoga, *asana*, or physical postures, can only be added after the restraints and observances are in place. Once the body has been strengthened and purified through *asana*, the practitioner can begin concentrated work with the breath through *pranayama*. These first four steps on the yogic path—*yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*—are considered the outer or external disciplines. They prepare one for the next four steps on the path which turn the energy and attention dramatically inward through sense withdrawal, one-pointed concentration, meditation and bliss.

So, while many Americans are experiencing what might best be described as ‘gym yoga,’ others have discovered various styles of yoga that emphasize to varying degrees the steps on the traditional yogic path. Some of the most common styles of yoga found in America today include Iyengar, Ashtanga, Vinyasa, and Bikram.

Iyengar yoga is named after the Indian teacher, B.K.S. Iyengar, who first brought yoga to the West with his book, *Light on Yoga*. This style of yoga emphasizes precision in body alignment in order to minimize injury and maximize the effects of the postures. For those who are new to yoga, Iyengar classes provide a firm foundation, as well as innovative use of props (blankets, bolsters, blocks, and straps) to make postures accessible to people of all body types and fitness levels. Iyengar classes are frequently limited to *asana*, and only add breath work after students have progressed to a certain depth of practice.

Both B.K.S. Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois studied with the great master, Krishnamacharya. Jois is the popularizer of the Ashtanga system of yoga. While the postures do not change (much) from one style of yoga to another, the way in which they are performed may. Ashtanga is a flowing series of *asanas* linked with a powerful breath technique, *ujjayi pranayama*. By moving continuously from one posture to another while breathing through the nostrils in this manner, the practitioner creates a deep heat in the body that produces a detoxifying sweat and increases flexibility. Traditionally, practitioners of this style begin with the primary series (a set of postures that takes about 90 minutes to

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complete) and only move on to the second series when they have mastered it. This is a vigorous style of yoga that is best practiced after one has learned appropriate alignment and breathing in a slower-paced class. For those who have injuries, this form of yoga can be problematic, so be certain to practice with a skilled teacher and modify the postures as needed.

Vinyasa yoga is sometimes also referred to as vinyasa flow yoga and draws from the Ashtanga tradition in its emphasis on linking poses with the breath and moving steadily throughout the practice. However, Vinyasa classes do not move through pre-set sequences as in Ashtanga. Vinyasa teachers sequence classes to build up to a 'peak pose' by systematically working the muscles that will be required to achieve it. For those who are relatively injury-free, this style of yoga can be appropriate even for a beginner.

Bikram yoga is named after its charismatic founder, Bikram Choudhury. As in Ashtanga, Bikram practitioners repeat a set sequence of breathing exercises and postures in every class. Like Vinyasa flow, the Bikram series is designed to prepare the body posture by posture for the culminating pose; however, this preparation is not flowing as in Ashtanga or Vinyasa. The most unique, and controversial, aspect of Bikram yoga is its use of a heated room with the temperature set in the range of 90-104 degrees Fahrenheit. The heat is used to increase sweating and detoxification, while adding to students' flexibility. Many practitioners love the sequence and the heated room, but this practice is not for everyone. Beginners may find this style difficult as there is little modification suggested and props are generally not available. Additionally, the heat may be uncomfortable for some.

Whatever yoga style you wish to try, it is important to look for a teacher that has a good background in anatomy and has been through some training specifically designed for yoga teachers. While gyms do offer yoga and some have excellent yoga teachers on staff, it may be best to go to a studio that specializes in this discipline. Such a studio is likely to offer classes designed for beginning students, and these classes will help to prevent injury and provide a good foundation upon which to build a consistent practice. Carefully choosing a style of yoga appropriate for your fitness level and health status along with a qualified teacher will make all the difference in whether or not you experience the tremendous physical and mental benefits of this ancient body-mind practice.

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