



# PRACTICE

It's the foundation of growth in yoga

**Y**ou have just enough time to change into your yoga gear and get to class and you hesitate. Or you've proudly developed a 30-minute daily meditation practice but today you're inclined to stay in bed. Perhaps you've had an incredibly busy day and not once took a moment to focus on yourself and what you were doing. No matter how dedicated you might be, distraction beckons.

It's easy to procrastinate or resist commitments to your own well-being. Whether you get side-tracked by the phone, have a physical discomfort, or feel lazy, the activities and events of the world draw your attention. It's as though the general default is an absent-minded release into a stream of diversion.

What happens when you don't meet your personal commitments? For the most part it doesn't matter. With today's busy schedules, you have to be flexible. But you may have experienced a nagging feeling that you've let yourself down. Even if your alternate activity was engaging, you might feel flat or deflated. You know you haven't taken advantage of a practice that contributes to good health. Or you've broken a rhythm of continuity that has sustained you.

Whatever your practices may be, when you get yourself to class, when you do your meditation, or when you take

personal time to regroup, you get the pay-off. You might be more relaxed, open, expanded, or centred. And even if you don't, you know you have made the effort and in time, the effort always has a positive effect.

Abyasa is practice or effort. Without the actual doing, nothing happens. Practice makes it possible to learn, to improve, to maintain, and to deepen your experience of yoga.

## CONTEMPLATION ON INTENTION

A good place to start is to identify what has brought you to yoga and its practices, and then what has kept you interested. Some people, for example, have health concerns, such as working with a sore back or relieving nervousness, and find the sequences of postures benefit their overall sense of well-being as well. Getting older is a prime motive as yoga helps build and maintain flexibility and strength. Health practitioners recommend yoga and meditation to relieve stress or improve energy. Other reasons are to enhance quality of life, overcome a personal crisis, cope with a high-pressure job, or find like-minded friends.

You might be living the balance that's right for you and your intention is to just keep it. Or you might want to make a stronger commitment. Especially if you have developed a routine of one practice, you may want to add another, or extend your time.

Maybe you're ready to add different styles or types of training to your experience or complete a teachers' training program. Are you prepared to challenge yourself and overcome distractions? If you can, voice your intention. If you've been doing yoga for a while, is it different from when you started? Next year's intention may be different again. What could you do now that would boost your experience of yoga?

What if you started something a while ago and stopped? Come back! Even if you haven't done anything in years, you always have the foundation you have created.

## THE CROSSROADS OF PRACTICE

In the *Yoga Sutras Patanjali* says, *Abyasa*, practice, is repeated effort to follow disciplines that give control of the thought-waves of the mind. (I.13) This control is not necessarily about trying to force your mind to not think or to contemplate only happiness. It is about consistently guiding your mind towards your genuine best interests and away from anxiety or self-criticism.

Yoga practices themselves are perfect methods. Most likely you already have investigated or found practices that particularly resonate. These may include yoga postures, breathing sequences, guided relaxation, meditations, chanting, recitation of Sanskrit texts, or repetition of mantra. More passive

endeavours include reading or studying books on yoga philosophy, or listening to mantras or music to bring yourself to the present moment. A weekend retreat might activate or rekindle your interest.

Simply, when you pursue practices that develop steadiness and peace of mind, you make a choice to move away from what Patanjali calls “mental laziness, doubt, lack of enthusiasm, sloth, and despair caused by failure to concentrate.” (I.30) Instead you just feel better.

### CONTEMPLATION ON CHOICE

Every day brings a series of choices that directly affect how you feel and what you think about yourself. It's impossible, of course, to always get it right. But consider asking questions like these when you are at the crossroads of action.

- ◆ Will this bring me more tension or more peace?
- ◆ Is this action for overall good?
- ◆ Will I feel better or worse if I follow this direction?
- ◆ Which choice truly is for my benefit today and in the future?

### RESISTANCE IS FUTILE

Patanjali continues, “Practice becomes firmly grounded when it has been cultivated for a long time, uninterrupted, with earnest devotion.” (I.14) This is the ultimate incentive. *Abyasa* is the process of developing a nurturing lifestyle, progressively choosing actions, thoughts, words, and practices that develop personal stability and health.

Regardless of how accomplished you are at anything, resistance arises. *Abyasa* asks you to push through. Investigate your reluctance. Sometimes it's physical; suddenly you feel tired or listless. It can also be emotional; you have had a difficult day. Or totally arbitrary, such as not having the right clothes or expecting a guest the next day.

What are your personal habits? Do you

procrastinate or talk yourself out of the benefits of practice? Maybe you have created an imaginary standard that you can't meet. Perhaps you readily accept distraction because you don't like the feeling of resistance itself. Consider becoming vigilant at the moment of choice. What thoughts create obstacles?

The key to working with resistance is to notice how you feel when you choose not to do your practice. If your reason was authentic, you will have clear acknowledgement. For example,

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your cold worsens and you're glad you stayed home. If your reason was iffy, you will miss your routine. There's a sense of let-down. Keep that in mind for the next time you are choosing. As you ask yourself if you are going to make an effort, remember the let-down when you don't. In contrast, tune in to the sense of satisfaction when you make the effort; take a mental note for the next moment of choice.

Another method is to provoke yourself. In yoga, a classic method of overcoming resistance is to draw on the famous statement in the *Bhagavad Gita* when Arjuna is paralysed with inaction. Krishna reminds him, “Be a warrior.”

### SELF-AWARENESS

Self-awareness is a fundamental practice in yoga. Could you set yourself the goal of being self-aware three times a day? When you are aware of yourself you are paying attention to where you are in relation to your surroundings and other people and at the same time aware of all the thoughts and feelings passing through you.

In yoga, thought-waves are the innumerable ideas, words, plans, conversations, and memories of the mind itself. These thought-waves

respond to two basic influences: towards the world itself, all the objects, people, and dramas; and towards your inner world of reactions, information, impressions, and retention of experiences.

Control of thought-waves is the practice of progressively cultivating awareness of what, exactly, you are thinking. The essence of *abhyasa* is to be aware. In yoga class, for example, you enhance your awareness of your body as you deliberately move your shoulder or hip, or follow through when your teacher reminds you to extend your leg. Self-awareness is also the state of being aware of yourself internally. It is the process of witnessing yourself. Is your mind filled with chatter or imagining? Are you carrying a strong emotion such as being irritable or hurting? Or comparing yourself to another person? Notice, too, when you feel tranquil and relaxed.

### PRACTICE OF AWARENESS

An easy practice that brings instant results is to focus your attention entirely on this moment and ask yourself: Where am I? Observe how you are dressed, whether you are sitting, lying down, standing, or riding in transport. What is in the room or landscape around you? Who is with you? Take the time to describe completely where you are physically. Then focus your attention internally. Guide your mind to right now, this exact moment. You might recognise a predominant concern or a sense of spaciness. Just notice. Then direct your awareness to the breath and become fully aware of each inhale and exhale. Once you have become completely aware, you can answer: I am here and it is now.

### WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

As in any endeavour, the value of yoga and its practices are discovered through effort. You try it and you like it or you don't. When you stick with it, you will find a particular teacher and style of yoga that you prefer, even a day and time that works best for you. Likewise you might investigate attending a weekly chant, meditation,

or study-discussion group. Or you can stay at home and watch a DVD or any of the thousands of websites that provide demonstrations and discussions of all the yoga practices. In time, some people become teachers or group leaders to ensure their practice.

It's up to you to decide the appropriate level of practice as well as the level of commitment. Beginning something is usually easier than continuing, especially if you readily get bored, or find that your progress is slow. But practice generates momentum. With an ongoing commitment all you have to do is show up. What could be easier? Showing up means practicing through the ordinary ups and downs and through extraordinary life challenges. It means doing the practice in all kinds of weather, with or without distractions, when you feel rebellious or disappointed, sluggish or vivacious. In time you develop a practice that has a strong foundation, able to withstand

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shake-ups. Your practice become integrated fully into your life, and you approach the challenges of day-to-day life as you do your practice.

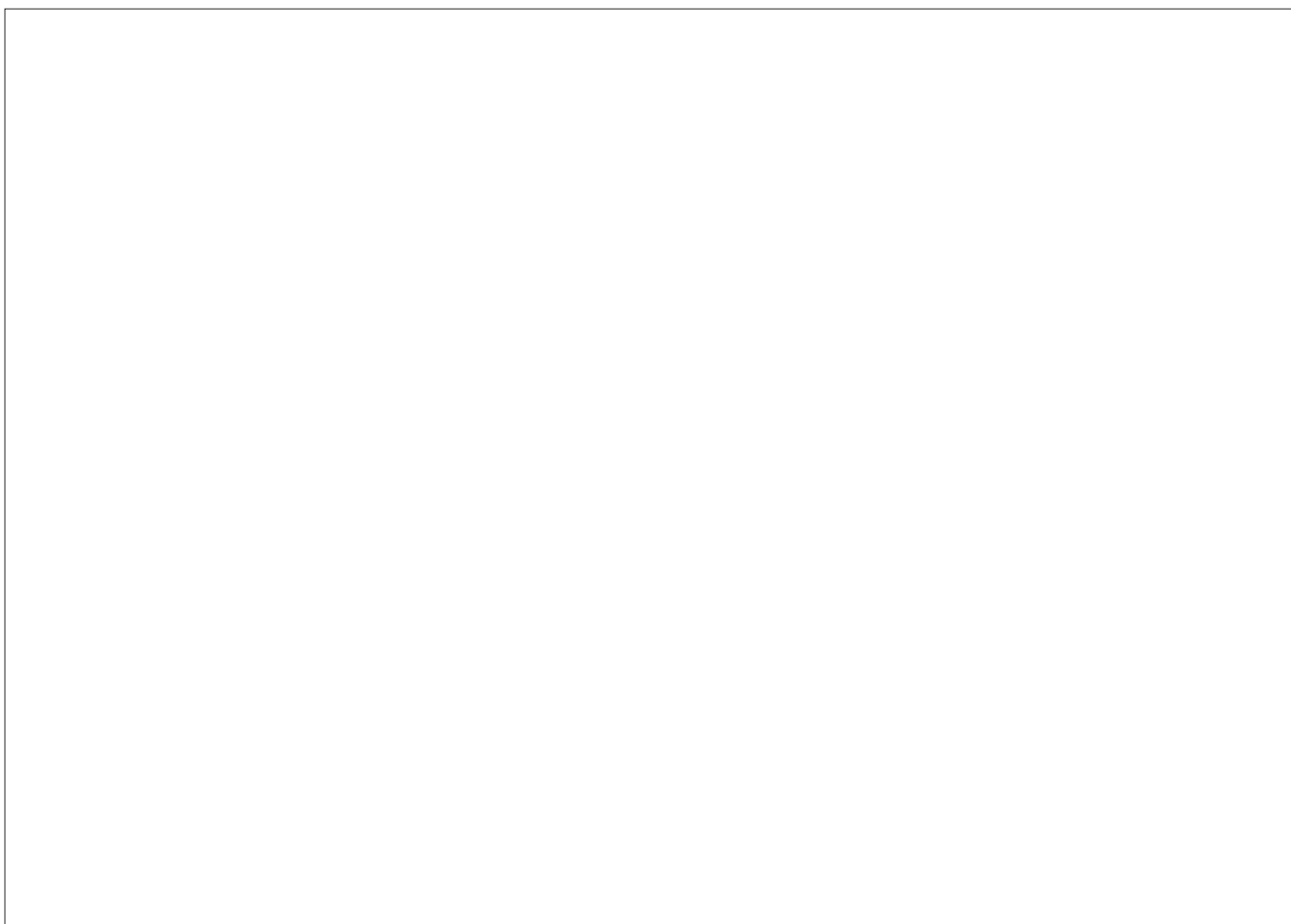
You don't have to be able to do advanced postures or lead a Sanskrit chant to deepen your experiences with yoga. The practices themselves help you dissolve physical and emotional blocks. They open the body, improve the breath, help you relax, and generate a sense of vitality. Many individuals have done yoga practices on and off for decades. The benefits add up. At any stage your body is imminently grateful for the stretching and strengthening of earlier practices. Your mind congratulates efforts made to dispel anxiety and stressful thinking and instead instilling positive and optimistic

attitudes. Your heart appreciates the sense of openness and acceptance. And your spirit expands with a sense of freedom.

Whether you have a short-term goal or want a lifestyle change, all you need is willingness. Practice is the doing itself. It is living life as it unfolds but also making choices that positively affect you. For those who have established ironclad routines they never miss. For others, it's okay to get distracted and resume. The bottom line with practice? Just do it.

**FOR FURTHER READING:**

Prabhavananda, Swami, and Christopher Isherwood, *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali*, New American Library, New York, 1969.



Abyasa is the process of developing a nurturing lifestyle, progressively choosing actions, thoughts, words, and practices that develop personal stability and health.

**KEEP IT SIMPLE**

If you find it's overwhelming to make a big commitment, make a small one. The practice of pranayama, or breathing exercises, is one of the most effective ways to bring yourself to the present moment. It's also a great way to relieve tension, regroup from an emotional upset, or cope with difficult situations or people. Here are two classics that you can do for three to five minutes:

- ◆ Inhale gently but deeply, filling your belly like a balloon, then gently exhale through the nostrils. Repeat three times then allow the breath to return to its natural rhythm. Stay focused on the process of inhaling and exhaling.
- ◆ Inhale to the count of four, hold to the count of four, exhale to the count of four. Repeat three times then allow the breath to return to its natural rhythm.

**TAKE THE CHALLENGE**

Wouldn't you feel great if you fulfilled a commitment to continual practice? What if you attended 10 consecutive weeks of yoga or meditation sessions? Maybe you're ready to extend your practice to two days a week or add another practice.

Consider a personal pledge of doing a daily practice for 100 days. If you break it, start over. What about 30 days or even 10? Don't give yourself a challenge you know you can't meet. What is possible? Once you establish a routine, commitments to practice become easier. Here are some suggestions for possible daily practices:

- ◆ Do one round of Salute to the Sun every day.
- ◆ Read three pages of a book about a yogi, yoga philosophy, an article in *Australian Yoga Life*, or other written material pertaining to yoga.
- ◆ Do self-inquiry. Ask yourself questions that deepen your understanding of your tendencies. Or ask yourself questions related to readings or teachings.
- ◆ Repeat a mantra out loud, doing three rounds on a mala of 108 rudraksha beads. Or repeat a mantra silently for a specified time.
- ◆ On your own or along with a recording, chant a mantra or other text.
- ◆ Meditate for 15 minutes.
- ◆ Listen to a recording of guided meditation or relaxing music.
- ◆ Turn your attention on yourself in a given moment to become fully present. Do this three times a day.
- ◆ Clean or arrange a puja, or altar, and light a candle, incense, or other gesture that brings your attention to the moment and to your inner experience.
- ◆ Listen to and follow instructions on one of the practices from an Internet or YouTube site.
- ◆ Be the witness. Disengage yourself from what you are doing as though someone else is the doer. Do this three times a day.
- ◆ Keep a journal. Write down your challenges and your insights. Allow yourself to record your resistance, frustrations, or disappointments as well as your triumphs.
- ◆ At the same time each day, sit in the same place and send out good wishes to specific people or certain places in the world for healing, prosperity, warmth, and friendship.

Self-awareness is a fundamental practice in yoga.

**HELP YOUR COMMITMENT**

Most importantly, set yourself a goal that you know you can attain. What actions do you need to take? Here are some suggestions

- ◆ Find a different style of yoga, a new teacher, or a better time.
- ◆ Go out for coffee afterwards with someone from class.
- ◆ Take a course or re-take an introductory course.
- ◆ Dedicate a space or a time to practice.
- ◆ Bring a friend.
- ◆ Go on a retreat.

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