EVERYTHING YOU HAVE WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT YOGA, 
BUT DIDN’T EVEN KNOW TO ASK

AN INTRODUCTION TO YOGA

Many Americans are drawn to yoga initially, as a way to keep fit, although this is 
beginning to change. For this reason, classes that have gained popularity in the U.S. 
usually teach one of many types of hatha yoga. Hatha yoga is the physical practice of 
yoga that focuses primarily on poses and breathe work, designed originally to prepare the 
body for spiritual pursuit. If you browse through a yoga studio’s brochure and the yoga 
that is offered is simply described as “hatha”, chances are the teacher is offering an 
eclectic blend of two or more of the many styles of hatha yoga.

“Hatha” yoga, however, is only one of six branches of yoga. The others include raja 
yoga, which focuses primarily on meditation; karma yoga, which focuses on the path of 
service; bhakti yoga, which focuses on the path of devotion; jnana yoga, which focuses 
on mind or wisdom of the yogic sage or scholar; and tantra yoga, which is the pathway to 
ritual.

The word “hatha” comes from a Sanskrit word, which when broken down into ha and tha 
stands for ha, or sun, and tha, or moon. This represents the concept in yoga of seeking to 
achieve “balance”. Sun energy is thought of as “yang” and associated with more 
masculine energy while moon energy is thought of as “yin” and associated with the more 
feminine energy. Yoga is the practice that unites these energies and balances our bodies 
and minds.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF BREATHING IN YOGA?

In yoga, breathing is done primarily through the nose, which helps the mind and the body 
relax. As we breathe in deeply, we are encouraging richly oxygenated blood to travel to 
all body tissues, assisting them to achieve positive health. As we exhale, we aid in the 
elimination of toxins and waste products. Equally important, breathing helps to still and 
calm the mind.

Many classes begin and/or end with breath work. Throughout the class, the focus on 
breath helps you move into poses more deeply, allowing you to hold the poses longer and 
with more ease. The breath should flow naturally, (one breath with every movement), 
and should initiate the movement. Generally, you will breathe in, or inhale, as you open 
and extend the spine, and breathe out, or exhale, as you rotate and flex your spine.
DO I NEED TO BE FLEXIBLE TO PRACTICE YOGA?

Absolutely not. However, by exercising the body in a balanced and safe way and by respecting and honoring your body’s abilities and limitations, you may be able to achieve more flexibility. More importantly, yoga is not about performance. Yoga is instead a process of moving inward, which is more about personal growth than performance of poses. It should make you feel good, reduce stress and help you manage your family, health and job with more grace, ease and comfort while cultivating the awareness needed to build a loving and caring relationship with your own inner self.

PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER AS YOU PRACTICE

**Hip Hinge:**
As you bend forward, try to remember to hinge from the hips while activating the abdominal muscles. Think of creating a “hand sandwich” as you bend forward, by placing your hand between your upper leg and your lower torso, thereby creating a sandwich-- with the hand being the ingredients between the two parts of your body.

**Neutral spine:**
Focus on keeping your back extensions active, using your core body to stabilize and maintain the spine and pelvis in their neutral positions.

**Scapular retraction and depression:**
Always try to remember to keep the shoulders relaxed down and away from the ears to avoid tension in the neck and shoulders and to strengthen the upper back. Think of “fanning” your shoulders over your back.

**Head in line with spine:**
Because it is safest, try to keep the neck in line with the head and spine in most poses.

**Knee alignment:**
In most poses, try to make sure your knees are pointing in the same direction as your toes. However, try to keep the knees positioned over the ankles rather than the toes. It is especially important to remember this when you bend your knees over your foot, as in a lunge, to avoid injuring your knees.
SOME QUESTIONS ANSWERED

WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO PRACTICE?
The best time to practice is the time of the day that works best for you. Some people consider the morning best, because it is easier to exercise first thing before other activities cut into their time, but for others, this is either impossible or just not desirable. It is best to try to work out at the same time each day because your body gets used to this, but for many people, it is necessary to vary the time to accommodate other activities in their lives. This, too, is OK.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I PRACTICE?
Again, this is up to you. Of course, it would be wonderful if you could do yoga everyday, but for many people this is not possible. Practice yoga as often as you can, even if you must do a very limited workout on any one day, doing those poses you find most helpful and beneficial to your body and mind.

INSTRUCTORS OFTEN BEGIN CLASS WITH A FEW MINUTES OF SILENCE. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS?
This period of quiet allows a time to transition away from the activities of every day life and to center and still the mind. It is a very important part of the practice because it serves to settle and calm you as it brings your focus to the present moment and what is to come.

WHAT DOES THE WORD “NAMASTE” MEAN?
“Nama” means bow; “as” means I; “te” means you. Therefore, the word literally means “I bow to you”. Namaste represents the belief that there is a divine spark within each of us. The gesture is used to acknowledge the soul in oneself as well as the soul within others, and it conveys respect and dignity for one another. Namaste is performed by placing the hands together at the heart, closing the eyes and bowing the head. In the U.S., the word is often accompanied by the gesture. Some instructors begin and/or end their class with the word “Namaste”.

INSTRUCTORS MAY ALSO CHANT THE SOUND OF “OM” BEFORE OR AFTER CLASS. PLEASE EXPLAIN?
Many teachers bracket their sessions with this sacred, ancient Hindu mantra. While there are many definitions and meanings for this sound, a very basic understanding is that it is the basic sound of the Universe, which contains all other sounds. It is the merging of everything into one. Whether or not we know the meaning, it is a moment in class when everyone joins their voices together in harmony. Whether or not you choose to join in, listen and observe how the sound resonates within you.
WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF SAVASANA?

Savasana means “corpse pose”. Sounds easy, right? Just lay there and play dead. If yoga was merely a physical practice, this would be true. Yoga, instead, is the integration or submersion of all of you - mind, body and soul. Because savasana requires stillness of the body and mind, it is sometimes considered one of the hardest poses or asana. Have you ever tried to stop thinking at night when your mind is reeling and you cannot sleep? This is the opposite of savasana. In savasana, the challenge is to lay still and have no thoughts or to realize that you are having a thought without allowing it to disturb anything, just letting it float in and out.

WHAT DOES THE WORD CHAKRA MEAN?

Literally meaning a circle or wheel, in yoga chakras refer to our energy centers. They are the openings for life energy to flow into and out of our aura. There are seven main chakras that align with the spinal column. They are associated with our physical, mental and emotional interactions.

HOW DO I KNOW WHAT TYPE OF YOGA TO PRACTICE?

Yoga styles today range from very gentle and meditative to vigorous and technically demanding, therefore, selecting a yoga practice that fits your goals and physical condition is very important. Additionally, because traditions differ, you may hear or experience conflicting information. To learn more about the many different yoga traditions, see http://www.yogajournal.com/basics/165.