

What is the perfect asana?

Students often have an idea of the 'perfect' form of an asana believing if it is achieved then they will have succeeded. This perspective however is not the correct perspective for practicing yoga asana for three main reasons:

1. If students are pushing themselves towards an idealized version of an asana then they are more likely to suffer injury and the body and mind will actually close down rather than open up!
2. If students perceive they must accomplish an 'ideal' form of asana and it is unobtainable either due to their level of experience, prevailing medical conditions or simply because their body cannot allow it then there will be an undercurrent of dissatisfaction and a feeling of frustration meaning their practice of yoga asana has already failed.
3. It will also mean the student will never be able to be absolutely present because there is an orientation towards a future goal.

We, as yoga teachers, must have a clear idea of how to approach asana to help our students succeed! Consider how an older lady in a wheel chair could perform a more effective, 'advanced' yoga asana practice than a young flexible gymnast, who can easily adopt any pose she desires, if her practice is done as an inner exploration of her existing boundaries, using the breath, and working in accordance with what is experienced from moment to moment. Only in this way can yoga asana be transformative and truly be called yoga!

We have already seen that yoga asana requires:

- Breath awareness
- Movement done with an inner sensitivity, in accordance with the body's needs
- A focused mind with moment to moment presence
- Exploration and Self-reflection

(1) The use of Static v Dynamic Movement

Traditionally asana is often practiced statically where we spend some time holding a specific asana, and this certainly differentiates it from many other forms of physical movement; at other times and in some traditions there is more dynamic use of asana where the body moves either in and out of an asana or between different asana.

We will usually use a good mixture of dynamic and static asana in any one class, although some styles of yoga have a preference for one type only.

Dynamic movement, where we are working in and out of an asana, is usually less intense so can be useful as preparation before staying in a pose; is good for beginners as they do not have the mental or physical means of staying for longer periods to explore the pose; and it can be good for some conditions such as heart disease where sometimes staying in some poses can be too strong. Then we can gradually build up our ability to stay statically in any one

Practicing Asana

asana, leaving it and re-entering it as needed at first. Generally speaking movement in asana is classically done slowly and mindfully, with great internal sensitivity.

(2) Awareness of the breath

Breath awareness is extremely significant in asana for many reasons:

- Concentration upon the breath harnesses the mind
- The breath serves as a feedback tool so if held, uneven or ragged we know we have gone beyond our current capacities
- We can use the breath to facilitate our physical movements
- The breath helps us to palpate tight areas, releasing & opening them
- It links us with the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system i.e. creating a calming, relaxing effect, helping us to balance the nervous system

i) The act of breathing in asana

To get ready to breathe in asana it is first useful to explore where the breath is directed and which locations in the body are being moved by the breath. To do this we will spend time working with basic breathing techniques, especially working with the yogic complete three part breath so that students become more sensitive to the act of breathing.

For asana we need to keep the lower abdominals in a slight state of contraction so that we can direct the breadth and depth of the breath as needed.

This way of breathing has many advantages for asana practice. It fills the lungs more completely and creates more space around the waist so the diaphragm can easily move. It also gives more freedom for the spine to move and can help to protect the lumbar region of the spine. It also means we can more easily increase or decrease the intensity of our breathing.

ii) Using the breath to facilitate the practice of asana.

We can use the inhalation to enhance any opening or expansive movement such as where the chest is opened or where the spine is lengthened. We can use the exhalation to enhance any closing or compressing movements such as folding forwards. So for examples in forward bends we use the inhalation to extend the spine and the exhalation to fold forwards.

On occasion we can try using the breath differently within an asana to see what effect that has for instance we can rise up into the backbend of Bhujangasana (cobra pose) on an inhalation and then try the same lift on an exhalation.

However ideally we are always referring inwardly and utilizing the breath to expand our body from the inside out, gradually feeling our way into the postures. Ultimately a student will learn to work with what feels natural, to be guided from within.

iii) Coordinating the breath and movement

To learn to coordinate breath and movement it is best to start by simply practicing the posture without attention being placed on the breath. Once the posture has been experienced then we can coordinate the movement with the breath, allowing the breath to frame the movement.

Practicing Asana

(3) An exploration of the experience of an asana

i) Using the breath to create an effect

In a way the breath moving through the body is like the wind played through a musical instrument, and by breathing in different ways we can adjust our experience of asana. We can breathe slowly or more vigorously, shallow or more deeply, softly or with more intensity and we must choose that which suits our asana practice at any point

Sometimes breathing more deeply will help lift our energy if we are tired or we are working within an asana requiring more strength and endurance. Alternatively if we are working with an edge of intensity as we stretch into a posture and want to relax the mind and body we need to breathe more softly. Certainly we get a more **langhana** or relaxing/calming effect if we emphasize the exhalation or momentarily hold the breath after the exhalation and a more **brmhana** or enlivening effect if we do the same for the inhalation.

Breathing must however always be smooth and relaxed and when the breath becomes strained or jerky it is a great feedback tool telling us we have gone too far or for too long.

As teachers we must always remind our students to be mindful of their breath in asana and help them to explore the breath as they work with asana. The breath brings all asana to life and engages the mind as we work with the body.

ii) Adjusting intensity

Each student must learn to work into their tight, contracted areas, gradually expanding their physical boundaries and assimilating more free flowing energy. A great contemporary American yoga teacher called Erich Schiffman has called this process 'playing the edges' and this term is often used in yoga.

Playing the edges

Playing the edge is the process of sensing how far to move into an asana knowing if you do not go far enough there is no intensity or opportunity for opening and if you go too far into the stretch you will experience pain and possibly injury and the body will actually resist opening as the stretch reflex mechanism contracts muscles. Stretching in yoga asana is an art whereby you learn to work with the perfect amount of intensity without moving into pain or psychological or physical resistance.

As an important note: the movement must always be experienced within the muscles and never at the joints, where a movement is experienced at the joints we must make internal adjustments so the intensity is always at the belly of the muscle being stretched!

So working with less challenging postures at first to play the edges:

- 1) Detect the minimum edge of the stretch where the initial feeling of resistance is experienced.
- 2) This is the first edge where we stay with focused easy breathing until the relaxation response is evoked
- 3) As the feeling of resistance dissipates, like a gate opening, it allows us to move through to the next point of resistance, the next edge.
- 4) Here again we stay with focused breathing until again the resistance dissipates and a new gate opens.
- 5) We practice in this way yielding at each new edge ensuring we never push too hard or exert force in any way or the body will close down.

Practicing Asana

6) Then at some point the intensity will not diminish and this is the point beyond which we do not proceed. We stay at this point and breathe deeply, perhaps exploring working with the breath in different ways or by making small adjustments to alter the feeling tone within the body, or more subtly altering the current of energy running through the body.

7) We may also at this point choose to leave the pose and re-enter it several times. We must never force an opening or work past our current levels of endurance.

This gradual process of playing the edges needs to be cultivated slowly to allow each student to listen to their inner conversation, waiting for internal cues to rest and move. If done too quickly a student cannot be fully aware of inner sensations and the body will not yield allowing the sensations to diminish.

ii) Exploring the lines of effort within asana

When we are practicing asana we need to consciously create different lines of effort because within asana we are channeling or directing energy within the different asana templates. To illustrate this Erich Schiffman tells us to try imagining the centre of the palm is like a small sun and to imagine as we stretch our fingers out we are radiating the stretch out from the centre like the five rays of light. We have to keep our hand very relaxed but allow the hand to gradually remold itself to this new open shape. Play with this seeing if you can simultaneously consciously stretch the hand, whilst feeling where the muscles are being contracted, keeping the movement as effortless and relaxed as possible. We do the same thing in yoga asana although we are involving the whole body. In this way we are endeavouring to open up the whole body releasing constricted tight areas, feeling those areas where there is right effort or strength, making the body stronger and removing limitation or obstruction. Indeed the yoga postures have evolved over time to help clear the body, creating different pathways for energy to flow freely.

In yoga asana the centre of the body is located two inches beneath the navel (sometimes known as the hara in martial arts) so it is helpful to think of the centre of the body to be the entire pelvis, it being situated beneath the navel and above the genitals.

For all postures we need to start by considering how the pelvis is positioned. It can either be in a cat tilt, which is the posterior tilt, where the front of the pelvis is drawn towards the navel or a dog tilt, which is the anterior tilt where the front of the pelvis is drawn away from the navel. Alternatively it may be placed in a neutral anatomical position.

Once the central point of a position is aligned we then can think about the lines of effort or energy that will radiate out from this central area. Different poses will have different numbers of lines radiating outwards for example Dandasana (stick pose) has two lines, one radiating up through the spinal column and another along the legs, whereas Trikonasana, (triangle pose) has five lines radiating out through the arms, legs and spinal column.

We must work with all the lines of effort at the same time although the spinal column will always be very important because the spine is rooted in your centre. Note that all lines begin at your centre, even the arms since they too have their root at your centre so for example when we lift the arms we lift them not from the shoulders but from our core.

Good alignment ultimately comes from within.

As a good yoga teacher we can teach students what to look for and how to observe themselves, offering individual guidance and adjustment where helpful, but it will always be the case that what a student finds is opening and clearing when they adjust themselves

Practicing Asana

according to the inner feeling will be in accordance with their own body mechanics. We therefore need to gradually teach students how to work within asana using the building blocks as described in this section and continue to guide them as they practice to reflect inwardly. This means we will be offering specific teaching points for asana as well as pointers where students can check to see if a shoulder remains open, if the lower back feels free and long etc.

iii) Adjusting the intensity within lines of effort

We must always keep the body as relaxed as possible using the minimal amount of effort we can.

We can increase the intensity by gradually increasing our stretch as we maintain the relaxed state, moving from soft to more intense as we feel it is desired.

We can allow the intensity to increase and decrease with the breath, the inhalation can be used to create and intensify the line of effort and the exhalation can be used to release all effort and strain perhaps also allowing us to make the line of effort longer. Sometimes we can do the reverse.

Remember we must always work with just the right level of intensity, not too much or too little.

In yoga asana we must always work with the whole body so ultimately we are not working with five lines of energy in trikonasana (triangle pose) rather in practice we are working with the whole body, the whole breath and the whole mind, in this way it has become a more authentic yoga!!

Finally:

It is worth reiterating that it is of absolute importance that we must always ensure our students are directed to experience the asana within the muscles and never at the joints because this is one of the primary ways in which to make asana both safe and effective.

Always remember we are not primarily working towards achieving an idealized asana, which can be seen from the exterior, as attainment of this does not constitute real success in our yoga asana practice. Rather it is an internal journey of opening, releasing and strengthening where we are working with what we experience from moment to moment; where through our mindfulness and concentration upon the breath our practice becomes our meditation. One day our students will inevitably be able to do more than they previously had thought possible but this should occur naturally, almost spontaneously, and most certainly without force!

We must teach our students that the correct practice of yoga asana is in the journey rather than the destination and paradoxically by focusing upon the journey they will have reached the destination!!

Practicing Asana

Ujjayi Breathing

Once we have worked with how to move the breath as a wave in asana we can then try to incorporate ujjayi breathing. This technique is used in many traditions such as Asthanga Yoga and Viniyoga. 'Ujjayi' can be translated as either 'victorious', 'warrior' or 'psychic' breath although this breath is usually known as the warrior breath.

In ujjayi breathing the glottis is partially constricted creating a 'sonorous' or melodic sound. The glottis is the hole at the top of the trachea where the vocal cords are located, and by partially constricting the glottis we are able to control the amount of air passing through the throat making the breath long and deep. This has many effects including:

- Strengthening the respiratory muscles and the lungs themselves
- Increasing the amount of oxygen inhaled increasing energy levels
- Promoting relaxation thoughts its smooth, rhythmic action
- Decreasing mental tension, being especially good for anxiety
- Facilitating deep diaphragmatic breathing meaning the heart is massaged more effectively, being very good for heart conditions
- Creating a heating effect, being excellent if we feel lethargic or congested
- Making asana practice more meditative
- Helping us to become sensitised to our energy
- Developing our extra-sensory awareness of subtle energies

Ujjayi breathing is very beneficial for the following conditions:

- Hypertension – reducing blood pressure
- Insomnia – relaxing the mind & body
- Anxiety – calming the mind and nervous system, creating a sense of being present
- Conditions related to the excessive production of mucous – heating and drying

It is excellent for using in all asana practice and all students should use it with the exception of anyone suffering from low blood pressure who will need to monitor the effect.

It can be difficult at first to master ujjayi breathing but there are several ways to try to learn the technique.

- We can imagine we are about to pronounce a hard 'g' as we would for the word 'gate'. This is the shape we are making at the back of the throat. We can then breathe gently inwards and outwards as if we are sucking and blowing air through the partially close glottis at the back of the throat.
- Alternatively we can pretend we are misting a pair of glasses or a mirror, making the gentle sound of 'aah'. Make this sound as you continue inhaling and exhaling. Eventually close your mouth and let the sound of 'aah' gently emanate from your throat.

In the early stages it may be helpful to imagine that your ujjayi breathing is mirroring the ebb and flow of the tide. Remember to make the breath very smooth and easy, never straining the breath. Also its effectiveness is increased if you very lightly contract the lower abdominals as you inhale and more fully contract them as you exhale. This use of the abdominal muscles means there will be greater use of your thoracic respiratory muscles promoting deep diaphragmatic breathing. If you can do this then asana practice becomes more pneumatic like moving on air!