

The Importance of warming-up

We have already seen that there is an arc-like structure to the whole class where the intensity and complexity of asana practice gradually increases, and for us this means including an initial period of warming-up after the initial centering.



If the body is gradually warmed up then **flexibility increases and the possibility of injury diminishes**. This is also part of creating a kind of tapas or heat to bring beneficial change or transformation to the body and mind; this introduction of heat or warming is one of the reasons why our yoga mat is called a tapas mat.

It is possible to create warmth in a **passive** manner by increasing the heat in the environment, such as we find in Hot Yoga, however this can be somewhat problematic in that tissues and joints may become freer but simultaneously we may not have the knowledge, skills and self-awareness to practice safely; there are also recent reports¹ indicating an increased temperature can reduce the tensile strength of connective tissues, meaning that injury becomes a greater possibility. (Tensile strength is the ability of a material to resist being pulled apart.)

Alternatively, we can gradually bring warmth to the tissues and mobilise joints in a more **active** way through movement, which has the added benefits of increasing heart rate, blood flow, deepening the breath, sensitizing the nervous system and so forth.

The warm up can consist of simple movements or simple asana, and these can be **generalized** or **targeted**. Ideally it is a combination of each so that we feel an increased flow of energy (prana) through the whole body, as tissues are stretched and joints are mobilized but will also have received targeted preparation for specific asana to follow.

The **targeted preparation** includes **physical preparation** such as lengthening hamstrings for Uttanasana (Standing forward bend), and also **mental preparation** such as introducing significant teaching points earlier in the practice, for instance exploring anterior pelvic tilting in simpler asana such as Majrasana (Cat Pose) for the later practice of Uttanasana where an anterior tilt is needed. With regards to mental preparation this can also take the form of simply raising awareness of a particular area of the body, waking it up so to speak. In this way we are making the following more complicated & challenging asana more accessible to students and also gradually building up their knowledge and skills.

So initial preparatory warming movements & asana generally need to be:

- More dynamic or active to increase heat, e.g. repetitions of simple movements or asana, perhaps followed by shorter stays
- Performed with attention to the breath or they can become too mechanistic & rapid
- Performed with full attention or mindfulness, i.e. with an inner focus

Then as our pathway to the peak pose(s):

- Longer stays can follow where we build up stamina/strength and stretching at the full ROM (range of movement)
- We can gradually work with more demanding, complex or new asana as the class progresses

¹ Troels B. 1979 Achilles Heel Rupture, Acta Orthopaedica Scandinavica, 152 Supplement, pages 1-126

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There is no one way of actively warming up with different traditions taking different routes for instance:

- The Sivananda tradition often begins with Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) however we must be aware of our students' needs, and often in our classes Surya Namaskar itself will require some preparation.
- The Bihar School often starts with elements of the Pawanmuktasana Series, the wind-relieving series of simple movements and these can be useful for us.
- The Desikachar or Viniyoga tradition generally begins with simple dynamic supine movements where the focus upon the breath is paramount, although sometimes these are not then developed upon.
- Iyengar yoga often starts with standing movements although these can be quite complex and for most groups of students more simplistic preparation is needed. There is also no emphasis upon the breath.

Often asana possess many different facets so that they can simultaneously warm and mobilise many different muscles and joints so do bear this in mind, and it is also possible to consciously add elements to a preparatory movements so for example in a simple version of Majrasana (Cat Pose) we can add a side balance to open hips and raise awareness of balance or in a simple Virabhadrasana 1 (Warrior 1) we can add an arm movement, such as circumduction (arm circles) or dynamic eagle arms. We can be quite creative!

Inevitably as we are taking a Vinyasa Krama approach we will always consider the needs of our particular students, the time of day, the temperature of the room and so forth. This means we will have to think ahead and also with experience be able to be more adaptable & responsive according to what we find on the day.



The use of the breath as part of the warm-up

It is also possible to utilize some pranayama techniques as part of the initial warm up and in particular **Ujjayi** (warrior breath) is very useful as this has a warming effect, whilst also relaxing the nervous system and increasing internal focus. Indeed the use of ujjayi breath within asana practice is recommended as not only does it help in these ways it also provides an excellent feedback tool so students know they are working within their own capacities. The only significant caution for ujjayi is for pregnancy, so these students must monitor themselves when using ujjayi as they must not overheat.

We can also teach **Kapalabhati** (Skull Shining Breath) as this as a kriya or cleansing pranayama can be both clearing and heating. Potentially **Bhastrika** (Bellows Breath) can also be introduced, as this is very heating and stimulating. More about these techniques later as there are many cautions for these practices.

So always consider how you will introduce an initial warming up period and be sure that it helps you to prepare for later asana to be practiced. You will also need to consider:

- That the flow of movements/asana flows intelligently between the different bases, i.e. never for instance going from standing to lying to standing – your body will know what feels 'right'.
- That the body remains balanced by introducing pratikriyasana or counterposes. Here avoiding working too strenuously between two opposites e.g. flexing then extending repeatedly is a sure way to try to break something.
- In addition to using your knowledge or mental intelligence also **refer to the intelligence of your own body to see what feels right!**

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