

Free Spirit Yoga and Pilates
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What are Yoga Asana's

The word asana is usually translated as pose or posture. Through their observations of nature, the yogis discovered a vast repertoire of energetic expressions, each of which had not only a strong physical effect on the body but also a powerful psychological effect. Each movement demands that we home some aspect of our consciousness and use ourselves in a new way. The vast diversity of asana is no accident, for through exploring both familiar and unfamiliar poses we are also expanding our consciousness, so that regardless of the situation or form we find ourselves in, we can remain comfortable and centered. Asana is a way to develop interior awareness.

What distinguishes an asana from a stretch or calisthenic exercise is that in asana practice we focus our mind's attention completely "in" the body so that we can move as a unified whole and so we can perceive what the body has to tell us. We don't do something to the body, we become the body. Asana is a reunion between the usually separated body-mind.

Apart from the vibrant health, flexibility and stamina this unified body-mind brings us, living in the body is also an integral aspect of spiritual practice. The most tangible way we can know what it means to be compassionate or not grasping is directly through the cellular experience of the body. The most direct way we can learn what it means to let go is through the body.

Yoga is not about the perfection of body or of yoga postures, it is a way to "meet" your self, it's a good place to begin. It's important that you do not make the mistake of thinking that the perfection of the Yoga asana is the goal, or that you'll be good at Yoga only once you've mastered the most difficult postures. The asana's are useful maps to explore your self, but they are not the territory. The goal of the asana is to live in your body and to learn to perceive clearly through it.

When we are not in our body we are dissociated from our instincts, intuition, feelings and insights and it becomes impossible to dissociate ourselves from other people's feelings, and other people's suffering. If we do not know when we are breathing in and breathing out and are unable to perceive our levels of tension, how can we possibly create a balanced world. Every violent impulse begins in a body filled with tension....every failure to reach out to someone in need begins in a body that has forgotten how to feel.

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When we begin asana practice we may feel far from happy within ourselves. We may feel confused, buried in self destructive habits and encumbered by difficulties, whether emotional, physical, or material. Our bodies may feel stiff and knotted and our minds a jumbles of words.

Unless we can find a way to practice our asana with joyfulness working with our difficulties rather than against them, your asana will be an experience of frustration and disappointment.

When you begin your practice you may feel very bound in your body and mind, you can choose to fight with yourself, pulling and tugging and forcing or resign yourself to the patient work ahead and give into the impulse to pull and force and struggle. Accept that some work needs to be done and decide to make this a positive, uplifting experience.

In your asana focus on what arises with each breath cycle and no more. In this way almost any difficulty becomes more manageable. Rather than focusing on how much further you wish you could go or comparing your efforts with those of someone more flexible, you can choose to focus on what you are accomplishing with each breath. As you investigate your tightness you discover ways to release it. It is only through those tiny slow and progressive openings that deep, profound change occurs. It is your choice to take pleasure in these small awakenings or to disregard your efforts as insignificant in the face of how much further you have to go. You can choose to have a sense of humor about your dilemma or fester in negativity.

There will inevitably be times when progress is slow, when injury or illness or life circumstances limit our ability to do the outward forms, but this doesn't limit our ability to plumb the depths of our inner life.

Each day you step onto your mat, make a decision to enjoy just where you are right now. Take a few moments to contemplate how fortunate you are to be practicing this wonderful art. A casual glance at the morning paper is proof enough of the vast suffering, poverty, violence and homelessness for so many human beings. If you are standing on a yoga mat and have the time to do your yoga you are a fortunate person.

In the spirit of gratefulness, let your Asana practice begin.

Namaste

