

Yoga Sequencing: Designing Transformative Yoga Classes (Excerpts from)

by **Mark Stephens** (Full Version Available on Amazon Kindle or Paperback for ~\$15; 528 Pages)

Introduction (769 words)

Doing yoga and teaching yoga are inextricably intertwined. The experiences we have on our yoga mats help us to refine our personal practice and provide insights into how we might best share yoga with others. The farther we go in our practice, the more we discover the vast universe of elements that are at play in yoga's incredible potential for enhancing our lives.

In the interrelation of these elements we come to specific practices—sequences of actions—that have different effects depending on how it all flows together. This brings us to several questions:

- What are the elements of a complete practice?
- How are they best structured to make the practice most accessible, sustainable, and transforming?
- What are the best ways to begin a yoga practice session?
- What should each session include?
- What are the best ways to sequence different asanas, breathing practices, and meditations?
- What is the relationship between this asana and that asana? How does this asana affect that asana?
- What are the effects of asanas ordered in a particular way compared to the same asanas ordered differently?
- What are the relationships within and between families of asanas—standing asanas, core asanas, arm balances, back bends, twists, forward bends, hip openers, and inversions?
- What about pranayama (conscious breathing) and meditation practices?
- What affects them, and how in turn do they affect what follows?
- On what basis—other than habit, intuition, or whim—should one determine the overall structure and sequence of a complete class?
- What about moving from one class to the next across the span of a week, a month, a year, or a lifetime?
- What are the best ways to design classes for a lifetime of yoga?

Superficially simple, these questions about sequencing decisions are as complex as the beautifully diverse mosaic of human beings doing yoga. Age, genetics, lifestyle, physical and mental condition, environmental setting, personal intention, and spiritual philosophy all come into play in doing yoga. Moreover, some of these variables can change from day to day, inviting or even requiring us to modify what we're doing—or at least how we do what we're doing.

Taking a holistic perspective on yoga, it's vitally important to give experiential and thoughtful consideration to all of these myriad elements, which, when properly blended together, lead to healthy, wholesome, and sustainable yoga practices in which students more and more come to a place of balance along their yoga path and in their larger lives.

The primary roles of a yoga teacher are showing students a yogic pathway and offering them guidance along that path. Doing this with inspiration, knowledge, skill, patience, compassion, and creativity defines a good teacher. The many elements of teaching—creating a safe space for self-

exploration, crafting class sequences that take students on physical and energetic journeys, cueing students in their process of refinement, offering practical guidance in meditation, offering examples for extending the practice off the mat— collectively lead to the same thing: yoga as a process for awakening to the truth of one's being, to an abiding sense of equanimity amid the shifting tides of daily experience and the seasons of one's life.

If yoga were a practice of attainment in which we were all aiming for a certain goal, the role of the teacher would be much simpler. We would tell students what to do and how to do it. Sequences would be prescribed even as we would draw from our knowledge of yoga philosophy, energetics, anatomy, and psychology to craft classes and instructions that correctly orient students in moving toward the goal. In the physical practice, instruction would focus on the perfection of poses; in pranayama we would teach the perfection of breath and energetic balance; in meditation we would teach students to still the mind.

But yoga is not a practice of attainment; it is an unending *process of self-discovery and self-transformation*. In this process, teachers are facilitators and guides who offer insightful encouragement to each student along his or her unique path as it evolves, breath by breath.

The art and science of teaching yoga is creatively expressed in how you craft asana, pranayama, and meditation sequences that honor the needs and intentions of the students in your classes. Your creativity is given form by yoga philosophy, the style of yoga you are teaching, the biomechanics and energetic requirements and effects of asanas, and by your personal sense of purpose in meaningfully sharing yoga. Here we look to use our full palette of knowledge and skills to create classes that resonate with the needs and expressed intentions of students, offering them a clearer pathway to more radiant wellbeing.

From Chapter One

There are as many approaches to planning and sequencing yoga classes as there are styles, traditions, and brands of yoga. Add the creative expression of yoga teachers fashioning their own classes and we find a dizzying array of class designs across the vast landscape of hatha, or physical, yoga. As the yoga movement continues to expand, we can anticipate the further evolution of yoga practices, some consciously harnessed to ancient teachings and others decidedly not. This is part of the sublime beauty of yoga: it is alive and evolving each and every time someone steps onto a mat, explains a technique, or guides students through a class.

While a few yoga styles insist that they offer the true, original, best, most effective, or otherwise most ideal approach, there is no absolutely correct or incorrect sequence (although, as we shall see, some are dangerously risky or otherwise go against the grain of even the most basic sequencing principles). Rather, different sequences make more or less sense in terms of how yoga works for different people in various life situations and conditions, what is being emphasized in a particular style or tradition of yoga, or with respect to the intention of an individual student or teacher. Thus, yoga teachers have tremendous freedom in designing and teaching different sequences, freedom that also carries responsibility for ensuring that the sequences are sensible. Crafting sequences that give structure, coherence, meaning, and transformative potential to yoga classes, you have an opportunity to draw from and apply everything you have learned about yoga, from anatomy to philosophy, asana to pranayama, self-acceptance to self-realization.

Most classes are not planned; commonly (and usually problematically) they reflect random creativity. Random creativity can be a wonderful source of discovery. If it is just you coming to your yoga mat and following your senses, then such spontaneous sequencing might give you the perfect practice. Many yoga students choose a home practice that is informed less by what some style or system of yoga prescribes than an intuitive sense of being guided from within. This is a wonderful way to approach your personal practice. But if you are designing a sequence for others to do, the random approach is likely to lead students into unnecessary confusion, difficulty, and even injury. Even in one's personal practice, random or purely intuitively informed sequences can lead to greater difficulty in cultivating the stability and ease that we want throughout the practice. Moving from one particular pose to another might make sense in terms of efficiency or relatively seamless and fluid transition, but it can create unnecessary and potentially risky obstacles over the longer term, can lead to energetic imbalances, or can cause physical strain or injury.

In some yoga styles and traditions, most notably Ashtanga Vinyasa and Bikram, the order of poses is already set. One benefit of this approach is that the asanas, and in some styles even the specific actions for transitioning between them, are like a perfect mirror onto the practitioner because the only thing that changes from one practice to the next is the practitioner, thus making the experience of doing the sequence somewhat more a reflection of the person doing it than the sequence itself. Do you feel different doing the practice from one day to the next? According to the set sequence approach, that difference is primarily you, not the sequence, thus giving the practitioner an opportunity for deeper insight into the process of personal awakening, evolution, and self-transformation that is yoga.

In doing set sequences, you know where you are headed. Some find this leads to greater anticipation of what's ahead and detracts from the experience of being fully present in the current moment in connecting breath, body, and mind. Others find that knowing what is coming next leads to deeper absorption in what is happening right now. These tendencies, which tend to arise in any style of practice, are typically greater in set sequence practices.

The more significant issue that arises in doing set sequences is the potential strain caused by doing repetitive actions. For instance, in the primary (beginning) series of Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga, the sequence calls for flowing through Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose) over fifty times. Even if one is properly aligned and engaging effective energetic actions, this can be a very challenging sequence that, done repetitively, can strain the shoulder and wrist joints as well as the lower back, knees, hips, elbows, and neck. If a student approaches the set sequence with clear intention to practice with *sthira* and *sukham*—the steadiness and ease that the ancient yogic sage Patanjali posits as the essential interrelated qualities of asana practice—repetitive stress might be reduced or even eliminated. Nonetheless, the repetitive nature of practically any set sequence, especially one devoid of counterposes that systematically address the tension that naturally accumulates along the way, can itself cause physical strain, mental fatigue, and energetic imbalance.

In between random creativity and set sequences we find a plethora of classes loosely based on a template found in a book, teacher training manual, or online site or adapted from observation of other teachers' classes. While these templates can be an effective way to get started in crafting unique and well informed classes, the tendency is to apply the template or observed sequence in cookie-cutter fashion, teaching it to students or in settings for which it was never intended. Another tendency is to change the sequence in ways that disrupt the integrity with which it addresses the biomechanics of movement or flexibility, the energetics of the sequence, or some other integral aspect that made the original sequence make sense. While creativity is beautiful, it is ideally

expressed in keeping with the basic sequencing principles that make physical yoga beneficial and sustainable.

Parinamavada and Vinyasa Krama (966 words)

A complete and effective yoga sequence is one that allows students to progress steadily, safely, and simply from one place to another in their personal practice. Every student comes to yoga somewhat uniquely and also changes from day to day and practice to practice. Here we are blending two essential philosophical concepts at the heart of planning yoga classes: (1) *parinamavada*, the understanding that constant change is an inherent part of the cause and effect nature of life; and (2) *vinyasa krama*, from *vinyasa*, which means “to place in a special way,” and *krama*, which means “proceeding step by step according to a regular order,” referring to the informed and sequential arrangement and pacing of asanas, pranayamas, and other yoga techniques to accommodate different intentions and abilities. Let’s explore this further.

If we accept the constancy of change, we are still left with the question of how to consciously participate in the changes that are happening. This question applies in every phase of a yoga practice, from setting intention at the beginning, to refining how you do what you are doing, to settling into Savasana (Corpse Pose) and moving back out into the larger world. The concept of change is of particular significance in sequencing because it encourages us to appreciate where we are and how we feel in the present moment and then to chart a course of action based on cultivating intended changes that are realistic given our immediate circumstances. In crafting and teaching sequences to others, it calls on us to more fully assess, anticipate, and honor the realities of students in our classes, thereby offering them a pathway that makes yoga work for them. The idea is to begin from where you are, and for a student to begin his or her practice based on his or her present physical, emotional, and mental condition.

The power of this insight is in its simplicity: acknowledge where you are and progress from there, as opposed to jumping ahead at the expense of stability and ease. For a teacher, this means letting go of preconceptions about students and classes in favor of observing where they are and offering guidance based on that observed reality. It also means crafting and teaching sequences that make sense in terms of the students actually in a class rather than teaching a preconceived sequence that could be too easy, too hard, too complex, or otherwise inappropriate for that particular class on that particular day. For students doing a yoga practice, this means exploring consciously, one breath at a time, and moving with stability and ease along the path toward a deeper, more self-transforming practice.

The concept of vinyasa krama is from the teachings of Tiramulai Krishnamacharya, whose famous students T. K. V. Desikachar, Indra Devi, B. K. S. Iyengar, and Pattabhi Jois became among the most influential yoga teachers in the world in the mid to late twentieth century. Although these teachers have expressed the quality of vinyasa krama in somewhat different ways, all emphasize the importance of offering a step-by-step practice based on the needs of the individual student or class. Vinyasa krama thus asks us to approach yoga with a systematic method, integrating breath, mind, and body while moving sequentially into a deeper practice. It also asks us to take an expanded view of “vinyasa,” which unfortunately is commonly reduced to “Chaturanga, Up Dog, Down Dog” in the popular yoga lexicon.

Vinyasas are variations and movements in which we consciously connect the breath, mind, and body in relation to one another. By “connect” we refer to yoga itself, from its root word *yuj*, “to yoke.” Thus we are gradually moving into more elaborate and complex forms of practice while continuously yoking the mind and body through the medium of the breath. The breath becomes this

medium when we utilize the essential yogic breathing technique of *ujjayi pranayama*: slow, smooth, lightly audible, conscious breathing through the nose. Ujjayi pranayama offers a prism or barometer through which to maintain awareness of how one is doing in one's yoga practice. If the breath is strained, it is a sure sign to slow down or even retreat from the intensity or form of action in which one is engaging. Using the breath in this way allows one to proceed with a clearer awareness of steadiness and ease, the twin fundamental qualities of asana described in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

By exploring the practice breath by conscious breath, each and every movement becomes a vinyasa sequence unto itself. Even the simplest of movements are vinyasas. For example, we do a vinyasa when moving from standing in Tadasana (Mountain Pose) to sweeping the arms out and up overhead into the Urdhva Hastasana (Upward Hands Pose). Indeed, there is a vinyasa in simply taking in a single breath and being conscious of the movement of the breath-body-mind amid this flow. From the smallest micro-sequences such as this to the macro-sequence of one's life, we develop the yoga practice breath by breath, step by step, sequence by sequence, class by class, each breath and movement drawing from what came just before just as it prepares us for what may come next. This is the essence of vinyasa krama.

The concepts of parinamavada and vinyasa krama apply equally to planned group classes and individual instruction (as well as in one's personal practice, in which one is listening inside for intuitive guidance). The teacher's role in this process is threefold: (1) to intelligently plan the route based on the realities of the terrain and the students in class; (2) to observe and communicate with students in order to ascertain when they have integrated the experience with stability and ease; and (3) to provide informed guidance and inspiration along the path.

Qualities of Good Sequencing (787 Words)

In applying the concepts of parinamavada and vinyasa krama, we are led to create sequences that are informed, effective, efficient, beautiful, and integrated. Let's briefly explore each of these terms as they relate to planning and sequencing yoga practices:

Informed: By *informed* we mean that one draws from accurate information and knowledge about the elements of the practice one is doing or teaching. Yoga is informed by many sources of knowledge and wisdom, including introspection, spiritual philosophy, subtle energetics, functional anatomy, and the sciences of biomechanics and kinesiology, to name just a few. Given the vastness of each of these sources of insight and the complex diversity of human beings, there is really no limit to how much one can learn and apply in the art and science of sequencing. While this can seem overwhelming, by taking the large perspective of yoga as a lifelong practice, one can approach the various methods and techniques one open-minded breath at a time, thereby making possible some new insight in every moment of the practice.

Effective: By *effective* we mean that the sequence is successful in bringing about the intended result of the practice—whatever that intention may be— while being safe, balanced, and transformational. Different sequences can have dramatically different effects, which will also vary for different students or even for the same students in various settings or conditions. If someone is emotionally depressed and goes to a yoga class with the intention of elevating their mood, a class designed for reducing anxiety through deep, sustained forward bends can have just the opposite effect. Similarly, a student experiencing insomnia and able to practice only in the evenings after

work is likely to exacerbate his or her sleep problems if the class has lots of back bends or stimulating breathing practices such as *kapalabhati* (skull-cleansing) pranayama.

Efficient: An efficient sequence moves toward the intended result in the simplest way, allowing a feeling of graceful transition into a gradually more sublime experience of yoga. This is not to say that the practice should be void of difficulty or complexity. To the contrary, it is often precisely in the experience of working through challenging situations or experiences that we move most deeply into yoga as a practice of self-transformation. But just as perseverance contributes to the yogic path, so too we benefit from surrendering in a way that allows us to more fully accept our limitations and move beyond them through patient exploration. This interrelated set of qualities—perseverance practice and letting go—allows us to more consciously chart the simplest solutions to removing the physical, emotional, and mental obstacles that we encounter in the evolution of our practice and ourselves. By crafting sequences that are informed by an understanding of how to most simply navigate the obstacles one is likely to encounter along the way, we can move from where we are to a deeper unwinding of unnecessary tension and thereby open to the deepest possible yoga practice.

Beautiful: Taking this graceful approach becomes a source of beauty as the practice comes to reflect one's inherent nature as a beautiful being. Nothing is forced. Each breath, movement, and posture is done consciously, in keeping with one's overall intention and an abiding openness to the clearer insights that emerge from doing yoga more consciously. The practice then progresses away from external sensibilities—how a pose appears or compares to others—and toward internal integrity and the integral awareness of refining the expression of one's being through conscious action. The effect is an elegant and inwardly satisfying practice that simply feels right.

Integrated: Lastly, a complete practice is an integrated practice that takes account of the whole experience. While many students come to yoga primarily for a physical workout, to reduce stress, clear the mind, or open to a more expansive sense of being, as a yoga teacher it is important to offer class sequences that offer all of these qualities, even if more focused in certain of these areas. We know that the body, mind, heart, and sense of spirit are interrelated. Given this, it is incumbent upon yoga teachers to create the space in our classes for the integration of these elements, including through how we fashion sequences and guide students through them. As students rise from Savasana or otherwise conclude their mat practice, they should feel at least a bit more whole—integrated—than when they stepped onto their mat.

Taken together, these sensibilities allow us to identify and define the core principles of sequencing that are ideally embodied in every class sequence: Moving from Simple to Complex, Moving from Dynamic to Static Exploration (or Moving into Stillness), Cultivating of Energetic Balance, Integrating Effort and Ease, and Cultivating Sustainable Self-Transformation.

Deepening the Integration of Asana (544 words)

Each practice is potentially a movement into deeper self-transformation. This movement occurs within each breath, each asana, and each sequence and extends across all the practices a person does in a lifetime.

Cultivating a gradual, simple, expanding awakening in this process of self-transformation revolves around continuously coming back to a sense of *samasthihi*—equanimity in body, breath, mind, and spirit. This gives the asana practice a quality of *yoga chikitsa*—literally “yoga therapy”—in which the body is restructured and a person's entire energetic being is refined. This is an essential element of every class,

one that requires you as a teacher to create the space, sequence the asanas, and guide the class in a way that helps endow students with a practical awareness of this transformation and integration in their bodies, minds, and spirits.

Here are several ways to promote this integration of asana practice in classes and thereby maximize the benefits of each practice:

Create space for rest. Toward the beginning of every class, remind students that it is important for them to feel a sense of steadiness and ease throughout the class while practicing near the edge of their ability. Give them explicit permission—even encouragement—to rest as they feel the need, creating a space in which they can rebalance their breath and energy before resuming their practice. Demonstrate Balasana, reminding them that this asana is a dear friend they can visit at will. At the conclusion of any particularly intense sequence of asanas, always offer an opportunity for rest.

Create space for renewed self-assessment. Give brief or long pauses in the flow of the class in which you invite students to come back to their initial intention in the practice, to check in with how they are feeling and to stay with their intention and sense of samasthihi as you resume the asanas.

Apply pratikriyasana to neutralize tension from asanas and establish balance in the body.

Offer energetically balanced sequences. When planning a class, give careful consideration to the energetic arc and waves of the asana sequences to achieve the intended energetic balance for that class.

Savasana. A few minutes—five or more—in Savasana is absolutely essential for the full integration and completion of a practice. Lying down with effortless breath, surrendering to gravity, and allowing the body, breath, and mind to completely settle is the most important way to integrate the practice.

Create space for meditation. While the entire practice is ideally a meditative experience, students can deepen this experience when you create the space in class for moving into a deeper sense of stillness. This can be done at the beginning of class, during the flow of asanas, or at the conclusion of the asana practice (before or after Savasana).

Moving off the mat. Rising from one's mat, the next vinyasa starts with being conscious and present in the next transition—back out into the world. Encourage students to pay attention to how they are moving, breathing, thinking, and feeling. Consider concluding class with a moment of reflection with the palms and fingertips together at the heart and forehead to symbolize and feel a sense of connecting the head and the heart in setting intention in moving out into the rest of the day.

Sequencing: A Three-Step Process (169 Words)

Sequencing begins with breaking down asanas into their constituent elements and then placing selected asanas into an order that is informed by how the actions involved in these elements are related in moving with steadiness and ease through the arc structure of an entire class. When informed by the essential sequencing principles, this approach leads to the design of classes that are safe, transformational, and sustainable, allowing students to gradually move more or less seamlessly from beginning to moderate to more challenging practices. You can apply this approach to the design of any yoga class, regardless of style, level, or setting by following this three-step process:

1. Consider the general properties of different asanas and what this suggests about their sequencing.

2. Identify the constituent elements of individual asanas and what this suggests about their interrelationships and sequencing.
3. Choose peak asanas and class themes, then design complete arc class sequences for them based on the insights discovered in steps 1 and 2.

Healthy Wrist Sequence (358 words)

Students experiencing mild wrist pain can benefit from warming up their fingers, hands, arms, and shoulders before beginning their practice. Wrist and forearm massage is also effective in helping reduce pain. So long as the pain is mild, the following exercises can be healing:

1. *Tadasana wrist therapy*: Gently rotate the wrists through their full range of circular motion, repeatedly changing direction, then gently shake out the wrists for around thirty seconds. This can be incorporated in brief form into every Surya Namaskara.
2. *Uttanasana wrist pratikriyasana*: Whenever folding into Uttanasana amid Surya Namaskara, place the backs of the wrists toward or onto the floor and make an easy fist. This is less intense on the wrists than Pada Hastasana (also, more students can do it, and it can easily be done with the exhale into Uttanasana).
3. *Wrist pumps*: Holding the fingers of one hand with the fingers of the other hand, move the wrist forward and back while resisting the movement with the opposing hand. Repeat for one to two minutes if pain-free.
4. *Anjali mudra*: Press the palms and fingers (from the knuckles to the fingertips) firmly together at the chest in a prayer position for one to two minutes. This is also known as reverse Phalen maneuver; if there is a burning sensation inside the wrist joint within thirty seconds, this could indicate carpal tunnel syndrome. Reverse the position of the hands, placing the backs of the wrists and hands together, and press firmly for up to a minute (Phalen maneuver).
5. *Hand dance*: Kneeling comfortably, place the hands down on the floor with the fingers pointed forward, then turn the palms up, then down with the fingers out, up with the fingers in, down with the fingers back, up with the fingers back, continuing in this fashion with every permutation of palms up and down with the fingers pointed forward, back, in, and out.

Persistent wrist tenderness or strain usually benefits from ice, splints worn during sleep, anti-inflammatory agents (including turmeric and ginger), acupuncture, and other alternative treatments. Encourage students to explore all possible measures and to consult a doctor for additional guidance.

Healthy Shoulder Sequence (340 words)

The key to healthy shoulders is balanced strength and flexibility. If imbalance is creating instability or impingement, first avoid painful activities and refrain from unstable movements in which the elbow is lifted above the shoulder, especially with any whipping motion such as throwing a ball. Treat persistent pain with ice and anti-inflammatory agents. To develop healthy range of motion and strength, explore the following asanas and exercises:

1. Lying prone on a table with the arm dangling down, simply swing it forward and back in Codman's pendulum-swing exercise and around in small circles.

2. Stretch the rhomboids with Garudasana arms; use one arm to pull the other gently across the chest in horizontal adduction if unable to get into the Garudasana position.
3. Use Gomukhasana arms to stretch the triceps, latissimus dorsi, infraspinatus, teres minor, and pectoralis major of the upper arm and the pectoralis major, biceps, serratus anterior, and trapezius of the lower arm.
4. Use Parsvottanasana arms to stretch the infraspinatus, teres minor, serratus anterior, anterior deltoids, and pectorals.
5. Use Prasrita Padottanasana C arms to stretch the pectorals and anterior deltoids.
6. Stabilize the scapula by strengthening and stretching the serratus anterior and rhomboid muscles: on all fours and keeping the arms straight, slowly alternate between lowering the chest toward and away from the floor; when easy, do this in Phalakasana (Plank Pose) and progress to moving slowly back and forth between Phalakasana and Chaturanga.
7. To strengthen the rotator cuff muscles: supraspinatus through abduction of the arms into Virabhadrasana II; infraspinatus and teres minor through external rotation of the arms in Adho Mukha Svanasana; subscapularis through isometric contraction in Parsvottanasana.
8. If free of pain, explore further strengthening of the shoulders by keeping the arms overhead in flexion in Salabhasana C (Locust Pose) and Virabhadrasana III. If still pain-free after these asanas, explore holding Adho Mukha Svanasana for up to one minute, eventually working up to five minutes. If still pain-free, explore Adho Mukha Vrksasana, eventually holding for up to two minutes.

New to Teaching Yoga?

Tips on What To Teach and What Not to Teach (524 words)

The central irony and challenge of teaching yoga is that the essence and mechanisms of yoga asana practice are primarily internal and largely invisible to you as a teacher. How a student feels in an asana is his or her principal source of instruction and refinement. What he or she does in an asana to explore that refinement ultimately relies on internal mechanisms of feeling, reflection, and action, including intention, attention, the breath, and the body, with its many springs and levers of movement.

Thus one's role as a teacher is ~~some what~~ limited, ~~relying as it does on your~~ since it relies on the ability to give clear instructions about the breathing, alignment, energetic actions, variations, modifications, use of props, risks, and techniques for finding greater ease and stability in each asana and transition. Since every student is different, ~~our~~ effectiveness depends on the ~~our~~ ability to give both general guidance to a class and individualized suggestions that address the unique experiences of different students. ~~Your~~ The ability to see and hear students in their practice—including challenges to their alignment, the qualities of their stability and ease, their attentiveness—and then to relate to them meaningfully and appropriately based on ~~your~~ perception and understanding are the keys to ~~your~~ effectiveness in sequentially instructing the asana practice.

Working with this reality, it is important to teach asanas sensitively and systematically. This begins with acknowledging your own personal abilities and limitations, and then committing yourself to teaching what you know from experience. Before instructing an asana, you should know what you will teach and how you will teach it, including at least the basic alignment principles and energetic

actions, stage-by-stage verbal cues that clearly guide students into and out of the asana, methods of demonstration, alternative forms of the asana, physical cues, and the use of props to support students in most safely and deeply exploring the asana. Your years of practice, intensive study, teacher training, apprenticing, and practice teaching now all come together, fully incorporated into your personal practice and transferred from there onto your teaching palette.

As you further prepare to teach an asana, consider taking these steps:

1. Before teaching an asana to your class, teach it to yourself first.
2. Do the asana over and over, testing what you think you know and playing around with what you understand as its basic principles.
3. Then do the same for a sequence of asanas, experimenting with the effects of different sequences and ways of transitioning.
4. Put together the sequences into an entire class, then do the class on your own, giving yourself silent verbal cues throughout to develop and hone the narrative overlay to your class.
5. Go through each of these steps teaching your friends or family, practicing again and again to refine your skills and knowledge.
6. Reflect on what seems to flow easily and not so easily for you, gradually integrating more and more knowledge into your practice teaching.
7. Focus more on the asanas you find most challenging in your own practice and those that seem most difficult to explain throughout your career as a teacher, continuously refining your knowledge and skills.

Keep breathing!

Teaching Yoga: Refining the Asanas (1,029 words)

Asanas are always alive and evolving with every breath. As students tune in to what they feel in an asana, they have the opportunity to explore the deepening of their experience in it—stretching more or less, applying more or less effort, cultivating simpler balance, involving different parts of their bodies in varying ways, refining the breath, consciously awakening and moving energy and opening to more subtle awareness. In a student's personal practice, he or she might fully and constantly be present to all these elements, fully present to the experience, and conscious in exploring.

As a teacher you can encourage and guide this process of self-reflection and refinement by suggesting attentiveness to these elements of refinement along with giving specific suggestions for modification and variation based on your observation. Indeed, your guidance on refinement, including modifications, begins when you initially guide students into an asana, your verbal cues ideally always deriving in part from what you are observing in the class. Once students are in an asana you will have plenty of new insight that informs further specific guidance. This starts with keen, appreciative, systematic observation. Beginning from the initial setting of the foundation of the asana, your verbal cues should increasingly reflect your observation of the entire class and individual students as you teach to the tendencies that you are observing rather than to a predetermined script of cues.

After initially guiding students into an asana, pause and notice what they are actually doing. The relative attentiveness, understanding, body intelligence, muscle strength and flexibility, bone

structure, and other factors will result in often tremendous variation in how different students appear in the asana. Looking closely, what do you see? Look at the student from her foundation to her spine to her breath to her face to her limbs, observing from different angles to notice what might be more or less obvious from the front, back, and different sides. Does she appear stable? Relaxed? How is her breath flowing? Does her face appear relaxed or tense? Are her eyes soft and focused or hard and shifting? Does she appear balanced? Is she making occasional large adjustments in position or smaller adjustments synchronized with her breath? What is your overall impression? What do you first notice, especially in relationship to what is most at risk in the asana? What one or two simple modifications do you think will most benefit the student's sense of stability, ease, balance, and happiness in the asana? Has she followed the initial alignment instructions? Does it appear that she is consciously grounding and radiating? What parts of her body appear actively involved in the asana? Do you see where she might benefit from applying more or less effort to create more stability, ease, and space? Does she appear ready to explore variations that take the asana in a more challenging direction?

Based on your observations, give more specific instructions. Be clear in directing instructions to the entire class rather than to an individual student or subset of students. For example, in Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose), some students will likely hyperextend the knee of their front leg. Instructing the entire class, you can say, "Rooting down strongly from the top of your legs and down through your feet, keep awakening the muscles in your legs, engaging your quadriceps and feeling your kneecaps lifting." Addressing those with hyperextension in their knee, continue by saying, "If you tend to hyperextend your front knee, try to microbend it and maintain that positioning while still trying to engage your quads." If you are addressing a single student with specific instructions, either go directly to that student to work with him or her (observe, give verbal cues, give hands-on cues, offer a prop) or say the person's name from a distance to ensure that it is clear the specific instruction is for that student only. Ideally you will give more individualized verbal cues quietly to just that student.

In giving refining cues, start by addressing whatever is most at risk in the asana. For instance, if the class has just arrived in Utthita Trikonasana with a cue to gaze up to the thumb tip, the neck is generally most at risk (unless a student has an injury or some condition that is placed at greater risk in the asana). The first verbal cue would then be something like, "If it troubles your neck holding your head up, completely relax your neck and let your head gently drop down." Similarly, if there is a pregnant student in the class and you are in an asana in which there are modifications for her stage or condition of pregnancy, cue the modification before moving to other areas of refinement.

Many students will arrive in an asana attempting to go much farther than they should, usually causing misalignment in their positioning and compromising the breath. In reiterating basic alignment cues, blend in verbal, hands-on, and demonstrative cues for modifying in ways that make the asana more accessible, including the use of props. Here you might also suggest that students make the breath more interesting than the asana, exploring the asanas around the integrity of the breath rather than trying to squeeze the breath into what they are attempting to do with their body.

To better guide students into alignment, offer balanced alignment cues that help them to better feel and understand how combining different energetic actions leads to greater stability and openness. For several examples of oppositional balances, see *Yoga Sequencing: Designing Transformational Yoga Classes*, Table 4.1: "Cuing Oppositional Actions."

Once basic alignment and safety are addressed, go back to the foundation of the asana to emphasize

the relationship between roots and extension. For several ways to guide this relationship, see *Yoga Sequencing*, Table 4.2: “Roots and Extension.”

When holding an asana for a relatively long duration, you can introduce a variety of instructions to cue a deeper refinement or opportunity for further exploration. For several examples, each of which assumes that the class is ready to go deeper and that individual student modifications have been addressed, please see *Yoga Sequencing*, Table 4.3: “Deeper Refining Cues.”

Keep breathing!

Down Dog as the Foundational Arm Support Asana (780 words)

Following the basic principles of sequencing instructions, guide the building of full Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose) from the ground up and from what is at most risk of strain or injury: the wrists, shoulders, and hamstrings. We will look alternatively at the upper body (from the hands up) and lower body (from the feet up).

Adho Mukha Svanasana is an excellent asana for learning and embodying the principle of roots and extension. Encourage students to press firmly down into the entire span of their hands and length of their fingers, paying close attention to rooting the knuckle of the index finger as a way of balancing pressure in the wrist joint. This rooting action should originate at the top of the arms. With it, ask students to feel the “rebound” effect of this rooting action in the natural lengthening through their wrist, elbow, and shoulder joints.

The fingers should be spread wide apart, the thumbs only about two-thirds of the way in order to protect the ligaments in the thenar space between the thumb and index finger. Generally, the middle fingers should be parallel and in line with the shoulders. Look to see if the student’s arms are parallel; this will indicate if their hands are in line with their shoulders. The alignment of the wrists with the shoulders allows the proper external rotation of the shoulders, which activates and strengthens the teres minor and infraspinatus muscles (two of the four principal rotator cuff muscles), stabilizes the shoulder joint by drawing the scapula firmly against the back ribs, creates more space across the upper back, and thereby allows the neck to relax more easily. If a student has difficulty straightening his or her arms, play with asking that person to turn his or her hands slightly out; if a student tends to hyperextend his or her elbows, have that person turn the palms slightly in.

Tight or weak shoulders create specific risks to the neck, back, elbows, wrists, and shoulders themselves in Adho Mukha Svanasana. In either case, moderate effort in this asana develops both strength and flexibility, opening the shoulders to full flexion while developing deeper, more balanced strength. The shoulder blades should be rooted against the back ribs while spreading the shoulder blades out away from the spine. Note that externally rotating the shoulders tends to cause the inner palms to lift. This can be countered by internally rotating the forearms.

The roots-and-extension principle applies equally to the lower body. Rooting into the balls of the feet will contribute to lifting the inner arches, which is one effect of pada bandha. This will help to stimulate the awakening of mula bandha. The feet should be placed hip distance apart or wider, with the outer edges of the feet parallel. Firming the thighs and pressing the tops of the femur bones strongly back is a key action (along with rooted hands) in lengthening the spine in this asana. While firming the thighs, encourage students to slightly spiral the inner thighs back to soften pressure in the sacrum, all the while drawing the pubic bone back and up, the tailbone back and slightly down. The first few times in this asana in any given practice, it can feel good and help the body in gently opening to “bicycle” the

legs, twisting and sashaying alternately into each hip and stretching long through the sides of the body while exploring the hamstrings, lower back, shoulders, ankles, and feet.

Very flexible students tend to hyperextend their knees in Adho Mukha Svanasana. Guide them to bend their knees slightly. Students with tight hips and hamstrings will find it difficult, painful, or impossible to straighten their legs. Encourage them to separate their feet wider apart (even as wide as their yoga mat) to ease the anterior rotation of the pelvis and the natural curvature of the lumbar spine. Let them know that it is okay to keep their knees bent while holding this asana, very gradually moving into deepening the flexibility of their hamstrings and hip extensors.

With regular practice, the neck will become sufficiently strong and supple to support holding the head between the upper arms (with the ears in line with the arms). Until that strength is developed, encourage students to let their neck relax and head hang. With each and every exhalation, students will feel the light and natural engagement of their abdominal muscles. Encourage them to maintain that light and subtle engagement in their belly while inhaling, without gripping or bearing down in their belly. Keep bringing students' awareness back to the balanced ujjayi pranayama, to roots-and-extension, to a steady gaze, and to the cultivation of steadiness and ease.

Teaching Advanced Yoga (969 words)

In teaching yoga, we are very lucky when advanced students come to our classes. Rather than the acrobatically talented athlete with a flashy practice on display for all to admire or envy, the most seriously advanced yoga student is the one who shows up regularly in his or her practice with an attitude of beginner's mind. Practicing each day as though it is the first time, the advanced student appreciates that there is always something new to learn when doing yoga. Unattached to the outcome of the practice, he or she is fully present to the experience of doing yoga as a process through which to learn more about oneself while remaining open to changing in conscious ways that bring about greater freedom and happiness in life. Approached in this way, the yoga path is endless; there is no final asana or experience one attains and then says, "I'm done," or, "Now I'm a yoga master."

Given that there is nothing to master, but rather everything to endlessly explore, there is no such thing as a yoga master (despite an increasing number of self-anointed masters promoting their mastery in the burgeoning marketplace of yoga). This sets the context for designing and teaching classes in which there is vast freedom to explore. Working with advanced students, we can anticipate that their ego is, largely, safely checked at the door. They are likely to step onto their yoga mat with refined somatic awareness born of years in the intensity of yogic self-exploration. They recognize the centrality of the breath in doing asana and know from experience how conscious pranayama opens and expands the horizons of awareness in the bodymind. Bringing this set of qualities to their practice, we are invited to craft sequences that further encourage them on their evolving path.

The advanced series in Ashtanga Vinyasa (there are four) is collectively called *sthira bhaga*, from *sthira*, meaning "steady," and *bhaga*, meaning "divine" or "serene." The idea is that advanced yoga practice is one of cultivating steadiness in the overall fruits of the practice, to be wholly in it. While in Ashtanga Vinyasa and other yoga systems we are given specific asana sequences as the path of advanced practice, doing advanced yoga is not necessarily about particular physical forms. Rather it is about how, in exploring more complex forms, we discover deeper and often unexamined or unconscious sources of tension, and in this discovery go further in releasing the emotional,

mental, and physical sources of self-limitation invariably encountered on the path to greater serenity in our lives.

Through years of consistent practice, we can come to a very subtle refinement of our awareness in doing yoga. What may have been a struggle some years before—starting with maintaining steady ujjayi pranayama throughout each practice—comes to feel more natural. We become more attuned to the nuances of the asanas, moving more slowly to move more deeply in the small self-adjustments that allow a sense of effortless ease even when the asanas are very complex. This more subtle practice renews the quality of beginner’s mind that is ideally there for anyone doing yoga, allowing us to find and explore something new and transforming even in the simplest asanas. The truism that “the more we know, the more we know that we do not know” manifests with fascination in making even the most complex practice as simple as possible.

As we find greater ease in asanas and basic pranayama, we also discover that there are endless horizons yet to be explored in the world of pranayama. With the gross body strong and flexible, the nervous system fully turned on, the respiratory system tuned up, and the connection of breath to bodymind more refined, we can play with a variety of pranayamas that are the primary source for cultivating full energetic awakening. We come to sense that doing pranayama is like playing a musical instrument, with the slightest change in the pace, duration, texture, retention, or release of the breath bringing about the most subtle shifts in awareness.

We also come to recognize and respect our limitations, appreciating them as our teachers in a practice increasingly oriented around balance in our overall lives. In earlier years we might have obsessed over getting into some more complex asanas; now we tune in and find an inner invitation to go deeper, unconcerned with how our personal practice looks or compares with that of others. In every breath we slowly find more balance, clarity, and self-acceptance. The mind is becoming more familiar, more of a friend, quieter amid the syncopating rhythms of our lives. Here and now we come into doing advanced yoga.

In teaching advanced yoga classes, the world of asana and pranayama is wide open. Now you can look to the 840,000 asanas alluded to in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika as a way of suggesting that there is no end to asanas, and you can explore all pranayama techniques. You can also explore complex sequencing in which there is less limitation in how asanas are arranged across the arc of a class. Yet the body is still the body with all of its attendant systems and structures, which suggests the importance of staying attentive to the constituent elements of asanas and their sensible sequencing based on the same principles that apply in designing beginning and intermediate-level classes.

As always, teach what you know based on your experience and your ongoing study of the asanas. When you encounter students whose experience or ability surpasses your own, offer what insight you can while giving them the space to further develop their personal practice. Reminding yourself that it is not about how far one goes, but how one goes, encourage your advanced students to open to the challenge of keeping it all as simple as can be.

Teaching Kids Yoga (1,580 words)

In past generations, children tended to be much more physically active than today, whether playing with friends, active in organized sports or recreational programs, or working. Today, more and more children have a sedentary life that, coupled with poor eating habits, has more than tripled the

obesity rate among children ages six to seventeen from five percent in 1976 to twenty percent in 2009. Children are also under increasing pressure to perform academically in keeping with narrowly defined national and state standards of educational accomplishment, a trend that has combined with more limited spending on education to justify the reduction of physical education, the arts, and other activities in which children get exercise as well as a mental break that, if given, would enhance learning.

With rising expectations on children to perform, they are increasingly experiencing stress and related emotional and psychological disorders. Close to ten percent of youth ages twelve to seventeen had a major depressive episode (MDE) in 2009, with a rate higher (thirteen percent) among female youth. A significant percentage of children also have serious difficulties with emotions, concentration, or getting along with other people.

Despite these trends, many children are very healthy. Kids who get regular exercise have stronger muscles and bones, leaner body mass, are less likely to develop type-2 diabetes, and are likelier to feel better about themselves, have strong social relationships, and have a better outlook on life. They also tend to sleep better and are better at handling stressful situations, whether preparing for a test at school or dealing with a disappointing event. By getting more exercise these children have greater endurance, strength, and flexibility than their more sedentary peers. When combined with a healthy diet, children who exercise regularly are on the path of a healthier and happier life.

Most children who do yoga came to it by mimicking their parents or by having parents who introduced them to yoga. Children can certainly benefit from doing yoga on a regular basis just as much as adults, developing or maintaining flexibility, strength, coordination, and balance in their physical bodies while reducing stress and gaining a more positive outlook on life. However, the yoga that parents do may not be appropriate for kids.

It is important to take children's stage of development into consideration when crafting sequences for kids yoga classes. Children's bodies are still growing. Their bones are softer and their ligaments more elastic. Asanas that give healthy stress to the bones of an adult can overstress a child's bones. Movement that involves maximum range of motion in an adult joint can overstretch a child's ligaments, leading to long-term instability in the joint. While it may seem that kids can run and play forever, adult yoga classes—typically an hour to an hour and a half—can cause fatigue in a child. And while many adults enjoy doing yoga in a highly heated room, a child doing that practice in the same room is considerably more prone to heat exhaustion.

Many simple and popular yoga asanas are contraindicated in the broader literature on children's physical fitness. For example, in the California Department of Education's (2009, 292–97) Physical Education Framework for California Public Schools, several positions that mimic or are identical to basic yoga asanas are listed as contraindicated for all children in kindergarten through twelfth grade, including: Chair Pose, Standing Forward Bend Pose, Plow Pose, Salamba Sarvangasana (Shoulder Stand), Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose), the arm position of Virabhadrasana II (Warrior II Pose), and Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose, often called Butterfly Pose). In several instances the recommended alternative appears riskier than the contraindicated position: a high lunge with the knee projected beyond the foot is the alternative to Baddha Konasana, while a slumped expression of Marichyasana A (Sage Marichi's Pose) is given as the alternative to Uttanasana. On strength training, the biomechanics of which are similar to some repetitive actions in yoga such as Plank-Chaturanga, the American Association of Pediatrician's position is that "children and adolescents should avoid the practice of weight lifting, power lifting, and bodybuilding, as well as the repetitive use of maximal amounts of weight in strength training programs, until they have reached Tanner stage 5 level of developmental maturity." At the other

end of the caution continuum, we find many professional fitness organizations and yoga styles that advocate positions and practices that are widely considered risky for children, including bodybuilding with resistance weights, doing yoga in an extremely hot room, and stretching to one's greatest ability.

Here we take a middle path, respecting the insights provided by leading sources of research and education on children's physical fitness, mental health, and overall well-being while suggesting practices that fall outside that research, including the ways that asanas are linked together in coherent sequences, as well as meditation practices. In teaching yoga to children it is best to divide them into age groups. Here we will focus on three age groups associated with school grade levels: elementary school, middle school, and high school. While infants and toddlers often find abundant joy playing around with their parents while their parents are attempting to do yoga, often doing their best to mimic their parents, it is best to let them simply play; this is a beautiful expression of a child's fascination with movement, energy, and interaction. Enjoy watching and playing—and try to leave it at that until your toddler gets closer to school age.

In sequencing yoga for elementary school-age children:

- Appreciate that most children are inherently active (unless led into a sedentary lifestyle) and that with yoga you are giving children an opportunity to direct their physical activity in specific ways to help them to develop keener awareness of being in their bodies.
- Appreciate that young children are inherently creative and that they will spontaneously express their creativity with the asanas.
- Play with offering yoga as a form of play rather than as a disciplined practice so that children feel a sense of freedom in their physical exploration.
- Limit the practice to twenty-five to forty-five minutes, depending on fitness.
- Offer natural breathing exercises to highlight the four natural phases of the breath (inhale, pause, exhale, pause).
- Teach ujjayi pranayama.
- Guide children in feeling the movements and overall sensations in their bodies that happen with the fluctuations of the breath.
- Create a variety of different ways to explore yoga, tapping into and further encouraging children to develop their yogic intelligence through thinking, listening, speaking, interacting, and demonstrating.
- Sprinkle classes with mythology,⁵ storytelling, music, and games to more fully engage each child.
- Maximize the use of natural names for asanas such as tree, frog, cat, cobra, butterfly, and so on, and encourage imaginative and expressive ways of bringing the asanas more to life by “acting” these parts.
- Offer partner play to encourage trust and communication skills.
- Take a few minutes at the beginning of each class to check in with how the children in your class are doing. Get creative in making the check-in session fun.
- Guide kids in exploring the different qualities of awareness that happen with their eyes open versus closed.
- Keep the asanas simple. Be aware that as flexible as young kids are, they can easily overstretch.
- Teach standing asanas one at a time, with a brief rest between each asana.
- Keep the room temperature moderate and comfortable. There is absolutely no benefit to children in doing yoga in a room heated above seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit.

- Offer natural warming of the body through dynamic movement, including Classical Surya Namaskara.
- Do not teach young children Headstand.
- Craft sequences of asanas that develop the three elements of children's fitness: strength, flexibility, and endurance.
- Appreciate that different children are different from one another and can benefit from sequences that address their uniqueness.
- In working with hyperactive children, help to channel their energy by offering sequences that involve movement. Standing and balancing asanas are an excellent way for these children direct their more impulsive energy in healthy ways.
- Use creative visualization in Corpse Pose to encourage relaxation. Read a short story during their deep relaxation.
- Listen; children will teach you how to guide them.

In sequencing yoga for middle school–age children:

- Review all of the guidelines for teaching younger children; they all apply to guiding children in the middle school years.
- Limit the practice to thirty to forty-five minutes, depending on fitness.
- Offer gradually more vigorous sequences of standing asanas.
- Gradually build up to doing three standing asanas linked together in a sequence.
- Offer variations so that children can self-select more or less vigorous activity; the needs and interests of the child should take precedence over doing a certain sequence.
- Introduce resistance practices, including holding Plank Pose and Downward-Facing Dog Pose for up to a minute each and lowering slowly from Plank to Chaturanga.
- Introduce Sun Salutation A and B one asana at a time and give alternatives that make the asanas and transitions accessible to every child.
- Offer guided meditation up to five minutes.

In sequencing yoga for high school–age youth:

- Review all of the guidelines for teaching younger children; most apply to guiding high school age youth.
- Limit the practice to forty-five to sixty minutes, depending on fitness.
- Gradually build up to doing three standing asanas linked together in a sequence.
- Introduce arm balances, starting with Crane Pose and Handstand Prep at a wall.
- Offer creative flowing sequences such as Dancing Warrior.
- Invite physically adept and motivated youth to attend regular adult yoga classes.

Men, Women, Yoga (1,139 words)

The conditions of men and women change considerably across the broad span of one's life. Most of the changes are similar when considering the broad scope of human physical, emotional, and mental development from early childhood to the latest moments of life. Yet along the way there are several factors that bring us to give the conditions of women in yoga special consideration in crafting yoga sequences.

While there is no question that the onset of puberty is very significant in boys, the changes in boys pale in comparison with the hormonal and larger physical and physiological changes experienced by girls with menarche (the onset of menstruation) and the cyclical recurrence of menstruation until menopause. While sharing in the experience of pregnancy and childbirth can be very significant to men, this experience pales even more in contrast to the experience of being pregnant, giving birth, breast-feeding, and healing in the postpartum period. And while men often have a variety of emotional and physical challenges in midlife, the hormonal changes that occur with menopause can greatly amplify the sense of dramatic change that signifies moving into a new phase of life.

Until the late twentieth century most writings on yoga practice did not differentiate between men and women primarily because yoga was largely the province of men (and mostly men of the upper castes in India's hierarchical social system). Indeed, across the broad span of yoga history, women were largely excluded from yoga, reflecting the "oppressive social and cultural context out of which the yoga tradition arose" in India, particularly during the Brahmanic period in which women, as Janice Gates reminds us in her wonderful book *Yogini*, were defined as "impure" and thus pronounced by male yoga gurus as being ill-fit for the spiritually enlightening practices of yoga.¹ It is only much later that, with the development of yoga in the West, we begin to find specific guidance that addresses the special needs and conditions of women in yoga, albeit still often adhering to age-old patriarchal and sexist assumptions about women.

Even when not sexist, we find that many of the yoga practice prescriptions for women—often given by women—are based less on science than anecdotal assumption, superstition, or unfounded supposition that is repeatedly passed from teacher to student. For example, in the leading book on yoga for women, *Yoga: A Gem for Women* (1995), Geeta Iyengar reiterates her father's admonition against doing yoga during menstruation, as follows: "During the monthly period (48–72 hours) complete rest is advisable. Asanas should not be practiced... Normal practice may be resumed from the fourth or fifth day."

She goes on to say that a few forward bends may be done during menstruation to reduce tension. More recently, in *The Women's Book of Yoga: Asana and Pranayama for All Phases of the Menstrual Cycle* (2007), Bobby Clennell allows certain practices during the menstrual cycle while following the teachings on B. K. S. Iyengar, Geeta Iyengar, and other leading teachers in making this questionable assertion regarding the relationship between inversion and menstruation:

If the body is turned upside down, this process [of menstrual discharge] is disturbed and may force the menstrual flow back up into the menstrual cavity and up through the fallopian tubes, causing the uterus to perform an adapted function instead of its normal function... Since the menstrual process is one of discharge, it is a commonsense precaution to avoid these poses. Do not practice any inversions until the menstrual flow has completely stopped.

This is now a "commonsense" notion in the yoga community if only because it has been repeated *mutatis mutandis*, ad nauseam for the past two generations. Yet menstrual discharge is no more affected by one's relationship to gravity than the passage of food or water through the body. Try swallowing a mouthful of water when in Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose) or Sirsasana (Headstand); does the water stay in your mouth, flood your sinuses, or move through your throat and into your stomach? As the NASA Medical Division has confirmed through studies of women in zero gravity environments, medical science in general has established that menstrual egress is caused by intrauterine and intra-vaginal pressure along with the peristaltic action of muscles, which are not measurably influenced by gravity. This is also why four-legged females have

no problem with healthy menstrual flow despite not having a vertical orientation to gravity, and why a menstruating woman will flow just as normally whether sleeping on her belly or back despite her uterus and vagina being turned in opposite relation to gravity.

We use this as one example of misinformation becoming urban yoga myth and then parading as fact in informing yoga sequences for women and others. Whether, how, or to what degree this and other fallacies are rooted in patriarchal or sexist assumptions would make for an interesting study that is far beyond the scope and purpose of this book. Rather, for our purposes, it points to the value of always asking “why” or “why not” when told that something must not be done or must be done only in a certain way or at a certain time. Whether the various admonitions about women in yoga (indeed, about everyone in yoga) are valid deserves to be studied, discussed, and ultimately considered through one’s personal yoga experience. It is with these sensibilities—evidence combined with shared understanding and experience— that women (and men) ideally make decisions for what to do or not do in their personal yoga practice throughout the larger cycle of life. In advising students on the question of menstruation and inversion, longtime yoga teacher Barbara Benagh (2003) says that since “no studies or research make a compelling argument to avoid inversions during menstruation, and since menstruation affects each woman differently and can vary from cycle to cycle, I am of the opinion that each woman is responsible for her own decision.”

Just as each student comes to the practice in a unique way, women experience their menstrual cycle in different ways. For some women, menstruation is simple and easy, while for others it can be painful and distressing. As discussed above, most of the literature on yoga for women advises a highly modified practice emphasizing basic restorative poses, no inversions, or no practice at all. Yet many active yoga students maintain their regular practice while menstruating—including doing inversions—across the span of decades with no signs of ill effects. This suggests that the best guide to practice when menstruating is each student’s personal experience and intuition. The basic question to ask is, “How do I feel?” It is entirely possible that cramps, bloating, fatigue, or other discomfort will be present, indicating a relaxing practice that helps to reduce pressure in the uterus and abdomen, as described in Chapter 10 of *Yoga Sequencing: Designing Transformational Yoga Classes*.

Yoga for Seniors: A Teacher’s Perspective (1,094 words)

Many portrayals of yoga in the media convey the impression that yoga is primarily for young people. Yet as recently as 2005, *Yoga Journal’s* “Yoga in America” survey revealed nearly twenty percent of the 15.8 million Americans who practice yoga regularly are fifty-five or older. With life expectancy continuing to climb—from forty-eight in 1900 to seventy-eight in 2000— and fertility gradually diminishing, the senior age demographic is projected to become proportionally greater in the coming years. Today, seniors age sixty-five and older are already the fastest growing age group in the United States. We can therefore anticipate more and more seniors doing yoga, and with them we can anticipate more challenges in ensuring that yoga sequences are designed appropriately for their needs.

In teaching an aging population, it is important to give careful consideration to the unique conditions of each individual student while letting go of the assumption that sequences that make sense for a twenty-five-year-old make just as much sense for the “uniquely vulnerable group” of yoga students in their sixties or older. For instance, some seniors come to yoga for the first time and find themselves in an Ashtanga Vinyasa class described as helping with balance, strength, and

flexibility. While this style of yoga might be appropriate for a very small percentage of exceptionally athletic, fit, and energetic seniors already experienced with yoga, it is important to appreciate that Ashtanga (and its many branded variations, such as Power Yoga) was designed for youthful students (starting with young Brahman-caste boys at the Mysore Palace in the 1920s). It may be true that anyone can safely explore any sequence as long as they adhere to the yogic precepts of steadiness and ease; “explore” might mean a student sees what is being asked of them and possesses the confidence, clarity, and wisdom to say, “no thanks.” But in the reality of actual classes, students tend to push toward what they see others doing or what the teacher is suggesting; if the teacher is narrowly committed to a certain style rather than adapting yoga sequences to the needs of the real people in an actual class, many students—seniors included—will often push too hard or too far and get injured. Many others will simply disappear from yoga, convinced from the first experience that it just does not work for them.

Fortunately, wisdom does tend to come with age, as long as one continues learning. This is the conclusion made by Gene D. Cohen, MD (2006) in research on the aging brain in which he makes other insightful findings: the brain evolves throughout life in response to experience and learning; new brain cells form throughout life; the brain’s emotional circuitry becomes more balanced with age; and the brain’s two hemispheres are used more equally by older adults.³ These findings point to the mental health value of yoga for seniors as they learn not merely asanas but rather a feeling for what is happening at a more subtle level of awareness within and between the asanas. Keeping the mind active while feeling their way into asanas that make sense given the reality of their condition, seniors further stimulate both physical and mental vitality even as the forces of aging present new challenges and opportunities.

As with children, pregnant women, or indeed anyone interested in doing yoga, factors such as age may or may not be what is most significant. As with anyone anywhere in the life cycle, it is important first to assess their condition and intention before prescribing or suggesting a style of yoga or a particular yoga sequence. There are, to be sure, many active, fit, healthy seniors capable of doing a variety of practices. Yet taken as a whole, we can reasonably say that seniors tend to face a number of challenges that are altogether less common among their younger yoga peers. As we age, the body tends to become less mobile and weaker. There is an increased likelihood of having or developing arthritis, osteopenia, and osteoporosis, which contraindicates many asanas in which there is pressure in the joints while indicating the value of certain other asanas and actions that can help release joint pressure and restore strength to bones. There is also an increased fear of falling, even among seniors who have never experienced a serious fall, which often leads to less social and physical activity.⁴ Heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, dementia, and vision and hearing loss are all increasingly common the older one gets.

Clearly, these conditions indicate the importance of adaptive and therapeutic yoga sequences for seniors. Perhaps the greatest insights into yoga for seniors have been developed through the research projects conducted through the Therapeutic Yoga for Seniors Program at Duke University Medicine as well as through research articles published in the *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*. Here we draw from those resources as well as direct experience in working with a diverse population of seniors in various yoga settings (yoga studios, hospitals, hospices, prisons, community centers, and privately).

Creating and Teaching Yoga Sequences for Seniors

- Appreciate that many healthy, physically fit seniors are best served in regular yoga classes in which age is not a distinction.
- Create a safe environment in which seniors are invited to feel whole.

- Welcome seniors—as with any student—as they are and provide appropriate yoga sequences based on their actual assessed conditions.
- Emphasize steadiness and ease in exploring asanas and pranayamas over attainment of poses or performance in breathing practices.
- Make ample use of props, including chairs, to help create adaptive accommodations.
- Teach the Joel Kramer method of “playing the edge” as a way to feel one’s way into appropriate positioning.
- Emphasize dynamic movement in connection with conscious ujjayi pranayama to stimulate the circulatory and respiratory systems.
- Provide ample time for rest and integration during practices over thirty minutes.
- Encourage seniors to do yoga five days per week for thirty to forty-five minutes per session, shortening or lengthening sessions based on ability.
- Include moderate strength and resistance activities to build or maintain muscle strength and to help maintain bone density.
- Include asanas and energetic actions within them that require and develop balance, including pada bandha as a technique for stabilizing the feet and ankles, as well as a variety of standing asanas.
- Include meditation and creative visualization practices that emphasize a sense of wholeness, body-mind integration, and self-acceptance. Offer end-of-life meditations as appropriate.
- Create space for playfulness, encouraging seniors to spontaneously explore movement and to give mutual support to other seniors through safe partner yoga exercises.

Chakra Sequencing (715 words)

As with everything in the world of yoga, with chakras there are numerous contrasting and even conflicting views about what they are, how they work, their number, location, and even whether location is a relevant concept. Different chakra models found in historical, philosophical, and literary works have as few as five chakras or infinite chakras throughout the subtle body. In the traditional yogic literature the number varies from chakras at the intersection of every nadi to the identification of the major chakras, usually said to number between five and eight, that are located at the junctions of the major nadis as they spiral and rise along the spine and give us the major psycho-spiritual-energetic centers of the subtle body. The tantric model of chakras, which we will use here in looking at chakra sequences, was developed around the eleventh century and described in the Sat-Cakra-Narupana. It is the most widely accepted model, giving seven chakras described as emanations of divine consciousness.

Just as the movement of prana is felt in the physical body and in our mental awareness despite being invisible, the chakras can be usefully visualized as psychic centers of energetic and spiritual experience, not physical locations that can be palpated, x-rayed, or detected with magnetic resonance imaging technology. “Concentration on physical organs or spots in the body as prescribed by many spiritual masters,” says Harish Johari (1987, 15), “is misleading, for the chakras are not material.” Yet the chakras may correlate with the major nerve plexuses of the physical body; some schools of thought associate chakras with particular sensations in the body. More commonly they are correlated to psychological, emotional, and mental qualities. Lecturing in 1932, Carl Jung emphasized that, “they symbolize highly complex psychic facts which at the present moment we could not possibly express except in images” (Shamdasani 1996, 61). Whether the relationships indicated by these symbols are useful is a question best answered in personal practice.

Chakras are said to be part of a much higher energy system than the physical body. Traditionally it is said that awakening of the chakras depends on opening a higher source of energy than the physical body can provide, that it takes a concentrated quality level of awareness (Frawley 1999). During normal consciousness, this energy is dormant. When awakened through conscious awareness, this energy rises through the core of one's being, creating ecstatic bliss. For this to happen there must be balance in each of the seven chakras, each of which symbolizes certain aspects of one's physical, psychological, and spiritual condition.

The chakra model offers an approach to integration in the entire being, unifying the physical, emotional, and spiritual. This model provides a useful approach to sequencing asanas while exploring deeper qualities of self-awareness that embody a more multidimensional self-understanding. Whether applied as the model for a complete class or to stimulate specific areas of energetic balance or self-awareness, a chakra model class has a variety of creative possibilities for sequencing asana and pranayama practices. Here we will look at separate sequences for cultivating balance in each chakra as well as a complete integrated chakra class.

Muladhara Chakra

The muladhara chakra (from *mul*, "base," and *adhara*, "support") symbolizes our present psychic condition, bound as we are in normal consciousness to the physical body and intertwined in the web of earthly forces. The base chakra, muladhara is associated with the earth element and the grounding aspects of life, including the basics of food, shelter, and livelihood. Finger (2005, 39) and others locate this chakra at the base of the pelvis. It is out of balance when we lack grounding or are so rigidly grounded as to lack mobility or resilience in navigating the evolving path of our life. If constantly feeling out of control, insecure, irresponsible, or caught up in matters of money, it is suggested that the muladhara chakra is out of balance. In the yoga practice, we cultivate muladhara chakra balance by establishing a sense of grounding, particularly through the feet, legs, and pelvis, as well as a sense of moving into stillness through grounded forward bends that evoke a feeling of surrendering to the earth. Amid these grounding actions and sensations, one can deepen their sense of physical, emotional, and mental stability through visualization practices that help embody these qualities of awareness.