

## NOTES ON PRACTICE

Yoga is a mental posture, a state of equilibrium and stillness. It is not a destination to be reached; it is a place where you simply are. Only through practice (*abhyasa*) are the fruits of yoga obtained. The method is the goal.

### The Difference Between Effort and Intensity in Yoga Practice

The levels of intensity in yoga practice are defined as mild (*mrdu*), average (*madhyama*), keen (*adhimatra*), and vehement (*tivra*). The intensity of your practice will determine the quality and depth of your results. Although this would seem to indicate that the greater the physical effort you exert, the better, the answer is not that simple. The essence of yoga is balance and integration. In yoga, intensity is not measured by effort. Intensity is measured by the degree of focused awareness you bring to the physical aspects of your practice. This emphasis on focus and awareness, rather than just exerting physical effort, is what distinguishes this program's approach to Hatha Yoga.

### How to Determine the Proper Intensity of Practice

In their enthusiasm for results from hatha practice, many people confuse intensity with effort. Let's use asana as an example. If you work an asana with too much effort, injury or overwork may occur. However, if you work the asana with moderate effort, but with intensity or focus, you will achieve the desired result. Through your practice and reflection on the aftereffects of that practice, you will begin to discern the level of intensity that is comfortable and effective for you. The physical body is an excellent barometer to measure the attitude you bring into your practice. Are you pushing yourself too hard, or are you sustaining the intensity of your practice with balance? Once you gain a clear awareness of your intensity level, you can apply this awareness to other aspects of your practice.

### How to Determine the Duration of Practice

Let's take this understanding of intensity further. We could express intensity as part of a mathematical formula: intensity multiplied by duration will equal the resulting force ( $I \times D = F$ ). A modest amount of intensity over a long period of time can yield the same results that a great deal of intensity will yield over a shorter period of time. Therefore, to



achieve a given result, the relationship of intensity and duration needs to be proportional. If your observations reveal that only a small amount of intensity is possible for you without creating difficulty, then the duration must be proportionally increased in order to still achieve the desired result. Since most people cannot easily sustain a high degree of focus or intensity of practice, the natural variable to increase is duration or length of practice. Increasing our effort is not always wise. For example, you cannot force a hamstring to lengthen any sooner than it should. You will only injure yourself. Therefore, if you are trying to stretch a tight hamstring, duration would be the better variable to work with in asana practice.

There are two aspects to duration. One is the length of time involved, and the other is repetition. The true depth of an asana is most likely to be experienced as the asana is performed for greater lengths of time. So if an asana can only be sustained with integrity for a short period of time, then repetitions are necessary to achieve the desired result. Integrity means careful attention to structural alignment. In the long term, this attention to detail will be the most accurate and direct tool for affecting the flow of prana, the life force.

### **The Importance of Repetition**

Repetition is always important, even if the asana is held for a longer duration. By repetition, we mean either a certain number of repetitions of a particular asana during your daily practice, or repeating the asana every day. It is a good idea to resume practice of an asana before its aftereffects have dissipated completely. In other words, it would be better to have a moderate practice every day than an intense practice once a week. This will help to keep a flow going. Using a moderate daily practice with the addition of an intense practice once or twice a week could also be an effective approach. The only way you can discern what works for you is, of course, through practice, observation, and reflection. The most vital thing to remember is that your practice should always be enjoyable and relaxing.



## Choosing the Best Asanas For Your Practice

The timing of your daily hatha practice is a personal choice, though what you practice will change. If you practice in the morning, you may want to start gently with some of the warm-ups from month one. The session may then escalate with standing asanas and back bends and transition through some neutral asana, like dandasana, before finishing with twists or forward bends. Always make time for savasana or an equivalent restorative asana at the end of your practice. The same approach may be employed for an afternoon practice though less warm-up may be needed. An evening practice would typically be less muscular or heating than morning or mid-day. If back bends are performed in the evening, they would best be performed in a supported, restorative fashion. Inversions, supported twists, and forward bends would also be good, as they can be more quieting and inturning.

## Asana Practice and Food

It is suggested that you practice asana on a reasonably empty stomach. What you have eaten and the predisposition of your constitution will determine how long you need to wait after eating to practice. If you have a strong digestion, less time may be required. Another consideration is how long you should wait after practice before eating. The greater the intensity of your practice, the longer you may want to wait. If you have given yourself a long savasana (15 minutes or more), you may require less time.

Through all asana practice, move slowly and with awareness. Remember, the articulation of the asana is much more relevant than trying to stretch. Let your practice expand to become a part of your lifestyle. The joy experienced in any aspect of life, however seemingly mundane, will be enhanced as you become steeped in the practices of yoga. Properly performed, yoga will bring you greater health, happiness, and awareness. *Consider your practice a gift.*

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