

Raja (Astanga) Yoga practice

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Notes: Terms are in Sanskrit and English. All the Sanskrit terms are translated into English.

I will begin with a general discussion of what yoga is, so you can determine why you are here, what you would like from your investment of your time, energy, money, and commitment into learning and practicing yoga.

In my experience, most people are drawn to yoga for its well-known benefits of achieving a strong and healthy body, great figure, flexibility, and other physical benefits.

You will get all that, and much more, from yoga. If you will take the time to really focus on what yoga is, the history of yoga, what it has done for people, and also, how it can harm people if not followed correctly, then you will have a much better understanding of yoga. From that foundation of understanding, you can make your own decision about what path you would like to follow in yoga.

Yoga has been misunderstood, and also followed correctly. However yoga is followed, it is a personal journey that is humbling, and empowering, as one discovers the truth. It is important to have a teacher who will help you avoid injuries and incorrect practices in yoga, and to help you to discover the correct path in yoga.

What I would like to present to you is Royal Yoga, or Raja Yoga, from the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, written in about 200 BC. It is also called Astanga Yoga, 8 Limbed Yoga.

I have included lessons learned from many different yoga schools and yogis since the early 1970s.

These are my interpretations of Raja Yoga, as described in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, and tempered by my experience doing yoga over 30 years, and what I have learned from my teachers. Most prominent teachers are Sri Dadaji (Amiya Roy Chowdhury), and Tai Chi Master Wen Chi Huang. I have learned the roots of yoga from them, and from my integral experience living yoga, being fully present in the moment.

If you follow the simple instructions given here and in class, you will derive a great benefit from a dedicated practice over time with yoga. Let's talk about time.

With yoga, you will see immediate benefits from the very first yoga session, as long as you follow the instructions correctly, and you are able to relax.

If you continue, with zeal, concentration, and correct practice, even five minutes every day, you will continue to benefit from the practice of yoga. Even better is to spend 90 minutes per day in class, at least three times per week, and then practice at home every day. Doing one asana per day will bring a benefit. Doing a focused practice will bring more benefits. You will receive a direct benefit from doing more yoga, of course, within correct balance with your life.

What do I mean by a focused practice? Just that. A quiet mind, with clear light flooding every cell of the body, with global awareness of self and all, while doing the practice, and then carrying on this state of awareness into daily life, that is yoga. A feeling of love for all beings, including yourself. Your path in life getting smoother, even when events you would consider to be catastrophic (before taking up yoga) happen, they do not bother you as much, or not at all, and in fact, they fade away on their own, and you continue on your journey, sailing through life smoothly on the great ocean.

Here's one simple point to remember. Throughout your practice, keep the mind in Ajna, the Sixth Chakra, third eye. How to do it? Here's one example: If you keep your eyes open, while standing in Tadasana (Standing Mountain Pose), gaze a little above the horizon. That will automatically center your mind at Ajna. This practice alone will help you to remain calm, focused, and strong, not only while in asana practice, but in your daily life. And you do not have to have your eyes open to be in Ajna. It is so easy to do, and it will bring lasting benefits, and propel you on the path of yoga.

And so, here is Raja Yoga. The two-time Nobel prizewinner Rabindranath Tagore wrote a beautiful song in Bengali called *Amra Sabai Raja* (We are all Kings). I was taught how to sing it in Calcutta. It is appropriate for Raja Yoga. And so, we begin.

The path of Raja (Royal) Yoga, also called Astanga (8-limbed) Yoga, consists of:

1. **Yamas** (restraints)

Ahimsa (Non-violence towards self or other beings)

Satya (Tell the truth do not lie to ones self or to other beings)

Asteya (Refrain from stealing from ones self or from others)

Brahmacharya (Refrain from lusting. This does not necessarily mean chastity.)

Aparigraha (non-attachment. This means to live in the world, and to fully enjoy, but not to be a slave to attachments. One can enjoy life fully, and also be totally free.)

2. **Niyamas** (observances)

Saucha (Cleanliness. This refers to purity of mind, body, emotions, and spirit, the clear light of being).

Santosha (Contentment. Let there be contentment).

Tapasya (Duty. Let there be unity within, without, to oneself, and to all. All one. Do not delay in carrying out ones duty. This is responsibility, discipline. It is a joy to be one, to manifest love.)

Swadhyaya (Self-study. Realize the facts. All are one, yet separate, and again one, depending on the point of view. We are full manifestations of the One Power. It is a play of the Divine. All are one, all Divine. Love is the path, and answer.)

Ishwara Pranidhana (Devotion to the Supreme. All One.)

3. **Asana** (Posture. Postures should be comfortable, to facilitate all the 8 limbs of Raja Yoga). Asana and Pranayama (fourth limb) go together closely. Proper practice of Asana will assist in making the yogi strong, be well, to enjoy life, and to realize the joy and purpose in life. Proper anatomical alignment, to improve health, power, and well-being is emphasized. Slow, steady progress in all eight limbs of Raja Yoga is the key to lasting change and progress in yoga.)

4. **Pranayama** (Breath. Life power through the breath. Prana means Life energy. Yama means cessation of life, a different phase. Prana is breathing in, out, Yama is the pause between each cycle. There are four phases in pranayama. Inhale, pause, exhale, pause. There are different types of pranayama in Raja Yoga. It is very interesting to realize that the heart literally rides on the diaphragm.

5. Pratyahara (centering, to bring the senses and awareness within, to quiet the mind. This is the preparatory (and also concurrent), necessary step before the next three limbs. Also the preceding four limbs cannot be successfully done without this limb. All limbs are in sequence, and also concurrent. One can successfully focus on the outside world if one is calm and centered within. It is important to note that concentration on Ajna, the sixth chakra (third eye), is integral to quiet and peace within, and also awareness of within and without can be achieved.)

6. Dharana (Concentration on an object or person. Full awareness of meditation. Again, Pratyahara (fifth limb) and all the preceding limbs are necessary to reach this stage).

7. Dhyana (Full union with the person or object of meditation. Two are one, yet again two. Union is achieved with the object or person). Dharana and the preceding five limbs in concurrent state is necessary to achieve the state of Dhyana. Duality and the veil of mind (Maya) is overcome, and union is achieved. Dadaji says that 20 minutes of Dhyana yoga can help to purify the body, to heal. In this latter case he is speaking about union with self, but of course it is not restricted in that way.

8. Samadhi (Full union with all. This is a natural state (Swabhava). Kaivalya is total liberation. There is some vibration in Kaivalya state. Above this, from a certain point of view, is Satyanarayana state, where there is no vibration. All vibration comes from this state, and is inseparable from this state. According to Dadaji, full attunement (Satyanarayana state) can be sustained only for a period of about twenty minutes at a time, in order to maintain the body in this world. Satya = Truth. Narayana = Creator

Guidelines for the practice of Asanas.

No food two to three hours before asana practice.

No liquids 15 minutes before asana practice.

Yoga mat or blanket is helpful but not necessary, depending on the surface. For example, one can do yoga on the beach, right on the sand! For correct sitting posture, one may need a cushion to enable a lumbar curve in the spine, depending on one's flexibility. Some yogis can sit flat on the ground or floor with no cushion or elevation required. A folded blanket of cotton or wool is very useful for this and other purposes in yoga. Some people will need two folded blankets for sitting. The knees should be level with or below the hips when sitting. This ensures the spine has the natural curves for sitting comfortably.

Beginning the practice.

One can start in Savasana (corpse pose), or in a sitting asana, such as Sukhasana (easy Lotus), or Siddhasana (Perfect pose), or Padmasana (Lotus pose). One can also sit in Vajrasana (Diamond or Thunderbolt pose), or in Dandasana (Staff pose). One can also just sit in a chair, or even lie on the floor, bed, or on the ground. There are literally thousands of asanas (poses). There are also many ways of performing yoga. It is always important to listen to the body, and not to push too hard into any asana.

A general description of the practice, and flow of each class.

In our class, we usually do relaxation and centering (meditation) first, followed by warm ups, then gradually build our moving meditation into asana practice, with some floor asanas, then transition into a vinyasa flow (Sun Salutation – Surya Namaskar), working with the breath (Pranayama), posture (Asana), awareness of Chakras (energy centers), Bandhas (working with the energy of the Chakras), transitioning from vinyasa flow into balancing asanas, and sometimes inversions. Finally, we end with relaxation and centering, usually with Savasana (corpse pose), then finish the class with singing Aum (OM) together three times.

Focus is maintained throughout the entire practice, a steady moving meditation, working with all the elements mentioned above, to create higher body awareness, strength, peace of mind, and energy. Asanas are carefully linked together in a balanced way. After the warm ups, we usually spend time and attention on cat breathing (Marjaryasana), and the Tiger poses (Vyagrhasana 1, 2, 3), to work with the breath, awareness of body position in asana, awareness of chakras, especially Ajna, balance, endurance, and higher awareness. In this way, it prepares us for the asana practice to come, and gives us power for the more advanced asanas. It also helps us in our lives outside the yoga studio.

Warm ups

There are many different kinds of warmups that we have done in class.

Depending on ones state that day, one can start in a sitting pose, then start a gentle forward bend. One can gently stretch the hamstrings and the low back, back of hips, stretch the sides of the trunk, the arms, open the heart center (Anahata Chakra), air element, and throat center (Vishuddha Chakra), ether element, and Ajna (Sixth Chakra, third eye), fine ether element, in Dandasana (staff pose). Two phases. First phase: Open the heart, anterior tilt of the pelvis, stretch the hamstrings, open the feet back and up to facilitate this stretch of the hamstrings. Open the eyes (heart opens into the eyes), open the throat, open the belly (third chakra Manipura), willpower, fire element, open the second chakra (Swadhisthaya sexual chakra water element), open the root chakra, Muladhara Chakra, at the base of the spine (just superior to the perineum), earth element.

There are more warm ups and beginning asanas. In general, it is wise to link together with opposing movements, or complementary movements. Always be gentle, and listen to your body. Do not overdo any movement. Use the yogic breath when doing stretches, and asanas. In general, exhale into forward bends, inhale into backward bends, exhale into stretches. Keep a steady flow, and keep a neutral posture between postures, or sides of postures, to give time for integration. Examples follow.

Spinal twist

Integrate by sitting in Sukhasana, with Jnana Mudra, between each side. Jnana (wisdom). Mudra (sign).

Paschimotanasana (Full Back Stretch)

Integrate by sitting in Sukhasana, with Jnana Mudra.

Maha Mudra (Great Seal)

Integrate by sitting in Sukhasana, with Jnana Mudra, between each side.

Shoulder circles (forward, then backward).

Left arm forward. Right forearm above elbow of left arm. Stretch left arm across midline to right.

Exhale as you deepen the stretch. Right hand, palm down, on right knee. Bring left arm across midline to left side. Exhale as you stretch the arm straight back. Breath again, exhale deeper into the stretch.

Bring the arm back to center. Integrate by sitting in Sukhasana, with Jnana Mudra.

Repeat with right arm.

Integrate by sitting in Sukhasana, with Jnana Mudra.

Follow with different warm ups for arms. Examples: arms out to each side. Thumbs up. Thumbs forward. Thumbs down. Thumbs forward. Thumbs up. Thumbs back. Thumbs up. Repeat. Rest.

Integrate by sitting in Sukhasana, with Jnana Mudra.

Garudasana (Eagle Pose). Left arm 90 degrees. Bring right arm under, wrap around, palms together, fingers flat, on edge to gaze. Drishti (gaze) at/from/in Ajna.

Integrate by sitting in Sukhasana, with Jnana Mudra.

Repeat Garudasana, right side.

Integrate by sitting in Sukhasana, with Jnana Mudra.

There are many more examples of warm ups and linked asanas for beginning yoga practice.

Here is a description of the Cat breathing exercise with the Marjaryasana asana series one and two, followed by Tiger asanas, Vyagrhasana asana series one, two, and three, and transitioning into the Sun Salutation, Surya Namaskar. We are breathing with Victorious breath, Ujayi pranayama.

After warm ups, begin by getting on all fours, with the knees directly under the hips, and the hands directly under the shoulders. You may want extra cushioning under your knees. Curl the toes like you are going to spring forward, like a cat! In fact, spring forward from your toes to see what it feels like to be agile and strong, catlike.

Breathing in, inhale:

Open all the chakras, being conscious of each one of them opening. There are seven major chakras, counting from one to seven: Muladhara, Swadisthaya, Manipura, Anahata, Vishuddha, Ajna, Sahasrara. Arch your lumbar spine into its natural curve, lordosis, by reaching back and up with the rear end, and coming into extension. Tilt the pelvis forward. Let the belly drop, so that the diaphragm can pull down on its central tendon and enable the lungs to fully inflate. Engage Ujayi Pranayama, by narrowing the air passage at the throat, to finely regulate the breath. There will be a sound created. Open the front of the throat, Vishuddha Chakra (fifth), Open the eyes. Always keep the mind at its seat, Ajna Chakra (sixth), just above the center of the eyebrows. The heart channel of TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) opens into the eyes, Anahata Chakra (fourth), Heart Chakra. It is freeing to open all, to surrender, to be filled with love, the power of life, Prana, Chi, Ki, all the same. Breath in pure joy, love.

Breathing out, exhale:

Close all the chakras, engaging the bandhas (locks). Jalandhara Bandha at Vishuddha Chakra, by placing your chin at the top of the sternum. This is also called the throat lock. As you are bringing your head down, close your eyes. Stretch up through the arms and shoulders, getting a nice stretch in those muscles. Tilt the pelvis back. Engage Uddiyana Bandha, Upward Flying Lock, by pulling the belly button in, and the lower abdominal muscles. This will engage the bandhas for Manipura Chakra, Swadhistaya Chakra, and it will also intensify the bandha at Muladhara Chakra, Mula Bandha. Engage Mula Bandha, the Root Lock, to further this bandha. Arch the spine into the sky. Engage Ujayi Pranayama, the Victorious Breath. Let all your tensions go with each exhale. Breath your love, joy to all.

Repeat.

Then do the side motion. Hips to left on the exhale, forehead to mat, inhale to center. Hips to right on the exhale, forehead to mat, inhale to center.

Come back to center breathing, as in the beginning of the Cat Breathing.

Begin the Tiger Asana series, starting with Vyagrhasana One. I call this one the Flying Tiger.

First phase: On the exhale, bring the left knee up to the chest. Engage Jalandhara Bandha. Engage Uddiyana Bandha, arch the spine to the sky as in Cat Breathing exhale phase. You will find that you need to expand the ribcage more to breath in because the diaphragm is held in partially during Uddiyana Bandha. Engage Mula Bandha. Engage Ujayi Pranayama.

Second phase: Inhale as you bring the left leg straight back. Stretch the leg back, and look forward, open your eyes, and keep Uddiyana Bandha, Mula Bandha engaged.

Third phase: Inhale as you bring the right arm forward. Drishti (Gaze) is over the hand, which is held firmly palm down, straight in front. Stretch out forward and back with the right arm and left leg. Keep this stage of the asana with full focus of Ajna, for at least six or seven breath cycles in Ujayi Pranayama.

Exhale limbs back to center. Resume Cat Breathing. Integrate.

Repeat Vyagrhasana One on the right side.

Exhale limbs back to center. Resume Cat Breathing. Integrate.

Vyagrhasana Two.

Left Forearm to mat, 45 degree angle across mat, palm down. Reach back and catch left ankle with right hand. Inhale as you come into a high kick, look down, Drishti is on the mat in the center by your forearm. Come into a pronounced lumbar curve to kick higher. Keep your diamond focus, Ajna, to keep rock solid balance. You will feel a strong bow in the front of the body, across the midline. This is very powerful, for healing, to integrate both sides of the body and mind. It will stretch the muscles on the front of the trunk, Psoas Major, etc, and the Quadriceps, and so on. Engage Uddiyana Bandha, Mula Bandha, Ujayi Pranayama. Hold this asana for at least six or seven breath cycles. Exhale limbs to center, come up to Cat Breathing, integrate.

Repeat right side.

Exhale limbs to center, come up to Cat Breathing, integrate.

Vyagrhasana Three. The same as Vyagrhasana Two except you keep the arms high, and you are looking forward, with the Drishti (Gaze) straight ahead, a little up, to fully engage Ajna. This asana is more difficult from a balance standpoint, and different muscle groups are involved.

Start from the Cat Breathing pose. Right hand comes off the mat, reaches back, catches left ankle. Inhale in Ujaji Pranayama as you come into a high kick. Arch your back forward, and lift the leg up and forward, creating a strong bow across the midline. Diamond focus in Ajna is essential for power and balance. Engage Uddiyana Bandha, Mula Bandha. Hold the asana for at least six or seven breath cycles. Exhale limbs back to center, integrate in Margaryasana, cat breathing.

Repeat other side. Exhale limbs back to center, integrate in Margaryasana, cat breathing.

Come into a forward stretch in Balasana (Child pose). Exhale while fully forward, stretching the arms, sides of the trunk, shoulders, while stretching back and down with the hips.

Rotate forward on an inhale into Urdhva Mukha Shvasana (Upward Facing Dog Pose). Relax into the pose to give the spine a restorative back bend.

Repeat these two asanas.

From Urdhva Mukha Shvasana, rotate back on an exhale into Adho Mukha Shvasana (Downward Facing Dog Pose).

to be continued....