

### *What is Yin Yoga?*

All forms of yoga open the physical body as well as the subtle layers of our being. By opening the energy channels, the subtle layers, we make way for divine energy to enter our system. We are then invited to explore consciousness and immerse ourselves in other dimensions than merely the three dimensional realm, the gross level we usually (think we) live in. Yoga unites the different layers that make up who we are as a human being. Unification of body, heart and mind will leave us feeling more whole, more integrated, aware and at peace. At peace with ourselves and with the world around us.

Yin yoga in particular cultivates the pranic<sup>1</sup> body, the energy channels known as meridians. In Yin yoga we touch the deeper branches of the meridians. “These are pathways or rivers of energy continuously flowing through the body. They are an invisible, comprehensive network that link all substances and organs. They are unseen but embody a physical reality. The nourishment and strength of the meridian system is essential for the maintenance of harmonious balance on all levels of the bodymindspirit. Before each meridian can be in harmony with the other pathways, it has to be in harmony with itself, yin and yang in complementary balance (page 180 of the manual<sup>2</sup>)”.

In yin yoga we use asana, poses, but contrary to other styles of yoga we spend more time there to stretch the yin tissue, the connective tissue (tendons and ligaments). We also focus more on the lower part of our bodies, the yin part (more solid and inward) – where most bones come together. The upper body is more yang (active and mobile). The way we target yin tissue is we first come in to an edge, an appropriate edge. We do not force an aesthetic ideal. We use the shape of the pose to trigger the range of motion. Secondly we become still. “We let gravity have us”, so to speak. We relax our muscles so the deeper meridians that flow from skin to bones can be worked. Finally, as stated, we stay a while. Usually we stay 3 – 5 minutes in a pose. Staying longer has even more benefits. Soft props are used to soften the landing.

The beauty of Yin Yoga is that we can use the time in the pose to contemplate. We are invited to explore our edge and stay with whatever arises. We learn to discern: can I settle in discomfort? Which is a great lesson for daily life as it teaches us to host all experiences, the “good” and the “bad”. We use breath and visualisation or loving kindness phrases to deepen our experience as we go inside to integrate all parts of us that long for our attention.

### *Why would someone want to practice Yin Yoga?*

Stress is the norm in our day and age, being relaxed is occasional. Take a moment to contemplate that fact. How sad is that? How many lives are not lived fully and heart fully due to the “normalcy” of the rat race and our busy western lifestyles? This has grave effects on our sympathetic nervous system as it is triggered easily nowadays. Especially in western societies high blood pressure and high cholesterol are omnipresent and a clear sign of too much “yang” adrenalin rushing through our

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<sup>1</sup> This is the subtle layer, our energy body where prana, (lifeforce ) in Indian yoga philosophy and chi in Chinese yoga flows.

<sup>2</sup> The manual of the Insight Yoga Institute, Integrating Yoga, Buddhism and psychology

systems. Yin yoga activates our other side, our parasympathetic nervous system that regulates our sleep cycles, our digest and rest cycles. In yin yoga we attend to our tension, skilfully and purposefully.

Yin yoga is an inclusive form of yoga and by that I mean it brings in conscious breathing, mind training and contemplation. This holistic approach has a deeply calming effect on our system; yin yoga is restorative and nurturing. We learn to relax ourselves and not get overwhelmed by strong emotions. We distance ourselves from the grasping conceptual mind and open ourselves to the precious life that is ours to live. It is practised regularly and preferably daily; the continuity of practise is important for shift to occur. Finally, I personally like that it is practised in silence. There is so much to hear in silence.

### *Teaching a Yin pose*

#### Wide Knee Child's Pose Twist (both sides)

The wide knee child's pose twist is a beautiful shape "to stimulate the Lung, Heart and Intestine meridians as we twist to the side squeezing the abdominal region while opening the chest area (page 95, Insight Yoga, Sarah Powers, 2008)".

First come into Child's Pose. You may want to turn sideways on your mat so you can use the full length of your mat in the final pose. Take a few breaths here, relax, pause and connect with your natural breath. Now raise your head gently upright. Open the knees to the sides to find your edge in the wide knee shape. You can go further than your ordinary range of motion but stay in your natural range of motion. Check if you need padding for your knees in case they land outside of your mat now. I recommend soft padding as the joints can sink into them. You can use a blanket, cloth or scarf if you have one near.

The Wide Knee Child's Pose affects the meridians, the invisible highways of energy that lie on an around your legs: primarily the Spleen meridian along your inner legs. A lot can be said about these meridians, but since we focus on the Lung and Heart meridians in the upper body in wide knee child's pose *twist*, I will not go further into these now. All and all we have 12 meridians we can target with yoga, 6 in the upper body and 6 in the lower body.

So let us bring in the twist with the upper body on the floor. Slide your left arm and shoulder all the way to the right down on your mat. Pad your shoulder if you need to. Maybe also bring some soft padding under your left elbow and wrist. Now with your right arm lift yourself up a bit and see if you can slide your left shoulder and arm even further to the right. Rest your head on the floor or on your upper left arm. You may want to open the knees a little wider too. The right hand can go behind the back and hold on to the left upper leg or your pants. Find your appropriate edge, breathe into the edge and stay here for a while, about 3 – 5 minutes. Let gravity have you.

"The lungs do a vital job: each day we take about 23.000 breaths, which are filtered through our lungs to add fresh oxygen to our blood, which in turn carries that oxygen to each and every cell. We expel carbon dioxide (a waste gas from the metabolism of food) from our blood through our lungs as we exhale (page 85, Insight Yoga, Sarah Powers, 2008)".

In Chinese medicine the lungs are called the tender organ. "They extract the goodness from the heavenly air you breathe so they are the first area to assimilate the prana (lifeforce/ chi) from the outside with the prana from the inside. When lung chi is deficient, there can be deficient or stagnant chi anywhere in the body. This is reflected in the inability to take in on many levels (allergies, asthma, shortness of breath, coughing). The skin is considered the "third lung" and relates to issues regarding acne, rashes and hives (page 86 Insight Yoga Institute, Sarah Powers, 2008)". The lungs are energetically connected to the large intestines, both involved in the ongoing cycle of drawing in nutrients and letting go of waste.

The lung-large-intestine chi is associated with courage and reverence. An imbalance or depletion in lung chi is linked to sadness and grief. This is a natural response to life; if we don't grieve there will be grievance. Healthy lung chi is connected with courage and facing difficulties with tenure and the confidence that life is more than one shade.

To come out of the twist to the right, release the right hand down on an exhale, and as you push into the floor to come up, slide your weight over to the other side, moving the right arm over to the left, resting on the right shoulder and taking your left arm back. Find your edge on this side, keep the knees wide, lie your head down on the floor or on your right upper arm. Take care of your joints and use padding on your knees, right shoulder, elbow and wrist if needed. Stay 3 – 5 minutes.

"The Heart is a large muscle that is responsible for supplying the body with oxygenated blood. The Small Intestine is where the most extensive part of digestion takes place, where we sort out what's important from what's discard -able on all levels in both body and mind. Haemorrhoids, abdominal pain, diarrhoea and constipation are related to excess heat in the system caused by an imbalance in the fire element (page 87, IYI, S Powers, 2008)".

The heart -small-intestines chi rules the blood. Blood in Chinese medicine is considered the yin side of chi; responsible for receptivity rather than engagement. It gives us the ability to be comfortable being still. When in balance we feel alive, vital and creative. When it is out of balance we have a lack of tolerance, act impulsive and agitated. Since heart chi relates to our spiritedness, when deficient we may fall prone to feeling depressed and uncreative. Trouble with sleeping can occur that leaves us feeling depleted during the day.

To come out of the pose, exhale as you bring the left hand back to the floor. Inhale as you come up, pushing down through the right hand. With the weight on both of your hands, bring the knees back together, resting in Child's Pose. This is our neutral pose to restore.

### *Instructing mindfulness of breathing in the pose*

#### *Purpose*

Before I bring you into the Wide Knee Child's Pose Twist, I want to talk to you about mindfulness of breathing and why this is such a beautiful Buddhist wisdom teaching. "In stressing the importance of mindfulness, the Buddha emphasized the necessity of meticulously examining the body and mind. The practice brings us into a direct relationship with the roots of suffering (our patterns of reactivity) and ultimately stimulates insight into deeper wisdom nature. As we begin to understand ourselves better, we relax our compulsions to react out of habit (page 174, IYI, S. Powers, 2008)".

To practise mindfulness is to practise being here, in the present moment with whatever is going on. Mindfulness is a mind full of *now-ness*. Often our minds are not here, as thoughts take us away from the present moment. We are thinking of the future (“what to eat later?” or “how to respond to that email?”) and the past (“did I handle that situation this afternoon well?” or “I cannot stand what she said to me yesterday”).

If we identify ourselves solely with these thought patterns we will suffer. We will miss out on the beauty of the here and now, where life unfolds, and we will be chained to the vicious cycle of craving what we like and resisting what we don't like (aversion). These are two of the five hindrances; “the compulsive thoughts and feelings that inevitably oppress us (page 173, IYI, S Powers, 2008)”. They take us away from finding true happiness which is about hosting all experiences, not grasping the good only.

Mind training helps bring attention to these mind patterns so we have a chance to inquire into them. We will get a taste of genuine happiness to be found in the non-conceptual realms, our buddha nature. It is always there, we just are not used to being there ourselves, so we need to open our body, our energy channels and train the mind. So that integration can take place on all levels.

Mindfulness of breathing, or focused, one pointed attention “is called *shamatha* in Buddhist meditation, meaning “tranquillity” or “calm abidance”. The purpose of this initial exclusive focus is to settle down and in, breeding a concentrated state of mind that is both relaxed and alert (page 182, IYI, S Powers, 2008)”.

#### *Method*

Now that you have settled into the twist, it is time to anchor on the breath. What I mean by that is you will just be observing the flow of your natural breath, breathing in, breathing out. I invite you to rest your attention on this single anchor without seeking any outcome other than pure observance. This method of resting the attention on the in- and -out breaths is called *anapanasati* .

Do not deepen your breath or make it audible, which is a yang type enhancement method. Instead, find your subtle breath by being gentle with yourself and bringing your attention to the parts of your body where you feel tension or stagnant chi; the shoulder, the inner legs maybe. How does it feel? Inquire into the bodily sensations; do you feel a throbbing or tickly sensation? Stay with your sensation for a while. Inquire into your own personal experience of what is going on in the body.

Now, are you still aware of your breath? Did the breath change and if so, how did it change? Are you holding the breath, is it faster or shallower? Resist the urge to judge or change the breath. In mindfulness of breathing we want to host whatever is present in this very moment. We do not need to change anything, just be aware, observe and explore this very intimate layer that is part of you. If certain feelings come up, explore them. What are the feelings? Is it resistance, restlessness or boredom? Maybe you feel half asleep, “checking out” until we move to the next pose? Again, we are watching these feelings. You may notice that if you give your attention to them, they will pass.

You may also become aware of distractions in the mind. Possibly your mind is self-critical. Then it is purposeful to use the same thinking mind to train the mind. There are several shamatha tools you can use to relax with the breath. One of them is called loving-kindness toward yourself and others.

These *maitri*<sup>3</sup> phrases work as an antidote; they are words of loving kindness that enter deep into your system (your cells are listening!). On the inhale say to yourself in your mind: “May I (You) be filled with loving kindness”, on the out breath “May I (You) be well”. Or on the inhale: “May I (You) be peaceful and at ease”, on the out breath: “May I (You) be happy”. I always start with saying to myself: “I am here now, I am letting go; or if my judging mind is very loud: “I relax the self-harm”, “I am letting go”. And I like to end with wishing others well. Sometimes I have a particular person mind. Sometimes I wish peace to the world. Feel for yourself what phrases you resonate with and which ones you need to hear as nutrients for the brain and nourishment for your system.

#### *Effect*

A short term effect of mindfulness of breath can be negative: discomfort, boredom, feeling of failure for giving up, judging yourself more for that. Rest assured that this is only temporary, it will pass. The long term effect of mindfulness in your practice is mindfulness in daily life. You will want to add seated mindfulness practices to your asana practice. This will get you deeper into yoga and integration. I can say from experience that it really is a treasure to sit every morning and recommit to intentional living. In silence, breathing, pausing and checking in. I feel the inside connection I make during that time will stay with me throughout my day. An inner temple I call home. I feel more confident from an authentic source and less disturbed by behaviours of people as I see and recognize their suffering. It is a daily and lifelong practice to take refuge in awareness for the benefit of myself and others, as we are all on our path to liberation.

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<sup>3</sup> *Maitri* is Sanskrit for loving kindness, also known as *metta* in Pali