

SLOW DOWN with Yin Yoga

IN THESE MODERN TIMES, IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO FIND WAYS TO SLOW THINGS DOWN. A never-ending stream of communication and activity leaves us running from place to place, and sometimes even trying to make room for a Yoga practice leaves one feeling frazzled. We all struggle from time to time with creating a slower pace of life and as we approach stillness, it can be helpful to find a starting point. This is where Yin yoga can be tremendously helpful.

You may have heard of the Yin style of yoga but in order to really understand its value, there is no substitute for the experience. In its essence, Yin offers a forum for experimenting with a slow, quiet and deliberate practice. While it is true that most styles of Yoga offer the opportunity to become more aware and relaxed, Yin Yoga offers a unique two-pronged approach that makes it slightly different – one is that the muscles are intended to be relaxed in the poses (i.e. folding forward without flexing the feet) and second is that the poses are meant to be held for longer periods of time (approximately 3 – 5 minutes). When combined in practice, these two elements encourage a sense of surrender and release in the body and mind that can be very powerful.

Yin Yoga is the perfect complement to more dynamic styles of yoga that emphasize creating heat in the body along with strengthening and relaxing different muscle groups. Yin Yoga differs from these styles as it emphasizes working with the connective tissues instead of the muscles. Much of a Yin practice is spent focusing on the hips, pelvis and lower spine, with almost all of the postures being done on the floor in order to encourage a sense of support and release through a deep connection to the earth's gravitational pull. Initially, this kind of approach can seem boring, passive or soft, but in reality a Yin practice can be quite challenging from a mental and physical perspective. Some people fall in love at first asana, while others struggle to remain present in the holding of the poses. Yin offers a type of unique intensity in the extended holding of the poses that can become a foundational support to work through mental distraction and bodily discomfort, ultimately resulting in an ability to calm the mind and, in some cases, induce deep states of meditation.

Why practice Yin Yoga?

A Yin practice helps to detoxify the deeper tissues of the body, working past the superficial layers of skin and muscle and getting deep into the fascia, freeing up toxins and other potentially harmful materials that have become trapped within the body. Once this material is freed up, the energetic pathways of the body become clearer and healing information can flow unimpeded. This can help to feed deficient areas

and drain excessive areas of energy and result in a better ability to heal the body through increased vitality and harmony of energetic activities.

From a physical perspective, Yin Yoga engenders increased pliancy in the joints. It fights contracture and fixation as well as the degeneration of the bones that comes from immobilization. It also assists in re-hydrating the synovial fluids and moistening the ligaments by stimulating the production of hyaluronic acid, a protective substance that regulates cell growth and renewal in the body. Some tangible benefits of this aspect of practice include more fluidity in movement and a sense of grace and ease in daily life.

From an emotional perspective, Yin Yoga helps the practitioner to harmonize disturbing emotions by offering a safe space to engage with them in a non-judgmental way, neither holding on to them or acting out from them. Being present in the body/mind during a Yin practice can allow for underlying unmet needs to surface and deeper feelings to make them selves known. In essence, a Yin practice offers a forum to understand different aspects of the individual self in a profoundly healing way.

Opening to Discomfort

There are a few very simple and effective concepts that can aid a Yin practice. The first is to come into the pose at an appropriate depth. Once you find your edge (the place where you can really feel the stretch, but aren't forcing it), stay there and try to let any deeper release into the pose come from organic movement. Pay attention to the early edges and open up to deeper ones. Try to remain relaxed and connected to your breath - less is more with Yin.

Once you are in the pose, resolve to hold the pose for the intended period of time. This does not mean that you have to stay in once place – if the body wants to go deeper let it. If the body needs a break, come out of the pose briefly and approach it again when you are ready. Do your best not to fidget, instead pay attention to honing micro movements within the pose to encourage small releases. As with all yoga practices, if you go into pain, stop doing the pose or find a way to modify it that doesn't create pain. Remember there is a difference between discomfort and pain – see if you can open to discomfort rather than needing comfort to open. Examine the discomfort and then expand around it with your breath and awareness.

Yin Practice

With the exception of the opening segment, the poses in the following series are to be held for 3 - 5 minutes. If you need some time to get used to the longer holds, start with a minute and work your way up over time. You can relax or counter stretch the body in any way that is comfortable for thirty to sixty seconds in between each pose. Sometimes this style of practice produces a temporary feeling of creakiness or instability in the body as you change from pose to pose. This is normal. To avoid injury, come out of the postures with the same amount of awareness as you come into them – take it nice and slow and use a deep, even breath to anchor the mind and relax the body while you are holding the posture.

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Getting Started

While many Yin teachers go right into longer holds, I have found that starting a practice with shorter 1 minute sequential holds can be a nice way to prepare the body/mind for the prolonged holdings that come later in the practice. These four preparatory poses are intended to be a sequence, holding each pose for approximately 1 minute, for a total of 4 minutes on each side.



Knee to Chest

From a reclining position, relax your left leg and hip into the floor. If you find that you

are unable to keep the left leg relaxed, bend the left knee and keep the left foot on the earth for support. From either position, bring your right knee towards the torso, holding onto the shin or back of the thigh. Gently draw the knee towards the torso with your exhalations. Hold for one minute.

Reclining Head to Knee

From knee to chest, extend the right leg towards the sky and gently hold the back of the thigh with the hands, drawing the leg towards the torso, until you feel a stretch in the back of the leg. Use your exhalations to relax into the stretch. Hang out in the reclined position if the stretch is intense, or to create more intensity, reach up a little higher on the leg and gently lift the torso, bringing the knee and forehead towards each other. Hold for one minute. To release the stretch, bring the torso back down to the earth.



Half Happy Baby

From the reclined position, with the right leg extended, gently bend the right knee and bring it down and

then out towards the right armpit. Flex the foot and keep the shin over the ankle (as if you were going to lunge on the ceiling). Hold on to the back of the thigh with both hands or bring the right hand to the ankle or instep of the right foot to help hold the leg in place. Hold for one minute.

Figure 4

From half happy baby, release the right leg, bend the left knee and bring the left foot to the earth. Gently cross the right ankle above the left knee, to create the number 4 with the bottom half of the body. With an inhalation, bring the left thigh towards the torso. Reach through the hole of the legs with the right hand and around with the left hand and find a comfortable place to grab



hold of the left thigh. As you continue to draw the left thigh towards you with your exhalations, allow the right knee to come energetically forward and create more intensity in the stretch. Hold for one minute.



Butterfly

From a seated position, bring the soles of the feet together and open the knees out to the side. Let the feet be a little further away from the body in order

to bring the stretch more into the low back and hips and less into the groin. With an inhalation lengthen up through the crown of the head and with an exhalation fold forward. When you find a natural stopping point, bring the hands or fingertips down to the floor in front of you and begin to round the upper back. Allow the back of the neck to relax and grow long as you bring the forehead towards the earth. Hold for 3 – 5 minutes.



Dragonfly Series

From butterfly, come lengthwise onto your mat and open up the legs into a V shape

and relax the feet. With an inhalation, turn the torso towards the right leg and lengthen up through the crown of the head. With an exhalation begin to fold forward over the leg, keeping nice and grounded in the left hip. If you notice the left hip popping off the ground, back out of the pose a bit until the hip touches down again. If the stretch is too intense in the inner leg or back, bend the left knee and bring the left foot into the right groin. Hold for 3 – 5 minutes and then repeat on the left side. Finish up the series by bringing the torso back to center and fold forward at center for another 3 – 5 minutes.

Note: This is a good amount of forward folding. Taking short breaks for intuitive counter stretches between each hold can be very helpful.

Sphinx/Seal

In this backbend you have two options for intensity. Choose the one that works best for your back on any given day. You can choose one option for the duration of the hold or move from Sphinx to Seal if you feel the low back responds well to the compression and holding.

Option 1: Bring the elbows underneath the shoulders and the forearms to the mat, allowing the weight of the upper body to be supported by the arm bones.



Option 2: Bring the arms long in front of the shoulders and press into the palms to help lift the arms off the ground (fingertips turned forward or slightly out). Relax the abdomen and buttocks.

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Hold 3 – 5 minutes. When you are ready to release, slowly bring the torso down to the mat, cross the hands in front of you and let one cheek rest. Pause for a few breaths to notice your body’s response to the backbend or take Childs Pose as a counter stretch.

Dragon Lunge

In this lunge, there are three options for intensity. Choose one position to hold for 3 minutes or spend one minute in each version of the pose.

Option 1: From a hands and knees position, bring the right foot forward in between the hands and allow the left knee and shin to rest on the mat. Sink the pelvis forward and bring the hands underneath the shoulders, framing the foot. If there is too much pressure in the wrists, make gentle fists with the hands and rest on the knuckles. If the arms are too short to reach the floor, let the hands rest on the thigh.



Option 2: From position 1, walk the right foot over to the right a couple of inches and bring the arms to the inside of the knee. In this position the arms can stay long or the elbows can come to mat.



Option 3: The third and final option is a lunge twist, turning the torso towards the right thigh and gently rolling to the outer edge of the right foot. In this position, you can bring the right hand to the inner right thigh and gently encourage it to open out.



To come out of any of these poses bring the torso to center and gently shift the hips back. Take Downward Dog or Childs Pose as a counter stretch before repeating the pose on the left side.



Frog

Coming lengthwise onto the mat, open the knees wider than the hips, line up the shins behind the knees and flex the feet

out to the side. With an exhalation take the buttocks back and come to rest on the forearms. If this version of the pose is too intense for you, bring the big toes to touch behind the buttocks to modify. Hold for 3 – 5 minutes.



Twisted Roots

From a reclining position, bend the knees and bring both feet to the floor. Cross the right leg over the left and bring the right foot around to the left calf. If this isn’t possible, let the right foot dangle. Extend the right arm long by the right ear and bring the back of the right hand to rest on the earth above the head. Open the left arm into half of a T shape. With an exhalation lower the legs over to the left side, and find a resting place for the feet. Relax the right shoulder and turn the neck to look slightly right. Hold for 1 – 5 minutes, unwind and bring left leg on top of the right before coming over to the right side.

Plough

From twisted roots, bring the legs back to center and unwind. Bring the knees toward the chest and the hands onto the



low back. With an inhalation, move the torso and legs towards the sky and lower the feet behind the head, bringing the toes to touch down on the earth. If you are comfortable in this position, lower the arms to the earth. Keep the neck steady by gazing directly upwards with the eyes. If you cannot bring the toes to touch behind the head, position yourself near a wall and let the feet rest on the wall instead. Hold for 3 – 5 minutes. To come out, bring the hands to the low back and draw into the core to help control the release of the spine to the earth.



Reclining Butterfly

From a reclining position, bend the knees and place the soles of the feet on

the earth. Open the knees out to the side while bringing the soles of the feet together. Gently tilt the pelvis forward to create a small arch in the lumbar spine. Hands can rest on the hips or the arms can reach long by the ears and rest on the earth. Hold for 3 – 5 minutes.

Finishing Up

You can finish your Yin practice with a relaxation in Corpse Pose, in seated meditation or any combination of the two for however long feels appropriate for you and your current capacity to relax and/or meditate. After practice, remember to drink lots of water! As you have pulled water into the joints/connective tissue during practice, it is important to replenish it so that other parts of the body don’t become deficient. Water can also help the body flush out any toxins that might have been released during practice. ▲